

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:	Geography
Subject(s):	Geography
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Geography Geography with Transport Planning
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 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

There are no specific matters that require urgent attention before the programme is offered again.

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?

I was provided with the necessary reports, responses and guidance in a timely way. Thank you to the Examinations Officer and team for their fantastic support during my take-up of the 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

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 programme Aims and ILOs are highly appropriate for the award levels and programme of study. Students are positively exposed to critical, challenging and exciting modules across the programme. There is a deep evidence of the take-up of transferable skills and more specific skills that are attuned to the discipline (i.e. GIS). It is pleasing to note the emphasis that is given to issues of employability across the programme, which are well balanced to the more academically-driven modules. Module handbooks are effective at explicitly showing the ILOs.

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 ILOs and aims are clearly aligned to the wider national subject benchmarks and frameworks. There is an impressive suite of diverse modules providing opportunities for students to engage with leading sub-disciplinary and disciplinary, on-going debates, as well as some broader debates in the wider social sciences. The overall process is well organised, transparent and the programme structure is clear.

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.*

In the context of the ILOs, the assessment processes and methods are appropriate. Overall, there is a wide range of assessment types that are adopted across the modules, which effectively test the critical, analytical and interpretative qualities of the students, as well as their knowledge-base and understanding. The design and structure of the assessment methods is robust and rigorous, and this is exemplified by the marking of modules and classification of grades/awards. I was particularly impressed by the quality and depth of written comments on the scripts and feedback sheets, which would appear to be clearly enhancing the subsequent quality and performance of students.

I would encourage the teaching team to reflect on the possibility of some over-assessment on some modules, which would appear to be tied to the overall lack of super firsts (too many hurdles). Perhaps it may be possible to streamline some of the assessment in some modules.

It would be useful for the teaching team to consider the more consistent use of feedback sheets, and to include more 'feed-forward' comments on the sheets. This may require a re-formatting of the feedback sheets.

There are some key differentials between the types and forms of assessment within second year fieldtrips in the same module, and this requires the teaching team to consider the assessment and ILOs on this module.

The teaching team could usefully reflect on the assessment and credit implications of the balance(s) between individual, pairs and group work across modules.

The written feedback sheets on dissertation performance needs to more effectively map onto the criteria sheet for dissertations.

I would also encourage the teaching team to more fully use the full range of marks. If work is marked as being 'outstanding' it should be given an outstanding grade, where appropriate.

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.*

My observations of module evaluation forms would suggest that students are given numerous opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of ILOs. This view was reinforced during a skype interview with a group of students that both external examiners undertook. Students were very positive about the programme to deliver ILOs and their opportunities across 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.

I would highlight the following areas of good practice that are worthy of wider dissemination:

1. The broad programme includes an up-to-date, diverse, and cutting-edge curriculum that is challenging, critical and encourages reflective thinkers in the discipline.
2. There is a prominent focus on employability skills across the programme, such as Research Placement, Workplace Co-operative projects, School placements, and Geogs into Teaching.
3. There is an effective use of fieldtrips to crystallise complex theoretical and conceptual ideas that are explored in the lecture theatre and seminars.
4. There is wide evidence of innovative teaching practice across the programme, including: Annotated Newspaper Review (Geogs of Encounter), 10 minute podcasts and reflective logs (GoE), funding bid proposals (Geog of Mig), twitter feed announcements on some modules (Advanced Population and Health Geography), critical evaluation in a policy (Contested Cities), visitor talks (Advanced Retail Planning), and practice based enquiry group (Creating Alternative Futures).
5. Moderation of scripts and other work, and showing evidence of high-quality moderation, is exemplary.
6. There is an exemplary process of reflection by module leaders, which is documented in a standard template/report. This report also demonstrates clear evidence moderation and response(s) to moderation/recommended revisions to modules. I would suggest that this good practice should be disseminated and taken-up across the sector – very well done!

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 of the programme is embellished with research-informed teaching across all levels of the programme. It is clear that the content within modules draws heavily upon the 'hot' research outputs of the teaching team, and this means that students are engaging with the leading and cutting-edge debates within the discipline and broader social (and natural/physical) sciences. As a result, students are exposed to a range of different sub-disciplinary contexts and contemporary scholarship in the fields; embracing different methodological, epistemological and philosophical approaches. This is also evidenced in the deep ways that the majority of students embed/cite recent academic articles in their assessed work, and examination scripts. The passion(s) of the teaching team for the discipline is widely evident in the work/outputs of the students, as well as being borne out by a policy relevant/applied theme running through the programme.

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.

The External Examiner Handbook is excellent and provided good guidance. This was sent to me in a timely manner by the Examinations Officer and team, and ensured that I was aware of my role, powers and responsibilities before undertaking my duties 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.

I was sent all the necessary documentation (CoP), handbooks and guidelines in a timely manner, as well as numerous statistical data on student performance and programme-related outcomes. Hard copies of additional module information were provided on my visit to the School. I was not asked to perform any duties that were external to my role.

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 sent draft examination papers and I made a series of comments and suggested revisions. These revisions were included in the final versions of the examination papers. The questions were appropriate for the modules and programme.

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?

The VLE is excellent for opening-up assessed work to the examiner, as well as other related materials. I was supported in using and exploring the VLE given this is my first year as external examiner. Hard copies of dissertations were provided which was helpful.

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

I read a range of dissertations that were awarded different grades. The diverse choice of subjects was appropriate for the discipline and programme, and the methods and standards of assessment were robust.

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 operation of the board was professional and effective, and ensured fairness to all students. The administrative arrangements were clear and well organised by the examinations team. As external examiner I was able to input into the board in appropriate ways, and the recommendations of the board were appropriate and sound.

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

Both medical evidence and mitigating circumstances had clearly been taken into account and given due consideration in the process.

Other comments

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

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11 October 2016

Dear

Head of School response to your BA External Examiner's Report

I am writing to express, on behalf of the School, my thanks for your work as external examiner on our BA programmes this year. The role you play in ensuring we provide a high quality education in Human Geography is appreciated by everyone here.

We are delighted with your overall assessment of the high standard of our BA programmes as up-to-date, diverse, and cutting-edge curricula that are challenging, critical and encouraging reflective thinkers in the discipline.

It is very pleasing to see external validation of our programme aims and independent learning objectives, the quality of our modules, the research-led teaching we do, and our commitment to employability skills and awareness as meeting the wider national subject benchmarks and frameworks. It is also encouraging to know that our programmes are well organised, transparent and clear structured.

You particularly highlight the wide range of assessment types on offer that effectively test the critical, analytical and interpretative qualities of the students, as well as their knowledge-base and understanding. We are delighted with your appreciation of our written feedback to students, the innovative teaching practices we employ and the exemplary nature of our module moderation process.

Thank you very much for kind comments about the academic and support staff team that assisted you during the examination period. I will be sure to pass on your thanks.

Whilst you found no matters requiring urgent attention, you did identify some areas for our attention based on your evaluation:

(a) Over-assessment: you suggest that some modules are possibly being over-assessed which could explain the overall lack of super firsts.

Response: over the past 12 months as a School on both BA and BSc sides we have made a serious attempt to reduce the overall assessment burden and to identify and change modules where it was felt students were being over-assessed. While we have retained existing norms that weight module credits to overall assessment lengths, we have tried where possible to reduce the number of different assessments in any given module to two or three. Staff were asked to look at each module they taught on and make suggestions for streamlining. This has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of assessments for the coming academic year 2016/17 which you will hopefully see

the fruits of next summer. The University is also producing guidance on assessment mapping that we will fold into our ongoing considerations.

(b) Feedback format inconsistency: you advise us to consider taking a more consistent approach to the use of feedback sheets, and to include more 'feed-forward' comments on the sheets.

Response: the recent mainstreaming of the VLE and online electronic marking and feedback has created the possibility of different staff using different electronic and written formats to provide feedback which we are now trying to standardise. We have as a rule now moved to an electronic-only feedback system, but some staff prefer or require to mark and write on paper. The VLE allows for at least three different ways of writing feedback and in the process standard formats and headings become inconsistently used. For this academic year 2016-17, we have created a new School-wide feedback sheet that requires staff to identify up to three actions a student could take to improve their performance (feed-forward), and directly link the mark and feedback to the marking criteria for the assessment. This format must be used when marking online and we are looking at ways of supporting staff to do this.

(c) Incoherent diversity of assessment on the Level 2 Fieldtrips module: you identified some key differences between the types and forms of assessment within Level 2 fieldtrips on the Inside European Cities module.

Response: we recognise this issue and believe that this does make internal moderation and external evaluation more difficult than it should be. We will be reviewing this in early October to see what internal changes can be made for 2016/17 and then decide whether we will separate the fieldtrips into their own modules with unique ILOs and assessment types for 2017/18.

(d) Balancing individual and group work assessment: you would like us to reflect on the assessment and credit implications of the balance(s) between individual, pairs and group work across modules.

Response: as a rule, when an assessment involves two or more students working collaboratively on an assignment, the assessment length (words or time) is weighted to reflect both the sharing of workload and the additional challenges of working together in pairs or groups. We will reflect on how systematic and uniform this weighting is and discuss possible changes for 2017/18.

(e) Dissertation feedback: you suggest the written feedback sheets on a student's dissertation performance need to more effectively map onto the marking criteria for dissertations.

Response: the creation of our new feedback sheet should help with this but we will review the dissertation mark sheet in early October 2016 to ensure this happens.

(f) Stretching the marks: you encourage staff to better use the full range of marks and ensure that work marked as being 'outstanding' be given an outstanding grade where appropriate.

Response: we agree with this and have for the past two years been encouraging staff to stretch the marks at both ends to ensure excellence is rewarded and distinguished. Again, the University has a working group to explore marking schemes.

Thank you again for your service to the School over the summer and we look forward to seeing you again next year.

With all best wishes

Head of School