

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:	School of Earth and Environment
Subject(s):	Environmental Management / Sustainable Development
Programme(s) / Module(s):	BS-ENV/SEM – BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management (3 years) BS-ENV/SEM4 – BSc Sustainability and environmental Management (Ind) – 4 years
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BSc

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 Quality Assurance**
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

None.

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?

Yes – I have had no problem obtaining previous reports and responses. To refresh my memory of the main issues raised last year, I recently requested my previous report and the response of the school a few weeks before the exam board meeting. I was sent these reports immediately. In my first year as External Examiner (last year), I was sent the previous External Examiner's report and the School's response by email, shortly after my appointment.

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

This is my second year as External Examiner on the programme.

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.

I have carefully reviewed the aims and ILOs for all 11 of the modules I am responsible for, and for the programme overall. I find both to be appropriate and well aligned with the structure and content of the taught material and the methods of assessment. The standards being upheld are commensurate with the level of the awards being offered.

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.*

Yes, as far as I can tell, both the aims and ILOs of the programme at Leeds meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark. I believe the standards of students' performance on the BSc in Sustainability and Environmental Management are consistent with the standards of those in similar programmes at other Universities.

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.*

I continue to be impressed by the creative range of assessment methods offered across the modules in the programme, and their overall alignment with the ILOs of modules. Assessments include a wide range of methods such as exams, essays, group posters, management plans, fieldwork reports, policy briefs, group presentations, dissertation projects, etc. As I noted in my report last year, this diverse range of assessments is a positive feature of the course design because it accommodates differentiation within the student body. In most modules where there are a number of assessments, they are generally well joined-up with their intended learning outcomes. With respect to a couple of modules (e.g. Environmental Research Project – SOEE3030) that are assessed through the submission of a single assignment, formative assessments designed to provide feedback on progress are built into the work plan. This is good practice. Some assessment methods also allow students to apply their knowledge in a practical activity (e.g. the biodiversity management plan in SOEE2690), which has obvious benefits for skills enhancement and gaining experience that is useful for entering the job market after the degree is completed.

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.*

I would say that the academic standards demonstrated by students at Leeds is comparable to students in similar programmes at other universities in the UK. On the whole, I was impressed by the quality of student work and the dedication of staff to high quality teaching and learning. But as was also noted last year, one of the main weaknesses in students' work was that some coursework tended to be overly descriptive and failed to engage in critical analysis. In addition, some students were unable to structure their points in a coherent way that allowed them to build and sustain an argument. On the top end of the scale, however, the coursework that achieved marks in the 70s was of very good quality.

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

Not applicable.

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.

I am very pleased to see that some of the comments I made in my report last year have been taken on board to enhance the programme this year. To follow up on two points from last year:

1. **Group guidelines** – there were no formal grading criteria in place for group work assessments last year, but I understand that this has been noted as a priority, and the School has launched a project called 'Making Group Work Work' led by the DSE. As part of this, there is a plan to interview module leaders and students and to look at course rubrics and identify good practice in order to develop school guidance.

2. **Pathways and choices of modules** – in the Sustainability and Environmental Management programme, it was apparent last year that some students were not taking the modules needed for their chosen pathway. Students were consequently diverging away from the compulsory pathway modules early in the pathway, which was having implications for their programmes in the second and third years. However, I understand that the required modules taken in the first year of the pathways have now been changed, and module selection in the second and third years of the pathway is now more flexible. This is an improvement and should help to rectify the problem.

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 content of the 11 modules I reviewed all appeared to be up-to-date, reflecting current knowledge of debates and the relevant literature. It is also clear that in many cases, module leaders were personally engaged in research that related to the topic of the module, suggesting that there is a good relationship between teaching and research. The wide range of interdisciplinary skills and expertise contributing to teaching activities is impressive, but also necessary for a programme such as this that is uniquely located at the interface between human activity and the environment.

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

Not Applicable.

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

Not Applicable.

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, I have had sufficient access to the material needed to fulfil my responsibilities as External Examiner. Email communication with the programme administrator, Charlotte Close, is always very good and she has been very responsive to any requests I have had.

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, all documentation was supplied. Any further documentation I have requested has been sent to me immediately.

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 was sent exam papers to scrutinise and comment on. I found the level of questions to be appropriate. I didn't really have any pressing comments, but only pointed out a few typos.

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, this was all fine.

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

Yes, there was a wide range of appropriate subjects for dissertations. Many topics were very interesting and innovative. I felt that both the subjects and range of marks were appropriate, and the standards of assessment were also satisfactory.

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, very satisfactory. Administrative arrangements were excellent. I was present at the Board of Examiners meeting, and was very satisfied with the way operations took place and the recommendations that were made.

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

Yes. Procedures and discretionary criteria are in place for considering mitigating circumstances and medical evidence. These procedures appear to be followed well.

Other comments

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

One final issue that was noted at the External Examiners meeting concerns the procedure for the moderation of dissertations. In situations where the grade given by the first and second marker differs by more than 11 %, a third marker is brought in. A moderator is then used to help decide the final grade. However, it would be helpful here if there was some documentation of the moderation process (i.e. how is the final grade decided). I understand that such a moderation form exists at the PG level, but there does not seem to be one for the UG level. This may be something to consider in the future.

I have very much enjoyed my second year as External Examiner on the BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management programme. I do hope my comments and feedback are helpful.

School of Earth and Environment

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

22 August 2016

Dear

RE: Response to External Examiner's Report - BA Environmental Sustainability; BA Environmental Management; BA Environmental Management (Industry); BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management; BSc Sustainability and Environmental Management (Industry); 2015-16

I am very grateful to you as External Examiner for your very valuable work on reviewing our programme. Also, I am extremely encouraged by your positive comments regarding the programme and the overall procedures of the examination process.

You raised two points for consideration:

- 1) *"...as was also noted last year, one of the main weaknesses in students' work was that some coursework tended to be overly descriptive and failed to engage in critical analysis. In addition, some students were unable to structure their points in a coherent way that allowed them to build and sustain an argument."*

I understand that this is a comment regarding student performance and not necessarily module delivery, but I definitely take it as a point of consideration. We are addressing this in several ways. Firstly, we are overhauling our first year skills modules to accelerate and improve students' acquisition of university-level critical thinking and analytical skills, so that later modules can build on these. Secondly, we are currently in the process of revising the skills that each of our modules are addressing from the whole set of Leeds for Life skills map (<https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/skills.aspx>). This review process is not finished yet, but a preliminary assessment indicate that a substantial number of modules do have critical thinking as one of the core skills. However, in any case, this issue will be discussed at the next Programme Delivery Team meeting to initiate a collective reflection on whether we are doing enough to stimulate critical analysis and thinking across our programme and what can be done to improve student performance on this area.

- 2) *"In situations where the grade given by the first and second marker differs by more than 11 %, a third marker is brought in. A moderator is then used to help decide the final grade. However, it would be helpful here if there was some documentation of the*

moderation process (i.e. how is the final grade decided). I understand that such a moderation form exists at the PG level, but there does not seem to be one for the UG level.”

This was indeed discussed at the Exam Board meeting for all of the programmes and it was agreed that the same format used for PG level would be adopted at the UG level.

Yours sincerely,

Head of School
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