

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):	Geography: Geographical Information Science
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MSc Geographical Information Systems (GIS) MSc GIS via Online Distance Learning (ODL)
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MSc/PgD/PgC

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?

Not applicable.

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

I have now entered the final term of appointment so I assume that this will be applicable at my next report covering 2016-17.

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.*

As in previous years, the programmes' aims and ILOs are commensurate with the MSc level. The breadth and depth of material covered in the courses compares very favourably with similar Masters schemes offered elsewhere in the UK. The standards are appropriate for MSc level and the coursework equips with suitable academic grounding for further PhD study or for a related professional career in the industry. All the learning materials are thorough and provide clear indications of what is expected to achieve the respective awards, while assessments reflect the learning outcomes.

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.*

From my experience with two other Masters courses in the UK I am confident that the Aims and ILOs of the Leeds MSc in GIS exceed the expectations of the national subject benchmarks for Geography and other courses I am familiar with. This remains one of the best Masters in GIS in the UK in terms of the breadth and depth of material delivered. The academics delivering these courses have a strong reputation in the research community through innovative, cutting-edge research. In addition, the open distance learning course remains one of the best known distance learning GIS courses in Europe, if not in the world, defeating the rise of MOOCs, while delivering research-informed teaching of very high quality.

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 design and structure of the types of assessment methods used are entirely appropriate and fully address the ILOs. The focus on essay-style and project-style assessments, allows the students to demonstrate their full range of skills across the board. This year I paid particular attention to the Dissertations and the assessment methods for a number of modules. I am fully satisfied that the material covered in the coursework assignments reflects the ILOs and the assessment methods used are entirely appropriate. The dissertation feedback mechanism has improved dramatically the past three years and is now commensurate with the high quality of feedback delivered by all the other modules.

The quality of feedback has helped students to improve and as a result they produced some excellent work, demonstrating detailed understanding of methodological and theoretical concepts and advanced techniques beyond the narrow definition and usage of GIS. The moderation procedures for all the modules are transparent, thorough and auditable, with particular improvements to the Dissertation module. Students have commented that the quality of teaching is consistently high and that the balance of assessments and quality of feedback and marking are very fair. Having reviewed a wide range of assessed coursework for various modules, including the small number of failed work, I am fully satisfied with the quality of the students' work, the adherence to marking criteria and the constructive and fair feedback.

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.*

Even two of the weakest students who failed some modules were given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their skills and their work was very carefully considered with appropriate feedback returned. Throughout these Masters courses, the best students are stretched by completing more demanding dissertations, in addition to very high quality coursework. Overall, there is a wide range of assessment methods across the modules which permit a clear mark differentiation based on student quality, ability and commitment. Marking standards are consistently applied through comprehensive and thorough criteria, supported by a transparent moderation process. The level of written feedback provided to students is timely and of an excellent standard, allowing them to improve in subsequent submissions. This is also evident in student progression between modules from the first to the second semester. Two dissertations were of publishable quality and they deservedly received very high distinctions. I was pleased that my recommendation for them to be nominated for various RGS-IBG dissertation prizes was taken on board.

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.

In my third year as external examiner for the two MSc in GIS courses I remain impressed by the very high quality of student work and very comprehensive feedback. Improvements in the marking of dissertations and agreement in the rare cases of widespread marks is highlighted here as good practice. The sensitivity and fairness with which two cases of failed work were treated are also commendable. I would also like to point out the excellent organisation of these Masters programmes that relies solely on the enthusiasm, commitment and hard work of the academic and support staff.

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.

These are some of the most cutting-edge GIS/GISc Masters programmes in the UK if not in Europe. The curriculum design clearly reflects the research interests of the academic staff who are leaders in their research fields. The strong connections between the staff's research interests and their teaching benefit the students immensely as is evident from the publishable quality of some dissertations and the continuous success with RGS-IBG Dissertation prizes received.

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

My understanding is that some MSc graduates have progressed to PhD studies with the School of Geography over the years, while certain students awarded White Rose Doctoral Training Centre scholarship take the MSc GIS course as the first year of a 1+3 programme of PG studies. I hope this trend continues as it provides a solid basis for PhD researchers.

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

With 2016-17 my last year as external examiner with Leeds, I have not been asked to act as mentor for a new External.

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 organisation of these courses (especially the ODL) and professionalism of the course leaders is very impressive. All the relevant material has been made available to me by the School through the VLE in advance of the meetings and the course leaders were available, enabling me to make the required judgements. I also had access to the dissertations requested, summary of dissertation marks, individual mark sheets/mark agreement forms and the module handbooks. Any remaining requests for clarifications were addressed during my visit to the School before the Board. Overall I am very pleased with the access arrangements and the prompt response to my queries, resulting in the most effective actions.

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, I received all the appropriate documentation and the course leaders were responsive to my requests for clarifications. I received copies of the University's External Examiners Handbook and the Taught Students Handbooks, as well as the Module and Programme catalogue, which were all useful in understanding the module descriptions. I discussed in detail the overall programme structure and plans for subsequent years with the course team prior to the Board of Examiners. I was also granted access to the VLE in good time, where the available documentation, policies and procedures are coherent with regards to the expectations and role of the external examiner.

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?

Although the assessment drafts are not shared with the External Examiner (which I support in order to avoid overburdening), I have been kept informed throughout the year in relation to any major changes to assignments from previous years. There are no formal written examinations in these Masters and I am happy with the current arrangements.

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?

All the relevant material was made available for me to look at, alongside the marking feedback, so that standards and practices could be evaluated. In particular, I looked in detail a number of modules and I am fully satisfied. All the assessed work was very clearly annotated with appropriate feedback to the students showing very clearly how the marks derived.

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

I was pleased to see that dissertation modules have been strengthened by a more streamlined marking process this year. As usual, there is a very good range of subjects with various degrees of difficulty, challenging the best students to produce work of the highest quality. As in previous years, I read all the dissertations and the feedback from all markers: the assessment standards are high, but fair, and the marking is remarkably close, while the agreed grades make good sense. The majority of dissertations reflect the research interests of staff, putting in good use methods taught during the course. I was kept informed on dissertation marking throughout the year and provided my views on marking and feedback practices. This year I proposed two excellent dissertations of publishable quality to be nominated for RGS-IBG prizes.

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 Board of Examiners in late October 2016 and was satisfied with the process and Board's recommendations. I was sent minutes of all relevant meetings during the course of the year and I am satisfied with the recommendations made and with the fact that my feedback has been treated seriously. Overall, I am very happy with the arrangements and the recommendations of the Board were fair to all the candidates.

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

Yes, all the necessary procedures are in place to support students in mitigating circumstances through their Masters studies, as demonstrated in two very special cases (without disclosing sensitive information).

Other comments

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

This was my third year as external examiner for the two Masters courses and although I had to deal with two difficult cases where students failed important modules (in one case the dissertation) it was also reassuring to see that the two course leaders, <<>> acted swiftly and fairly. In addition to their professionalism and enthusiasm for the courses, they also demonstrated empathy for the students concerned, while retaining the standards of the courses and remaining fair to all students. It has been a pleasure to be the external examiner and I look forward to continuing with my final year in 2016-17.

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9 February 2017

Dear

Thank you for your external examiners report for the MSc Geographical Information Systems and MSc GIS via Online Distance Learning for the 2015/16 academic year. We were extremely pleased with your comments and support for our programmes. While you haven't raised any issues that we need to address, may we just take this opportunity to mention a few items:

1. We thank you for your helpful suggestions in previous reports and will endeavour to continue our efforts to improve across the board.
2. We have a new programme this year in the MSc Consumer Analytics and Marketing Strategy (CAMS) which we run jointly with Leeds University Business School. Further details can be found at: <http://business.leeds.ac.uk/masters/msc-consumer-analytics-and-marketing-strategy/>. This involves a number of new Geography modules including Applied GIS and Retail Modelling, Predictive Analytics, Big Data and Consumer Analytics, and Consumer Data Analysis and Visualisation. A new CAMS dissertation module focusing on Consumer Analytics is also part of this programme.
3. A number of new or remodelled ODL modules are being offered including Applied GIS and Retail Modelling (WUN), and Geocomputation (WUN).
4. We have put a lot of effort this year into streamlining the assessment regime of the bulk of our existing modules including use of student work portfolios. We hope this will both help reduce staff workloads and better meet students' ILOs.
5. We will continue to improve our organisation of the dissertation module building on gains made this last year.

As this current academic year will be your final year in this role we are currently looking for your successor. Can we take this opportunity to ask if you'd be willing to mentor the incoming external if required? We will be in touch as and when we have a name.

Once again, thank you for your thoughtful comments.

Best regards,

Acting Head of School

Cc _____, Pro Dean for Student Education, UoL

Cc _____ Quality Assurance Team, UoL