

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2015– 2016

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.

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

NA

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

There have not been major changes from year to year in terms of the range of modules offered, or the content within those modules. However, I would not have expected to see such changes, firstly because the course was already working extremely well at the start of my appointment; secondly because it would have required a number of new staff: existing staff already have a rather high teaching load relative to similar institutions, and I understand that the funding that would be required is not available. One important change, however, has been the new option for students to take essentially the same modules at Level 2 and Level 3 (though with the latter requiring a higher standard of work). This is an ingenious solution for broadening the available curriculum without necessitating staffing increases. Thus, overall, it has been gratifying to see that standards of learning and teaching provision have been maintained, and even improved. There have also been improvements in the marking and assessment procedures: When I first started my appointment, I felt that the marking standards were out of line with comparable institutions: Only 5% of students achieved a first class honours degree, as compared with 20% nationally. Having raised this issue in previous reports and meetings, I was pleased to see that the department took steps to address this issue, and now seems to be marking at an entirely appropriate standard.

When I was first appointed to this position by <<>>, she outlined her hope that I would be able to help you bring more quantitative methods into the course. Although I have emphasized this goal in previous external examiner reports, it has not yet been achieved. There is clearly a resource issue here: you do not have the staff available to introduce a new research methods and statistics module, 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 (e.g., Psychology, Medicine?), or you could have a once-a-year training day, given by an external expert.

Finally, on a more positive note, I have been pleased to see significant improvements in the procedures – particularly module moderation, which is now both smooth and effective – and the feedback given to students. For most modules, students receive extremely detailed personalized feedback, in addition to detailed marking schemes and model answers that demonstrate exactly what needed to be done to obtain a top mark. I was surprised to hear that your NSS feedback scores are not particularly high, as – for me – your feedback is extremely impressive.

Overall, thanks to the efforts of both linguistics staff and my predecessor <<>>, this course was in an extremely strong position when I took over; and thanks to the adoption of more appropriate marking standards, I am pleased to be able to say that I am leaving it in an even stronger position than I found it.

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 appropriate. In previous years, I noted that the proportion of students achieving a first-class honours degree was well below national benchmarks for comparable courses at comparable institutions. I understand that the department consciously took steps to address this issue, and am I pleased to say that these seem to have been successful. Although confirmed classifications were not available at the exam board, most individual modules seemed to have a more expected level of firsts (i.e., around 20%, as opposed to around 5% in previous years).

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 practical, essay, group discussion, 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. In previous reports, I mooted the possibility of adopting a more standardized format across the board (e.g., in my own department, all Yr1 exams are MCQs, all Yr2 exams are short notes etc.). In fact, though, I think the approach adopted in Leeds linguistics is preferable, since the outcomes required for different modules (e.g., tree drawing, phonological transcription, report on endangered languages) are too different for a one-size-fits-all approach.

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. I was also pleased to see an excellent paper trail – in all but one case – what had been done was clearly documented. However, as we discussed at the meeting, it would be preferable (especially for 1100 – Language: Meaning and Use, where this is a bit of an issue) if the marks came out at about the right level in the first place, without the need for any standardization. The reason is that it can be demoralizing for students to come out of an exam feeling that they have obtained only about half of the available marks, even if this 50% is subsequently moved up.

In previous reports, I have raised concerns regarding the 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 (for example) 64 vs 65 vs 66. So I am pleased to hear that a change to the categorical scheme is now in the offing.

The standard of work produced was very high overall, and I was again particularly impressed by performance in the syntax modules, Life-Cycle of Languages 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. The changes to the application of the marking standards noted above mean that they are now performing comparably to students at similar institutions. The strengths include a particularly detailed knowledge of the more technical aspects of linguistics, particularly morphosyntax. It feels a little harsh to cite this as a weakness, given that it is not explicitly taught, but I feel that students could benefit from some training in experimental methods and – particularly – statistics.

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.

The main enhancement has been the adoption of a marking standard that is in line with comparable courses. It is gratifying – and rare – to see such a wholesale change in practice in response to an external examiner's comments, and I would highlight this responsiveness as an example of particularly good practice (see also the marking schemes in 11).

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.

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

NA

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

NA

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.*

Yes, the documentation was sufficient, and I was easily able to request additional information where required.

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. Most staff went above and beyond what is required in terms of providing a detailed marking scheme/model answer. I understand that this is provided to students where possible, and this is really excellent practice in terms of giving detailed feedback.

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?

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

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. The one case in which scripts were not clearly marked is in the case of work that I accessed through the online system – no marks were on turnitin, and there was no name/student number to match up the work with the printed marks spreadsheets. This was only a minor issue this time around, since very little work was submitted/marked online, but it will need addressing if you move to more widespread online submission/markings in future years.

14. 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.

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?

Yes

16. 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 have also made in previous years: 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.

Linguistics and Phonetics
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies



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12 July 2016

Dear

Many thanks for your External Examiner's Report for the 2015-2016 UG programmes in Linguistics & Phonetics. We are very pleased by your positive assessment of our (revised) marking practices, feedback provision and moderation procedures, and are grateful to you for encouraging us to review aspects of our assessment practice over the past years.

For the record, I should point out that our move to co-teaching level 2 and level 3 modules was not motivated by a wish to 'broaden the available curriculum'. The modules previously existed as level 3 ones which could be taken by level 2 and 3 students; our introduction of separate level 2 variants means we can now assess level 2 and level 3 students appropriately for their level of study.

With reference to marks adjustments, I agree there is still work to do on some individual modules to ensure that marking schemes yield normal marks distributions. This applies in particular to Language: Structure and Sound and Language: Meaning and Use. These modules are complex in that most of the marking is not done by the person who set the marking scheme. When resulting distributions look out of the ordinary, it can be difficult to make an informed judgement as to whether this accurately reflects students' performance. Given our effort this year to adjust our expectations of what a normal distribution of marks looks like, we made a conscious decision to assume that students' performance was normal on these modules, and revise our marking schemes accordingly. In some cases, this resulted in marks adjustments. We are confident that these adjustments will become less common in the future.

With reference to quantitative analysis, constraints on both staffing and programme structures make it unlikely that we will be able to offer a level 2 statistics or experimental methods module. What we will do, starting in 2016/17, is incorporate a session on quantitative analysis in the level 1 module Key Skills in Linguistics, and give students an assessed exercise on level 2 Phonetics that involves some quantitative analysis. This will allow us to provide students with explicit training at levels 1 and 2 and direct them to both online resources and modules taught elsewhere in the University.

Thank you again, and we look forward to working with you during 2016-2017.

Yours sincerely,

Director of Linguistics & Phonetics

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies

FACULTY OF ARTS



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

19 August 2016

Dear ,

External Examiner report (Classification Board) 2015-16

Many thanks for your External Examiner report and helpful feedback on our Classification Board and procedures. I am very pleased to hear that you felt our students' achievements were commensurate with national benchmarks and your own institution, and that you found our administrative procedures excellent and our decisions correct and fully justified.

Thank you for your helpful remarks about the class boundaries. I take your point; as this is a feature of the Leeds classification algorithm it is something over which we have no control at School level but I will ensure that your comments are forwarded to the appropriate bodies at University level. Given that in the near future, Leeds will be revising its classification algorithm to move to a categorical marking scale and grade point average system, it seems likely that your concerns will be addressed in those changes.

I am grateful for your comments about the handling of mitigating circumstances cases. The University's policy on special circumstances discretion is very open. I agree that for the sake of consistency it would be useful to have a clearer set of guidelines. I will discuss with my colleagues in the Quality Assurance Team how to find the best way forward on this issue, so that we are able to improve on our practice next year.

In response to your comments about academic discretion, I am able to inform you that the 'single weak module' criterion is defined as being one or more classes below the student's average. As to the 'exceptional year abroad' criterion, our School Residence Abroad Officer has been working with subject areas to devise some School-wide criteria to define 'exceptional performance', and these are ready to be implemented for the 2016-17 session.

Regarding when to enter the decision of 'Delayed Award' or when to award a degree that may be upgraded through resits, we acknowledge that there was initially a lack of clarity this year, but I can assure you that my colleagues and I have reviewed this aspect of procedures so as to ensure clarity and consistency in 2016-17.

On behalf of the LCS may I thank you for your assistance at our Classification Board, for your thoughtful judgement in helping us decide some of the more complex cases, and for all your work for the School this year.

Yours sincerely,

Exams and Assessment Officer
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies
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cc.