

# 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 Environment/School of Earth & Environment
Subject(s):	As below
Programme(s) / Module(s):	<p><i>MSc Sustainability (Environment and Development)</i>  <i>MSc Sustainability (Climate Change and Environmental Policy)</i>            SOEE5020M Research Project            SOEE5010M Research Methods            SOEE5093M Introduction to ecological and environmental economics            SOEE5520M Introduction to Sustainability            SOEE5472M Environmental Policy and Governance            SOEE5483M Critical Perspectives on Environment and Development            SOEE5495M Environment – Development Overseas Field Course            SOEE5540M Climate Change Physical Sciences Basis            SOEE5550M Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation            SOEE5561M Climate Change Mitigation</p>
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc

#### 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 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*

No

#### 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*

Specific changes include merging two programmes to meet market interest and reconfiguring modules or assessment to improve delivery. These have been sensible changes with academic staff responsible having taken time to reflect on how best to implement change and continue to make updates to ensure that their teaching remains at a high standard. There is some excellent feedback from the students about the learning and teaching provision, and staff are responsive to both student feedback and external examiner insights. Overall, assessment has been appropriate with a broad range of approaches used, detailed feedback continues to be provided to students and marking has been well moderated. The

programmes delivered are of a high standard. The move to online availability of marking/assessments has been very useful compared with the first year of having to work through individual student profiles. I would like to thank the various programme directors and administrative support staff for having made my time as an external examiner rewarding and wish them all the best moving forward.

**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 two programmes reviewed this year had clearly communicated aims, covering appropriate content and relevant themes for the subjects – the module learning outcomes were appropriate for MSc level and the mechanisms by which students would achieve these were clearly outlined in the module documentation.

The programmes were structured with an appropriate mix of core modules as well as optional selections by students. The students for both programmes had an opportunity to undertake an independent research project and for those on the Environment and Development programme, a related fieldtrip, enhancing employability and the identity of that programme.

**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

**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.*

Module leaders used a good range of assessment types across the modules, affording students the opportunity to show their learning – overall these were appropriate to the learning outcomes, and together with the assessment criteria were clearly communicated to students via the module handbooks. Programme Directors may wish to be mindful of continuing efforts to manage potential over assessment when looking across the full spectrum of modules experienced by students and how international students engagement with particular assessment types. It may be possible to continue to reflect on possibilities of reducing overlapping assessment type across core modules and ensuring that there is general workload consistency between 15 credit modules for example, even if this is constructed from a range of different assessment types.

From the sample of work reviewed, there was good balance and consistency in the marking applied. There was excellent transparency for examiners through the detailed moderation process.

There were positive comments from students about the efforts of many staff to provide formative support for assessment.

**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.*

Yes

The cohort is comparable to other courses in the area – there are some excellent students and some, predominantly international students, who struggled for various reasons. It is always difficult to be consistent across markers when assessing work by students who find communication in written English challenging.

Research methods module: module convenors recognised there were some structural problems with the module that were perhaps limiting the students benefiting as much as intended. The main challenge was the amount of content and activities for the autumn term, and student feedback suggests it is quite intense for them. Options were discussed with staff. For example, it may be reasonable in the future to consider separating out a basic methods introduction from the in-depth training. That way, students will continue to receive a general methods introduction module which is front loaded perhaps even that all are expected to take, covering an understanding of the range of approaches, an introduction to a toolkit of methods, helping them to appreciate the value of different approaches and methods. Separate in-depth training for qualitative or quantitative methods/case study practice etc. could then support particular skill development as an option and likely some

students would wish to select a training that will feature in their dissertation. Perhaps the in-depth training should take place in the spring term once they have considered their dissertation topic for example. The approach taken to reconsidering the module would of course depend on the credits available/structure of the programmes. Fitting methods training into PGT delivery is a challenge for other courses in the area and constantly under review so this issue is no surprise or major issue.

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.*

Already noted in other answers on this report.

Good practice: there are a range of good practice as already highlighted elsewhere on the form, from good moderation systems to, generally, detailed feedback provided to students, even with the shift to online systems for marking. The students find this valuable in their learning and it would be useful to continue to ensure that there is general consistency across all modules in terms of what students can expect from written feedback online (i.e. that all modules marked online for example used the text summary or had key points communicated that matched the criteria on the paper feedback form, or made use of the in-text comments when appropriate). Some staff provided very detailed feedback while there were a couple of modules which did not provide as much summary text back to students for longer written work (clearly the type and amount of appropriate feedback is dependent on the assessment).

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.*

As noted previously, the module curriculum outlines suggest that there are interesting examples from research or policy used in teaching. The student evaluations highlighted how this was particularly appreciated by students. The courses offer the opportunity to understand the role of independent research through their independent project as well as fieldwork practice. It should be noted this year that there was a greater range of supervisors available, providing more opportunities for students to engagement with research ideas.

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

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.*

The administrative support officer for PGT examinations within the SOEE provided all the information needed and was extremely knowledgeable and helpful in addressing any questions that arose during examination process.

Programme directors and other staff also made themselves available.

**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 – Assessment questions were relevant to module content, all of an appropriate nature and level, had been clearly communicated to students and model answers were provided for the one exam reviewed (it may be beneficial to develop more detailed model answer points, even as bullet points, in future for each question to help transparency in marking).

One observation was that although group work is valuable to students and should be included, it is tricky for the marking process and can have an impact on overall grade – it would be feasible to consider either weighting some of the group work less overall, making it formative, or introducing an aspect of work that allows for individual weighting to help spread the marks further (e.g. for 5550, 5520).

**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 online system and e-copies of feedback was very efficient. We did have a bit of challenge accessing material the first morning due to the VLE having problems university wide.

Climate change impacts and adaptation - Feedback to students clear and detailed, marking consistent from sample reviewed. Some points about group task weighting above to help spread of marks. It was good to see the staff efforts to continue to update the climate change modules was paying off, for example there was much greater coherency within the module 'climate change impacts and adaptation' and while some student feedback seemed to continue to request a broader approach than agriculture, these type of comments tend to be the norm from a group of students with diverse interests.

Overall there was an appropriate spread of marks used in the module marking which resulted in appropriate classifications. It is notoriously difficult to use the higher end of the scale, although it was noted that a couple of modules did apply the very high end of the scale. Guidance to staff and the moderation process should ensure this is not a problem although it is perhaps an aspect to be mindful of in the future to ensure consistency in marking.

There was evidence of grade improvement through the course of the programme for most students demonstrating their learning and testament to the support they were receiving.

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

The choice of subjects was again wide ranging but relevant to their degree. It was possible to see markers comments and grades online or via e-spreadsheets.

Quite a few had a difference in classification between first marker and second marker although in most instances they agreed - Use of some third marking was probably useful to monitor consistency in grading, a common challenge when dissertations are graded by a larger pool of markers with differing perspectives.

**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?**

I attended the BoE meeting in person – all administrative arrangements were well organised. I was happy with the recommendations of the Board where specific cases were discussed and agreed.

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

Yes – special cases due to mitigating circumstances were given appropriate attention throughout the year and considered on a case by case basis where appropriate in the BoE.

**Other comments**

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

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**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

22 November 2016

Dear

**Re: Response to External Examiner's Report - MSc Environment & Development; MSc Climate Change and Environmental Policy for the academic year 2015-2016**

I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for examining our MSc programmes for the last academic session, and throughout your time as External Examiner for our two programmes. Over your tenure as External Examiner, your views have been an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and the staff involved in teaching the programmes have very much welcomed your input into their teaching processes. Thanks to you our MSc programmes in a stronger position now than they were when you arrived.

Over the last few years during your time as an External Examiner, we have made some significant changes to how our programmes are configured and managed. The last academic year (2015-2016) was the first year that we ran our newly reconfigured programmes, so I am delighted to hear that you felt these changes were sensible and that the delivery of teaching remains of high standard. It was also good to learn that there is some excellent student feedback, that you welcome our use of a broad range of assessment types and methods of feedback, that feedback to students continues to be detailed and marking well moderated and fair. I am also pleased to see that our move to making marks and assessments available online has been positive from your perspective.

I am glad that the administrative arrangements for your visit to Leeds this October went smoothly. The Faculty has been able to retain [redacted] as administrative support for all the School's Masters programmes, and we look forward to [redacted] continuing to make a positive contribution to the school, to students and to external examiners.

Returning to the programmes themselves, your comment that there was clear evidence of grade improvement through the course of the programmes is particularly welcome as this is a great testament to the teaching quality and support that our Masters students receive. I was also very pleased to read your positive thoughts on identities of the programmes and the employability of our graduates. We are committed to ensuring that research and policy informs our teaching, so I was pleased to see that both you and the students themselves highlighted the extent to which we succeed in doing this. As employability and job prospects become ever more important for our students, we will continue to work to improve their skills base. We are doing this through the new Personal Development Programme sessions which take place across two semesters and focus on transferable skills, applying for jobs, alumni experiences and how to get the best out of the programmes as a whole. Near-term future initiatives include investigating the possibility to offer more placement type dissertations for students on the Climate Change and Environmental Policy programme and building our offer of research projects based with external organisations or existing research projects for the Environment and Development students. For instance, a new optional module (SOEE5223 Delivering Sustainability Through Projects) was added to the MSc Climate Change and Environmental Policy

programme as a potential stepping stone towards more placement or external organisation based dissertations.

I was delighted to see that you felt there were no matters that required urgent attention and I appreciate the suggestions you have made for our consideration. Below, I have responded to each of these in turn.

Although you were generally happy with the range of assessments on offer which had well communicated learning outcomes, with transparent marking and moderation procedures in place, we do also recognise that continuing to be aware of managing the burden of assessment is important. We have therefore made the following changes: since the last academic year, the volume of assessment for SOEE5010 (Research Methods) has been reduced and altered to include some more reflective elements. Similarly for SOEE5561 (Climate Change Mitigation), the volume of assessment has been reduced from two, to a single essay assignment to more closely align with School guidelines. We will continue to keep assessment types and levels under review and have welcomed your feedback in this area.

As you note, it is always challenging to ensure that international students who come from other educational backgrounds and have frequently undertaken previous studies in languages other than English present a particular challenge for our programmes. Additional language support has come on-stream for the 2016-2017 academic year through a University-wide initiative from the University's Language Centre to provide pre-sessional English language resources tailored to our post-graduate students. This material has been directly linked to SOEE5281. Within the School, students are encouraged to make use of our Royal Literary Fellow who provides one-to-one support with improving writing skill and style. Reports indicate that those taking advantage of this service benefit greatly.

Group work is a skill that we think important for our students to learn, especially given that their future careers are likely to require them to work in teams with people from a variety of backgrounds. However, it is certainly true that the marking process for group work is difficult and weighting it too strongly can have an inappropriate impact on student marks. We will therefore take your advice into account when addressing assessment types and group work weightings in the two highlighted modules (SOEE5281 Introduction to Sustainability; and SOEE5550 Climate Change: Impacts and Adaptation). In other modules (e.g. SOEE5010 Research Methods and SOEE5472 Environmental Policy and Governance, particularly during the field trip to Humberside) group work forms part of the teaching approach but is not formally assessed. The school and faculty have recently concluded a detailed project looking in detail at best practice and innovation in group work, and we look forwards to integrating its recommendations into our programmes.

High quality and timely feedback to students, together with fair, balanced and transparent marking are essential components of any taught programme. All module leaders are aware of the University policy to return feedback to students within 15 working days of submission. What is harder is to ensure that feedback is universally detailed, related to marking criteria and consistent across modules. Through the provision of School-level guidance via the Code of Practice on Assessment we continue to work towards this. Similarly, we are aware of the challenges associated with marking consistently at the higher end of the marking scale. We have clarified the marking criteria to make it clearer to staff how to distinguish marks at the highest end of the marking spectrum, to encourage greater use of high marks and as a result we will review guidance given to staff for awarding high grades for the Research Project module (SOEE5020). In parallel, recent School guidance on this matter in Code of Practice on Assessment document will be re-emphasised to teaching staff in attempt to ensure greater consistency.

In relation to specific modules:

***Research Project (SOEE5020)***

Given the range of topics on offer and staff supervising students, consistent and fair marking for the research project is a priority. Although this year there was a higher than usual use of third marking (due to differences in grades between first and second markers), I'm glad to hear that you see the benefit of this process for monitoring consistency of grades. To increase consistency, we are clarifying and recirculating the marking criteria for projects.

### ***Research Methods (SOEE5010)***

Thank you for your (requested) detailed thoughts, based on our face to face discussions, on research teaching within our programmes. As you noted, the module leader was already aware of the difficulties in the module structure which inherited from the previous academic year. We have therefore begun the process of overhauling this module. In line with your suggestions thus far this has involved focussing on the theory of the research process early in the module to give students an overview of research as a tool. Detailed quantitative and qualitative methods are then covered in sequence (rather than in parallel) to allow students more space and time to engage with each. The assessment burden has been reduced and assessment approaches widened to include non-written components and reflective elements. Finally the structure of the module has been altered so that students have more time to reflect on, and develop their understanding of, the research methods that are being taught. We will keep these developments under review and welcome future feedback on their impact.

We are also investigating the capacity for providing additional methods training and the demand amongst the students for this training. We are doing this through a School-funded project specifically intended to provide, monitor and obtain student feedback on further, more specialised and in-depth methods. We will have the outputs of this project available for future years to further inform our approach. In the meantime, students on the Environment and Development programme are now able to attend an advanced GIS course, taught by the School of Geography (GEOG5060), while those on Climate Change and Environmental Policy can choose to take SOEE5223 (Delivering Sustainability Through Projects) and we are investigating the feasibility of building further methods options into the programmes.

### ***Environmental Policy and Governance (SOEE5472)***

This module includes the sole exam we have on our programmes. We recognise the importance of having clear and comprehensive model answers for exam questions and transparency in the marking of exam scripts. Although all scripts are marked by a single marker, both exam questions and indicative answers are moderated, as are the actual marks awarded. Nevertheless we will examine how we might improve this process in line with your suggestions.

### ***Introduction to Sustainability (SOEE5281 – note in the Report a typo means that this module has been referred to as SOEE5520)***

Introduction to Sustainability is definitely our students' 'marmite' module, something which you recognise in your comments. We certainly feel that it is immensely valuable to front-load teaching with the material this module covers in order to establish a strong and common base across students who come from a wide range of disciplinary and academic backgrounds. We continue to enhance the support available to students, in the form of drop-in sessions and formative assessments, in order to help them make the most of what can be an intense week. Since last academic year we have made some efforts to slim down the contact time in the first week as well. We will continue to monitor student feedback on the module and will look forward to hearing the thoughts of the next External Examiner on the approach that we are taking.

### ***Introduction to Ecological and Environmental Economics (SOEE5093)***

With the introduction of the new MSc in Ecological Economics, this module has been discontinued and replaced with two new modules (SOEE5094 Introduction to Ecological Economics and SOEE5095 Environmental Economics and Policy). This will hopefully address the difficulty you note of teaching such a wide range of topics to a diverse group of students in a short space of time.

### ***Climate Change: Impacts and Adaptation (SOEE5550)***

As noted earlier, in liaison with the module leader, we are working toward reducing the weighting of the group work in this module in line with your suggestion.

### ***Climate Change Mitigation (SOEE5561)***

Regarding feedback provided to students, we are very pleased that you found the written scripts had detailed feedback. For this module, verbal generic feedback is also provided in class, which is subsequently available through lecture capture to all students through the VLE. Each student also gets an individual feedback sheet which is sent to them through email. This also includes any general feedback relevant to the class as a whole. Unfortunately the module leader was unable to upload these documents to the VLE so they were not available to you.



We trust this letter has addressed your queries, responded to your very helpful suggestions and clarified our direction going forward. Thank you once again for your close scrutiny of our MSc programmes. We are very grateful for your encouragement and helpful critique. Your input over the last three years has made a positive difference.

Yours sincerely,

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