

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2015-16

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	School of Earth & Environment
Subject(s):	<i>Engineering Geology</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Entire MSc programme
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.

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?

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

NA

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 reviewed the unit handbooks, learning outcomes and aims of all the units attached to the MSc in Engineering Geology. The ILO and the structure of the course are commensurate with the level of the award. The content is appropriate and prepares students for a career in industry or further study. Some of the numerical modelling demonstrated in projects is of an advanced standard beyond what would be expected at MSc level.

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 ILO map onto the QAA subject benchmarks for this subject. The course compares well with other similar courses offered at <<>> and <<>>.

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 assessment methodology delivers a blended approach of coursework both written, verbal and group together with end of year unseen exams. This approach is appropriate to the ILO's – in particular the problem based learning assessments are particularly well designed and appreciated by the student cohort. I have reviewed a number of exam scripts, course work assignments and final year projects and confirm that the marking of the assessments is fair with a clear audit trail. The final awards are fair and every effort is made to give students credit for hard work – where there has been extenuating circumstances the arrangements allow students to achieve the best results they can. However, the amount of credit given to some of the course work artefacts does not reflect the effort and time dedicated to these pieces of work. I have discussed this issue with the teaching staff and urge them to change the weighting of a number of assignments.

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 stated above there is a blended learning approach to this course which ensures students are able to demonstrate their strengths and build on their weaknesses. The coursework content is particularly well liked and does apply theory to practice. The students do least well in the Soil Mechanics Unit which is consistent with other Masters courses and not a surprise. However, this year there was a high failure rate in the Hazard, Resilience and Sustainable Engineering Unit (40%) – I reviewed a large sample of the exam scripts for this Unit and would comment that the marking was very fair and generous in some instances. The students appeared not to be able to answer the questions asked and simply wrote all they knew of a particular subject. The discursive nature of the questions appeared to be problematic to quite a large number of the cohort. The projects are generally of a high standard. There is however a feeling that preparation for the projects is left too late in the year (May) leaving only three months for completion. This is a reoccurring theme which has been magnified this academic year due to the high numbers of students which places serious strain on the small core teaching staff. Finding projects for a large cohort is difficult and plans need to be put into place for the coming academic year to ensure none of the students are disadvantaged in this important part of the PG degree.

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.

Feedback is still a problem with no real improvement from last year in terms of timing but there has been an improvement in the quality of feedback. Timing issues could be related to the high student numbers (>30) this year and a relatively small core team. Numbers for the next cohort are also in the 30's and therefore staffing may well be an issue going forward especially as the MSc in Engineering Geology at Imperial College will not run next year. I am glad to see that the University has agreed to appoint a new lecturer in rock engineering to join the team but am concerned that this is on a fix term contract of three years – this will limit the quality of applicants in my experience. The process of project allocation was also raised last year by the External Examiner (see above). This aspect does not appear to have been adequately resolved from last year as the students feedback is almost identical on this issue.

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.

Aspects of research are contained in the curriculum and are evident in the projects with a large number being research focussed especially in numerical modelling. Whilst the increase in the role of research in the programme is definitely applauded, a clear emphasis must remain on the application of theory and research to practice as this is primarily a course which leads into employment in the ground engineering sector. One concern I have is that whilst many students choose to adopt numerical modelling as part of their project it is often at the expense of a good robust geological and ground model. The team need to ensure that students do not leave Leeds with the opinion that the geology is not important and they can solve all problems with a sophisticated software programme.

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

I did receive mentoring in the form of visiting the project presentations with the previous External Examiner – this was a great help and worked well for me.

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.

Yes – these were all sent in a timely fashion.

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 – all exam scripts, coursework and projects were available

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 standard of marking and feedback was very good.

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

Yes, I have looked at a selection of projects covering the range of marks. The projects have been marked appropriately although I think some of the +70% grades could have been in the 80%. I would encourage the team to give the excellent feedback on these projects back to the students as this is the final major piece of work but they receive no formal feedback. This was stated last year but not taken up – I urge this to be done.

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

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

06 January 2017

Dear ,

RE: Response to External Examiner's Report, MSc Engineering Geology 2015/16

I would like to thank you again for acting as external examiner, and for spending time discussing the programme with the staff and taking feedback from our students. We are pleased to hear that the Intended Learning Outcomes and course structure are commensurate with the level of the award and that the course content is appropriate for a career in the sector, or further study. It is similarly pleasing to hear that the assessments were well designed and appreciated by the student cohort, and that the dissertation projects were generally of a high standard, and that marking of assessments was fair and with a clear audit trail. I would like to take this opportunity to respond to some of the specific points you raised as follows:

1. The amount of credit given to the coursework artefacts does in general not reflect the amount of effort and time in producing the pieces of work.

This issue has arisen in previous years and I would point out that it was partially addressed last year e.g. by removal of the unseen examination in SOEE5070 and increasing the weighing and substance of the coursework assignments for that module; similarly, this year the merger of SOEE5015 and SOEE5012 into a larger 30 credit unit has allowed an increase in assessed coursework weighing for key components such the 'HS2' Report. However, in the other taught modules, the Module Leaders feel that a highly weighted unseen examination is necessary, in order to fully assess learning outcomes and encourage students to undertake the required background reading. Our Industry Advisory Board always supports this position. The inclusion of an unseen examination necessarily limits the amount of credit available for assessed coursework items. The Programme Team will discuss this again at the Programme Delivery Team (PDT) meeting in December.

2. Issue of inability of students to answer the questions asked (SOEE5531); discursive nature of questions appeared problematic to large number of cohort.

(i) There was an issue with the quality of the student intake in year 15/16 in that a large number (7) students were admitted from a specific feeder institution (from which we have not had many previous students). These students all struggled with a number of elements of the Programme. We have changed our admissions policy to ensure greater scrutiny of applicants from this and similar feeder institutions; as a result we have no students from this particular feeder institution the current cohort (16/17).

(ii) This year, the Programme Team has made efforts to communicate the need for students to appreciate the differences in learning outcomes for M level, from those at UG level, and in particular the need for appropriate commitment to undertaking reading and exercise of critical analysis in their responses to discursive examination questions, rather than simply relying purely on given material from their lectures.

3. Recurring theme that the process of project allocation does not appear to have been adequately resolved from last year; the students feel that preparation for project is left too late (May) leaving only three months for completion; process of project allocation was perceived to be unfair.

Please note that the dissertation project period ran from mid-May to end of August, a period of 16 weeks, which is equivalent to 600 hours study time as specified in the module catalogue and entirely appropriate for a 60 credit piece of work at 10 hrs per credit. This year, unlike in previous years, most students had their project topics by the start of this period, as efforts had been made to formulate these in term 2, using a different template to that used in previous years.

Nevertheless, the significant efforts of the dissertation project module manager and the project supervisors to establish projects earlier have failed to change the perception. This is partly due to the larger cohort in 15/16, which meant it was harder to get sufficient high quality projects organised (therefore students felt disadvantaged at not getting their first choice of project). Nevertheless we recognise that the process of devising and allocating projects needs to be i) adequately communicated to the students by the Project Module Leader, and ii) run in a way that is seen to be both robust and fair. The process and timeline for project allocation will be discussed at forthcoming PDT meeting.

4. Feedback (on assessed work) is still a problem with no real improvement from last year in terms of the timing, but there has been an improvement in the quality of the feedback.

It's pleasing to hear that there has been an improvement in the quality of the feedback and that the efforts of members of the teaching team have paid off. Nevertheless, we note that this improvement has not showed up in the feedback quality question score from Programme Review, which is worse than that for the previous year. Most likely this is because the student's perceptions of the usefulness of feedback was coloured by its lateness. The Programme Delivery Team have discussed this issue, and it has been re-emphasised to staff that where feedback is going to be later than the 15 working days specification set by the University, it is essential to advise the students when they will receive their feedback, and the reason for the delay. We are also managing student expectations on this issue, beginning at their induction meeting, whilst at the same time endeavouring to meet the institutional timeframe.

5. Over-emphasis of numerical modelling in projects at the expense of robust geological models; feedback on dissertation projects (I would encourage the team to give the excellent feedback on these projects back to the students as this is the final major piece of work).

Over-emphasis on numerical modelling in project work: this is partly a staffing issue as the expertise of the current rock engineering staff is numerical modelling. We hope this will be addressed by the new appointment of a lecturer in Applied Rock Mechanics who can undertake project supervision, expected in early 2017. However the PDT will also discuss whether the cohort should be given some generic guidance on the importance of robust geological models in project work by the Project Module Leader.

This year it was agreed that students would be informed that should they want feedback on their projects, they should contact their dissertation supervisor who would collate the mark-sheet comments from all markers, and forward. However, we note that protocol on feedback on Masters

level projects is a School-wide issue and the Programme Delivery Team awaits guidance from the DSE and Pro-Dean for Student Education regarding this matter.

Once again, I would like to thank you for the time you have spent with our MSc students and staff, we look forward to your continuing input to our programme in the New Year.

Yours sincerely,

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