

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 Geography (Faculty of Environment)
Subject(s):	<i>MSc River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	GEOG5230M Professional Development GEOG5285M Dissertation GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management GEOG5680M Hydrological Processes and Analysis GEOG5740M Introducing GIS GEOG5010M Principles of GIS GEOG5510M Using GIS GEOG5060M GIS and Environment GEOG5530M River basin management for water quality GEOG5710M Digital Image Processing for Environmental Remote Sensing GEOG5790M Programming for Geographical Information Analysis: Advanced Skills. GEOG5830M Environmental Assessment GEOG5990M Programming for Geographical Information Analysis: Core Skills
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc/PgD

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?

N/A

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

N/A

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 commensurate with the level of programme and provide a challenging study environment. Standards are in general appropriate for an MSc. The students receive advanced training, particularly in technical skills.

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 Intended Learning Outcomes are comparable with many other HEIs and students receive appropriate advanced level (MSc) training.

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 structure of the programme allows students to select one of two complimentary pathways, concentrating on either river basin processes or more on GIS skills. This is underpinned by common core skills.

Marking standards seem appropriate for the work that I examined. Feedback to students is generally good and marks are usually well justified in terms of the marking criteria. However, there is variability in the detail and quantity of comments returned. Some comments were rather fragmentary. Whilst adhering to the marking criteria is clearly desirable, one practice which I observed in a few isolated cases must be discontinued. This is the case where the assessor simply highlights appropriate comments in the published assessment criteria (literally using a highlighter) and provides little additional comment. This approach means the context of the comments is not known and the weighting of comments is not given.

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.*

Student numbers on the course this year were 8 students studying full-time. At first I was a little concerned about the range of marks which is concentrated in a fairly narrow band (Table 1.). However after reviewing the work the marks awarded are generally appropriate for the criteria against which they are assessed.

Mark	Count	%
80+	0	0
70+	18	28
60+	43	67
50+	3	5
	64	

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.

This is my second report year as External Examiner for the River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS. The programme team have responded very positively to my previous report and have implemented several changes. These include: sending through information prior to the assessment meeting; greater use of VLE for storage of key assessment detail; produced a really useful guide to the VLE for first time users; improved dissertation feedback, etc.

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.

Research-led teaching is clearly embedded in several of the modules (particularly in practical exercises) and is also represented in the range of dissertation topics. The main benefit of this is it allows students to place their work in the context of other research undertaken in the department and when this is done well students and staff both benefit from this. With the addition of GEOG5230M the new Professional Development module this has given students on the programme greater exposure to the research culture in the Department.

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.

Yes – This was comprehensively explained.

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.

Last year I suggested the School prepare a checklist of materials to be made available to the External Examiner (see below). This has been partly acted on and the provision of this material has improved (not least because much of this is available through the VLE). The administration and teaching staff associated with the programme have been very helpful in responding to requests for information and everything I requested was given to me. However, I still think some improvements can be made in this respect and it would be good if the administrator would email through the following list of items clearly indicating where these are available on the VLE or by sending through relevant documents. The list of materials required is as follows:

- External Examiners Handbook
- Outline of project specification and flow diagrams of modules / programme structure
- List of marking and assessment criteria for the different pieces of coursework
- Guidance notes for use of the VLE and clear map of where to find key material

- Outline of School of Geography Moderation procedures
- General marking guidelines and marking scales used
- Procedures for mitigating circumstances
- School Code of Practice on Assessment
- The previous year External Examiners Report and response from School
- A summary of the mark profiles for the student cohort
- List (Copies – PDF) of dissertations that need further consideration / verification and accompanying markers reports
- Invitation to view all coursework in advance of the meeting ensuring all work and examiners reports are available.
- Travel expenses claim form and claims procedure

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?

The MSc is assessed exclusively by coursework. No drafts of these assessments were sent to the External Examiner.

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 is a big advantage of the VLE all assessed work and marking details / feedback was available to me. Work with late extensions was emailed directly to me.

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

The range and choice of subjects on the MSc is entirely appropriate and is closely allied to the various research strengths of the school. Comments I have made previously have been embraced by the School and are starting to work their way in to the dissertation process. In particular there is now greater of student feedback including the research proposal and interim report. However, the range of high marks on dissertations is still limited and flaws in dissertations occur at both ends of the scale. This could be partially remedied if feedback was given on a full draft of the dissertation. The dissertations are short and aspire to be written in paper format. It therefore follows that a review of the whole thing would be appropriate (as per a normal paper review process). This would 'lift' all dissertations substantially and provide a better experience and appreciation of process for students.

Enforcing a minimum standard for the pass of the dissertation is an important threshold and a significant indicator of quality of the MSc. There is a temptation and will to assume that all will pass but sometimes the assessment needs to be more critical to ensure minimum standards are maintained e.g. are you happy to graduate a student who lacks the ability to produce a coherent and substantial independent research project (a key skill) to the workplace or on to further study, typically PhD?

One final point – I query the marking of the literature review as a piece of summative work that is then included in the dissertation. This almost looks like double accounting although I acknowledge this is often changed / improved in the process. It would be interesting to check for the degree of overlap between the literature review as a standalone piece of work and how it appears in the dissertation.

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?

Excellent arrangements. I would particularly thank <<>> for organising the whole process, responding efficiently to various requests and hosting us whilst in Leeds.

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

I was not made aware of any mitigating circumstances prior to the examiners meeting or asked to comment over the course of the year. Mitigating circumstances were briefly mentioned in the examiners meeting but these are not recorded in the assessment board minutes.

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

I wish to comment on the new module GEOG5230M Professional Development offered for the first time in AY2015/16.

I really like the general spirit and ethos of the module which aligns well with notions of 'employability'. It includes an interesting range of projects:

- Peat depth modelling for the Yorkshire peat partnership
- Leeds Flood alleviation scheme – improvements for the future
- Creating DEMs using structure from motion (SFM) and Airsoft
- Android mobile application to help solve the pluvial urban flooding problem
- Testing a natural flood management (NFM) tool using Debden Bridge as a case study.

The module is common to all MSc's so has a wide variation in topics and styles and has two main pieces of work (portfolio):

(1) Trial essay – *Is geography and art or a science?* (Short essay 750 words)

(2) Report - (2500 words) include an activity log of the work undertaken and a reflection on the project and study.

The work is assessed on the basis of a presentation and review of portfolio work. However, details of the assessment need to be made clearer and there needs to be formal assessment criteria for both of these pieces of work and documented student feedback on the process.

I believe the initial idea was to have this module assessed on a pass/fail basis i.e. to demonstrate competencies in these areas and be exposed to a professional 'experience'. However if a formal summative assessment is not undertaken then still needs to be an 'award' e.g. certificate of competence.

Overall this is a good addition to the programme and with some minor adjustments will be an important element going forward.

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November 4th 2016

Dear

Head of School response to the MSc External Examiner's Report

I am writing on behalf of the School to express my thanks for your work as external examiner on our MSc River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS programme this year. The role you play in ensuring we deliver a high quality MSc where student receive appropriate advanced training, partially in technical skills, is appreciated by everyone here.

As you note in your report, the programme team have implemented several changes that you suggested in last year's report. These include:

- (i) Sending through all appropriate information to you prior to the external examiners meeting;
- (ii) Making greater use of the VLE for storage of key assessment details;
- (iii) Producing a really useful guide to the VLE for first time users;
- (iv) Modifying the dissertation module assessment so that it now includes a dissertation proposal and interim report. These changes will improve feedback to students as they carry out their dissertation.

We are pleased that you feel that the programme is appropriately challenging for MSc students, and that research led teaching is clearly embedded in many of the modules, particularly the practical exercises and choice of dissertation topics, and that marking standards are appropriate. You note no issues that require urgent attention, but identified a number of issues for the programme team to consider further. I would like to take this opportunity to advise you on how we are responding to these issues.

1. Although you commented that marking standards seem appropriate for the work and feedback to students is generally good and marks are usually well justified in terms of the marking criteria, you felt there was variability in the detail and quantity of comments returned. In particular you note that one practice which you observed in a few isolated cases, where the assessor simply highlights appropriate comments in the published assessment criteria (using a highlighter) and provides little additional

comment, must be discontinued. In response to this comment the programme leader has spoken to all involved in marking work on this programme and outlined that this particular practice is not appropriate and must stop immediately. In addition, staff have been advised to make sure that the detail and quantity of feedback provided to students should allow them to improve their work.

2. You commented on the range of marks which is concentrated in a fairly narrow band, but after reviewing the work you felt the marks awarded are generally appropriate for the criteria against which they are assessed. All staff marking work on this programme have been shown the table you produced on mark distribution and asked to ensure they use the full range of marks, particularly for the dissertation.
3. You made several comments about the dissertation module which included (i) changes we have made in response to your comments last year on improving feedback to students throughout the dissertation process, (ii) enforcing a minimum pass for a dissertation, and (iii) whether marking of the literature review as a separate piece of work is double counting. I will highlight how we are responding to each of these points in turn:
 - (i) As you note this year the dissertation module includes two new components, the research proposal and interim report, to increase the feedback that students receive throughout their dissertation. We hope that this will lead to fewer flaws within the dissertation and a greater number of high marks being awarded. However, we will not know if this is the case until this cohort of students completes their MSc. Therefore we are hesitant to introduce additional feedback, for example on a full draft of the dissertation as you suggest, before we know the impact of this year's changes.
 - (ii) We will produce a minimum set of criteria for the pass of the dissertation to ensure that it is a significant indicator of quality of the MSc. All MSc students should have the ability to produce a coherent and substantial independent research project.
 - (iii) As you note we currently assess the literature review (3000 words) as a separate piece of work to the full dissertation (10,000 words) which includes a much shorter and changed/improved literature review. Therefore the degree of overlap between the two pieces of work is normally low. However, we do agree that it could be perceived as double counting. Therefore we plan to remove the marking of the literature review as a standalone piece of assessment as we feel that the students will now get feedback on this component of the dissertation in their proposal and interim report.
4. Lastly I would like to thank you for your comments on the new module GEOG5230M Professional Development offered for the first time in AY2015/16. I am glad that you feel that it is good addition to the programme, that you like the general spirit and ethos of the module which aligns well with notions of employability, and it included an interesting range of projects. The minor adjustments you suggest regarding the need for clear assessment criteria for the presentation and review of portfolio work will be implemented this year. The module has also been reviewed by the external examiner for MSc GIS, Seraphim Alvanides, and he made similar comments.

Notwithstanding the specific points above, we are pleased that your report is overall very positive. Your input into the examination process at Leeds is greatly appreciated and with your assistance we hope to raise our standards further. Thank you once again for your enthusiastic scrutiny and considerate work and we look forward to your visit next year.

Yours sincerely

Head of School