

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**  
**ACADEMIC YEAR: 2014– 2015**

**Part A: General Information****Subject area and awards being examined**

Faculty / School of:	Faculty of Arts/School of Modern Languages and Cultures
Subject(s):	<i>Linguistics and phonetics</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BA in Linguistics and Phonetics (and combined honours programmes)
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA

**Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner****Completed report**

The completed report should be attached to an e-mail and sent as soon as possible, and no later than six weeks after the relevant meeting of the Board of Examiners, to [exexadmin@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:exexadmin@leeds.ac.uk).

Alternatively you can post your report to: **Head of Academic Quality and Standards**  
Academic Quality and Standards Team  
Room 12:81, EC Stoner Building  
The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

**Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards****Matters for Urgent Attention**

*If there are any areas which you think require urgent attention before the programme is offered again please note them in this box*

Just the changes to marking standards outlined in more detail below

**Only applicable in first year of appointment**

*Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?*

NA

**For Examiners completing their term of appointment**

*Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School*

**Standards****1. Please indicate the extent to which the programme Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were commensurate with the level of the award**

- *The appropriateness of the Intended Learning Outcomes for the programme(s)/modules and of the structure and content of the programme(s);*
- *The extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration.*

The intended learning outcomes are entirely appropriate for both the single and combined honours programmes.

The standards are generally appropriate, if arguably a little on the stringent side. Although confirmed classifications were not yet available, from putting together the individual module marks, it seems that only one student from the whole cohort will receive a first class honours degree (i.e., around 5%). Overall, around 20% of UK graduates receive a first class honours degree (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3484/#qua>, and I find it difficult to believe that students who study linguistics (a relatively difficult course) at Leeds (a relatively high ranking University) are – as a group - below the level of the average UK student. My conclusion is therefore that you are marking more harshly than comparable institutions. This certainly seemed to be the case when I was inspecting individual pieces of coursework. For example, in several modules, exam answers that were largely accurate and detailed – though unoriginal and derivative of the lecture notes - received marks in the 40s or (low) 50s as opposed to, what I would expect, the high 50s, or even low 60s.

**2. Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?**

- *The comparability of the programme(s) with similar programme(s) at other institutions and against national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.*

Both the single and joint honours degree programmes meet national benchmarks, and are extremely similar to those of equivalent degrees at other institutions.

**3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs**

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

Each module (except the dissertation) includes one piece of exam and one or more pieces of coursework (typically counting for around 20%). The range of tasks in the assignment was excellent (discourse analysis, phonology workbook, essay, group project, oral/aural components) and I appreciated the flexibility module co-ordinators have in matching the task to the intended learning outcomes of the module. The exams also followed a wide range of different formats (MCQs, short answers, essays) which were generally well matched to the different topics. Although I can see the advantages of this flexibility, there is also something to be said for the opposite approach (followed in my own department) where – with a handful of exceptions for modules with particular learning outcomes – exams largely follow a standardized format (e.g., all MCQs in Yr1, all short-notes answers in Yr2, all 2/6 exam essays in Yr 3). I wouldn't suggest going this far, but it may be worth thinking about whether students would prefer to have a more standardized format wherever this would be possible, while still achieving the learning outcomes.

The marking and moderation systems seem to be very robust. In particular, I was pleased to see that marks were sometimes moved up or down in response to suggestions from the moderator, which does not seem to happen often at other institutions. However, this did seem to be done on a rather ad-hoc basis (i.e., the moderator simply felt that marks were rather high or low overall), rather than with any systematicity. An alternative might be to try to ensure comparable means across modules (or, at least, across modules sat by the same groups of students), or to raise/lower marks to be more commensurate with national standards (see above). In some cases, however, the moderation paper-trail was incomplete (e.g., a moderator had suggested marks be moved up or down, but it was not clear whether or not this had actually been done). Both moderators and module coordinators should be reminded of the importance of completing all of the module moderation paperwork before the external examiners' meeting. The level of feedback was excellent for all modules. The projects are all double-marked, which is important given the double-weighting of the module.

I echo, from last year, my surprise at the continued use of a fully-continuous – as opposed to categorical - marking scheme. I do not believe that markers can really distinguish work that is deserving of 64 vs 65 vs 66, but I know that your hands are tied here by University-wide procedures. However, I do think it is worth reiterating to the powers that be that you are out of line here with all the other departments in which I have worked or studied (Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield)

The standard of work produced was very high overall, and I was particularly impressed by performance in the syntax modules and the dissertation.

**4. Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the Aims and ILOs?**

- *The academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort.*

As noted above, the wide range of assessments offers students ample opportunity to show their strengths and weaknesses. However, as also noted above, the marks are almost certainly somewhat lower than for students at comparable institutions, which I think is more likely a result of stricter marking standards, rather than lower student ability.

**5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum**

NA

**6. Please comment on the nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year**

*It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.*

A new lecturer has been brought in to teach the phonology component, which seems to be working well (though these modules were assessed by a second external examiner, also new this year). However, since this lecturer replaced an outgoing lecturer, these changes have not addressed another issue I raised last time around: Staff are rather over-stretched, with a standard teaching load of 4 UG modules (plus PG teaching). In comparable institutions, 2 modules per staff member would be more usual.

**7. Please comment on the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching**

*This may include examples of curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research.*

Most modules are taught by a member of staff who has published important research in the relevant area. Students achieving the highest marks in the project often conduct research that is close to publishable standard.

## For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements

8. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements

NA

## The Examination/Assessment Process

9. The University and its Schools provide guidance for External Examiners as to their roles, powers and responsibilities. Please indicate whether this material was sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner.

- *Whether External Examiners have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and whether they are encouraged to request additional information.*

Yes, the documentation was sufficient (though see my comments above about the importance of a complete paper trail), and I was easily able to request additional information where required.

10. Did you receive appropriate documentation relating to the programmes and/or parts of programmes for which you have responsibility, e.g. programme specifications or module handbooks, marking criteria?

- *The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to External Examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes. But one plea: While some staff gave very detailed marking schemes and model answers, which were extremely helpful, some gave almost no information of this kind. It makes our job as externals MUCH easier if we are provided with this information.

11. Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments? Was the nature and level of the questions appropriate? If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?

Yes, I provided feedback on the draft exams, and was very satisfied with the response from staff.

12. Was sufficient assessed / examined work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work? Were the scripts clearly marked/annotated?

Yes.

13. Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate? Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?

Yes, this was a real strength. The standard of marking was entirely appropriate, and there were no cases of unresolved discrepancies between markers.

14. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners? Were you able to attend the meeting? Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Board?

Yes to all of the above! I was particularly pleased that you followed my recommendation and brought in a second external examiner. This allowed for both better coverage in terms of our expertise, and for us to dedicate sufficient time to each module.

15. Were appropriate procedures in place to give due consideration to mitigating circumstances and medical evidence?

Yes

## Other comments

Please use this box if you wish to make any further comments not covered elsewhere on the form

The only further comment is one that I also made last year. With regard to the dissertation, there is something of a discrepancy over whether or not students are required to conduct statistical analyses of their data (I saw some excellent analyses, but also some important mistakes, and some dissertations that could – perhaps even should – have used statistical analyses, but did not). I appreciate that the ideal solution – the introduction of a research methods and statistics module – is not feasible due to staffing constraints, but I would encourage you to think seriously about alternatives. There are some excellent online courses available. Other departments at Leeds will run such modules that your students could possibly join (Psychology, Medicine). Or you could have a once-a-year training day, given by an external expert.

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26 August 2014

Dear

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2014-2015 UG programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics. Like last year, we appreciate your positive comments on the range of tasks used in our assessments; we are pleased to see the quality of our students' work commended; and we note with gratitude your assessment of staff expertise.

I would like to assure you that we are taking your observations on our marking practices very seriously. At our Away Day in July, we reviewed our module marks distributions of the past 5 years, and arrived at the conclusion that our marking is indeed 'on the stringent side'. We agreed to pay closer attention to marks distributions in first marking and moderation, and to ensure that our average module pass marks are in the 62-64 range unless there is a clear justification for awarding lower marks. In the past 5 years, average passes have frequently been at or below 60, and we accept that this does not accurately reflect the standards our students achieve. We also agreed to make fuller use of the top end of the marking scale. We are working on new moderation and feedback pro-forma which should support the implementation of these agreed changes in practice across modules. The new moderation procedure will highlight the importance of keeping clear records; we regret that some paper trails were left incomplete this year. It will also remind the first marker to produce an explicit marking guide for the benefit of the moderator and External Examiner.

Over the past few years we have made progress in diversifying our assessment methods and in introducing methods that keep preparation and marking loads manageable in the longer term, such as MCQ papers. We have not yet explored whether increased standardisation of assessment formats may be beneficial. This is something we will do over the coming years. In response to your other suggestions, you are right that our hands are tied with respect to the use of a continuous marking scale. You are also right that we face comparatively high teaching loads, at least in terms of numbers of modules per staff member. Discussions are ongoing as to how best to address this. Finally, we will continue to embed more research methods, including quantitative analysis methods, into our programme, and offer our students more self-study materials and links to external resources. Up to now our assessment has been that we do not offer students enough relevant guidance to make the use of appropriate quantitative methods in dissertation projects a requirement. We would like to move to a situation in which we can require at least an attempt at applying relevant quantitative methods; however, it may take several years still before we are there.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Linguistics &amp; Phonetics

## The University of Leeds

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2014– 2015

**Part A: General Information****Subject area and awards being examined**

Faculty / School of:	Languages, Cultures and Societies
Subject(s):	Linguistics
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MODL1060 Language: Structure and Sound LING1060 Language Projects LING2330 Phonetics LING2350 Language, Society and Discourse LING3200 Dissertation LING3210 Phonetics and Phonology of English LING3220 Representation, Identity and Control LING3250 Life Cycle of Languages LING3310 Interactional Linguistics LING3500 How Texts Work
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA

**Name and home Institution / affiliation of Examiner****Completed report**

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Room 12:81, EC Stoner Building  
The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT

**Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards****Matters for Urgent Attention**

*If there are any areas which you think require urgent attention before the programme is offered again please note them in this box*

**Only applicable in first year of appointment**

*Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners' reports and the response of the School to these?*

No, but I was informed that external examiners' reports and responses to them can be viewed online.

**For Examiners completing their term of appointment**

*Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School*

## Standards

### 1. Please indicate the extent to which the programme Aims and Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) were commensurate with the level of the award

- *The appropriateness of the Intended Learning Outcomes for the programme(s)/modules and of the structure and content of the programme(s);*
- *The extent to which standards are appropriate for the award or award element under consideration.*

To judge from the assessment materials I was given to review, the programme Aims and ILOs are entirely appropriate for the level of the award.

### 2. Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?

- *The comparability of the programme(s) with similar programme(s) at other institutions and against national benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.*

The Aims and ILOs are in keeping with the expectations of the national subject benchmark, and are comparable to those of other programmes with which I am familiar. The Linguistics BA programmes at Leeds provide students with a rigorous and up-to-date training in the subject that is of as good a quality as I have encountered at any other UK institution.

### 3. Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs

- *The design and structure of the assessment methods, and the arrangements for the marking of modules and the classification of awards;*
- *The quality of teaching, learning and assessment methods that may be indicated by student performance.*

The assessment methods used for the modules for which I was given responsibility (noting that there are two external examiners for Linguistics, as the job is split between myself and <>) are varied, original, imaginative, and challenging even at first-year level. Overall, they appear to be fair, objective and effective tests of students' knowledge, skills, and critical insight, with many of them being designed in such a way that stronger students have the opportunity to excel, without setting the bar too high for the majority of the weaker ones.

There appear to be robust arrangements in place with respect to the marking of modules and classification of awards, in spite of a number of procedural difficulties that were encountered in the run-up to the final examination board meeting in the summer.

I have been greatly impressed by the quality of students' work that I have been asked to inspect this year. The assessment instruments that have been designed to test their knowledge are also generally of an excellent standard. Both testify to the high standard of teaching in the department, and the thoroughness of feedback that students receive on their formative and summative assessed work. For several of the modules I reviewed the quantity and detail of feedback returned to students was without doubt among the best I have seen during my career in academic linguistics.

### 4. Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the Aims and ILOs?

- *The academic standards demonstrated by the students and, where possible, their performance in relation to students on comparable courses;*
- *The strengths and weaknesses of the students as a cohort.*

The academic standards demonstrated by Leeds students in the work I was given to examine were on a par with those of students at other institutions whose linguistics programmes I am familiar with, most of which belong to the Russell Group of universities. I was very favourably impressed, for instance, by the level of knowledge that stronger members of the first-year cohort displayed in the *Structure and Sound* component of MODL1060 module. The average overall mark for this module was low, at just 55, perhaps because the level seemed relatively advanced for a first-year module. Students were expected to have grasped a significant quantity of technical terminology, and a considerable body of linguistic knowledge of other sorts must also be gained in order to do well in the assessments for MODL1060, even if no essay-style writing must be done. By their final year, students are producing work of a very good standard in modules that in my notes I have described as 'just the kind of diet that finalists should be getting', 'challenging', 'thought-provoking' and 'mind-stretching'. Giving students the opportunity to exercise their knowledge and skills via the dissertation project has yielded work as original, rigorous and insightful as one could expect to see in research projects produced by undergraduates.

As far as weaknesses are concerned, Leeds students appear to share problems that are regularly encountered elsewhere. Many lack an ability to construct arguments and to structure their work logically; considerable numbers also display incomplete mastery of appropriate academic writing style; referencing conventions are not fully understood, even among final-year students; and some finalists have still not fully grasped basic notational formalisms such as bracketing or the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet. The average marks for some modules are on the low side, but it is not my impression that this is necessarily a failing of the assessment methods used, or of the apparent quality of the teaching. Where module marks were lower than might be expected relative to the typical distributions of marks for comparable modules at the University of Leeds and elsewhere, the other external examiner and I recommended at the examination board meeting that markers consider being a little more generous with marks in future, as we are not of the opinion that lower average module marks automatically reflect problematic performance among the students on those modules.

### 5. For Examiners responsible for programmes that include clinical practice components, please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum

N/A

**6. Please comment on the nature and effectiveness of enhancements to the programme(s) and modules since the previous year**

*It would be particularly helpful if you could also identify areas of good practice which are worthy of wider dissemination.*

Not known (was appointed as external examiner in 2014-15 session).

**7. Please comment on the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching**

*This may include examples of curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research.*

The design, content, and assessment methods of several final-year modules I was asked to examine have been directly influenced by the module leaders' research interests (for example, LING3310 *Interactional Linguistics*). This was true also of several Year 2 modules (ones specifically for second years, rather than ones which second years may take alongside finalists). Integration of content relating to instructors' own research areas will no doubt have made the modules more enjoyable to teach, and for students to learn, and it is entirely appropriate that this research-teaching linkage be maintained as far as is practicable. Students have undertaken original research projects of their own design for the dissertation project and for other modules with a significant research component, and I would be surprised if these modules ever fail to receive good ratings from students in their module feedback. My own experience of working in the Linguistics and Phonetics department at Leeds (1998-2000) was that a high value was placed upon research-led teaching, and this appears still to be very much the case.

**8. Where the programme forms part of an Integrated PhD, please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD**

N/A

**For Examiners involved in mentoring arrangements**

**9. If you have acted as a mentor to a new External Examiner or have received mentor support please comment here on the arrangements**

N/A

**The Examination/Assessment Process**

**10. The University and its Schools provide guidance for External Examiners as to their roles, powers and responsibilities. Please indicate whether this material was sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner.**

*Whether External Examiners have sufficient access to the material needed to make the required judgements and whether they are encouraged to request additional information.*

I can confirm that the guidance materials I was supplied with by the University and by the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies were adequate for me to fulfil my role as External Examiner.

**11. Did you receive appropriate documentation relating to the programmes and/or parts of programmes for which you have responsibility, e.g. programme specifications or module handbooks, marking criteria?**

*The coherence of the policies and procedures relating to External Examiners and whether they match the explicit roles they are asked to perform.*

Yes.

**12. Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments? Was the nature and level of the questions appropriate? If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?**

I was provided with all the draft examination papers and assessments relating to the modules I was given responsibility for. The nature and level of the questions was appropriate in almost all cases, though I made my views known in cases in which I felt there was a shortcoming of some sort, or where I simply needed clarification. These comments were then fed back to the paper setter, who was given a chance to respond. The responses I received were full, detailed and clear, and in all cases the issues in question were resolved. I was impressed with how fully my colleagues at Leeds engaged with this process and believe that a version of it could usefully be adopted at my own institution.

**13. Was sufficient assessed / examined work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work? Were the scripts clearly marked/annotated?**

Yes (though I did not have the opportunity to see work for LING1060 *Language Projects* nor LING2350 *Language, Society and Discourse* on the day I came to Leeds to examine scripts, I imagine because these were not yet ready for my inspection). There was otherwise a very large quantity of material for me to look at, and I am happy that I was able to offer informed opinions about the quality of students' assessed work on this basis. The scripts were for the most part clearly marked and annotated, though there were one or two modules for which a greater number of marginal notes could usefully have been provided (e.g. LING3210 *Phonetics and Phonology of English*). By and large, however, the quantity of written feedback was very generous. I particularly liked the moderation form accompanying scripts for LING3220 *Representation, Identity and Control*, which has separate boxes for markers' comments and 'suggested actions', one for the first marker to respond to the moderator's comments, and another for 'specifying individual scripts for the moderator to look at'.

**14. Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate? Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?**

The choice of topics for dissertations was appropriate, though there was a case in which a student studying English Literature and Linguistics undertook a project which was deemed insufficiently 'linguistic'; this piece of work was referred for resubmission. The method and standard of assessment was rigorous, with the two markers completing detailed comments sheets which were then used as the basis for agreeing a final dissertation mark.

**15. Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Board of Examiners? Were you able to attend the meeting? Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Board?**

The administrative arrangements for the examination process, including the Board of Examiners meeting, were all carried out efficiently. I was able to attend the meeting, and was satisfied with the recommendations of the Board that were made at it.

**16. Were appropriate procedures in place to give due consideration to mitigating circumstances and medical evidence?**

Yes. These issues were handled carefully and sensitively by the Chair of the Board of Examiners and other internal Board members.

**Other comments**

Please use this box if you wish to make any further comments not covered elsewhere on the form





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26 August 2014

Dear

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2014-2015 UG programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics, and apologies for the delay in responding.

We appreciate your positive comments on the range of tasks used in our assessments, our commitment to research-led teaching, the quality and quantity of the feedback we provide to students, and our engagement with assessment review processes. We are also very pleased to see the quality of our students' work commended.

I would like to assure you that we are taking your and observations on our marking practices very seriously. At our Away Day in July, we reviewed our module marks distributions of the past 5 years, and arrived at the conclusion that our marking can indeed be 'a little more generous'. We agreed to pay closer attention to marks distributions in first marking and moderation, and to ensure that our average module pass marks are in the 62-64 range unless there is a clear justification for awarding lower marks. In the past 5 years, average passes have frequently been at or below 60, and we accept that this does not accurately reflect the standards our students achieve. We also agreed to make fuller use of the top end of the marking scale. We have worked on new moderation and feedback pro-forma which should support the implementation of these agreed changes in practice across modules. Finally, we have reduced the size of the MODL1060 *Language: Structure and Sound* exam, and will pay particular attention to the marks distribution for this module in the current cycle.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Linguistics & Phonetics