

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:	Earth and Environment
Subject(s):	Climate and Atmospheric Science
Programme(s) / Module(s):	MRes Climate and Atmospheric Science
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MRes

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?

Yes, I received the External Examiners report from 2014/15.

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 Aims and ILOs are entirely appropriate for the level of award.

On the standard, I would suggest a **review of the Level of certain optional elements of the supermodules.**

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.

As far as I know, there is no masters level FHEQ Subject Benchmark here and MRes programmes in this area are relatively rare. Nonetheless, the Aims and ILOs are well thought out and almost exactly what I would expect. They are commensurate with Aims and ILOs at masters (MSc) level.

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 backbone of the assessment on the programme – the proposal, the literature review and the dissertation – is incredibly well thought out and provides a framework that is fully aligned with the programme ILOs and gives students the opportunity to develop their practice throughout the programme. This latter point is, however, dependent on **feedback being worded in the appropriate fashion and ensuring that students have a minimum level of contact with supervisors – whether these criteria are being met perhaps requires a review.**

The other assessments are more modular in nature but appropriate. If I were to make one point here, I would say that **the benefit of the website coursework could be reviewed.** I'm not sure many employers, let alone PhD supervisors, are that interested in html skills now and the students specifically mentioned an interest in python or MatLab. Perhaps a data analysis/programming assessment would be more appropriate here? Alternatively, if this assessment is focussed on science communication, a blog post or an example of "popular" writing might be more useful to the students.

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, the MRes backbone is ideal for students to demonstrate achievement and develop practice through the programme. The students did note that they would like a **longer period to work solely on the dissertation** but there only appears to be one deadline that does not allow that.

Some students noted that the **fieldtrip to Arran occurred too early in the programme for them to perform well** in the assessment. Discussion at the Board implied that this particularly cohort did not take opportunities to work together but students did also mention that some resources on the VLE to get them up-to-speed with meteorology could be of value to them.

There seemed to be some confusion (perhaps mostly my own) about whether the dissertation should be formatted as a standard dissertation or written as a manuscript for publication (as suggested by the programme documentation that I saw). Most of the students had not heard of the "manuscript" idea, which might have been a good thing as I'm not sure that a manuscript would score a high grade when being assessed as a dissertation. I'd suggest that the guidance across **all programme documentation is reviewed so that there is coherent message on the dissertation format.**

In general, the standard of the students seemed incredibly high and it seems clear that **the programme has significant value to the School and the students.** A weakness appeared to be the cohort's high expectations of getting a PhD place before the end of the MRes programme – only one student had managed this. They were interested in having some more training and advice on how to secure a PhD place.

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 was not made aware of any significant programme enhancements.

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 at the heart of the programme and it seemed that, more often than not, the students and staff embraced this model with incredibly positive results. The students were particularly keen to note that **the research project and the students' integration into the research culture of the Institute for Climate and Atmospheric Science (ICAS) were major positives of the programme** – I certainly agree with them.

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

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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 exchanged several emails with the outgoing External Examiner and gave him the opportunity to comment on this report. I probably wouldn't have done anything differently if this arrangement had not been in place but it was, nonetheless, reassuring to speak to the outgoing External Examiner.

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 – the guidance I received gave me sufficient context to act 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 saw most of the relevant documentation but, as I have joined as External Examiner at the end of an academic year, I had not seen coursework briefs or assessment criteria. I assume this will happen over the coming year.

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?

N/A – I am new to the role so all assessments were completed by the time of my appointment.

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 cohort was small so I saw work from all students and all supermodules. The level of annotation was, if anything, excessive in some cases. Indeed, I have some concern that in some cases comments/feedback focussed on many minor points (as the reviewer of a paper might) rather than assessing and contextualising the work in line with the ILOs and assessment criteria.

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

Yes, all the dissertation topics were appropriate and focussed on important questions in the field. The assessment, including the double marking, was appropriate.

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?

Administrative arrangements were timely and comprehensive. My questions were answered quickly. I attended the Board and fully supported the recommendations.

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

Yes – there were no major cases in this small cohort though.

Other comments

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

The **School deserves significant credit for maintaining a dedicated programme administrator**. It was clear that <<>> gave the students excellent support and the students wanted me to note this – this has massive value to the Student Experience. Unfortunately, I have seen first-hand the impact of removing such dedicated support (we moved to more centralised student support recently): students struggle to get the information and support they need and it has increased the workload for the academic staff and, overall, damaged student satisfaction. I hope that this support can be maintained at Leeds because losing it comes at a significant cost. The excellent support from <<>> was also noted.

School of Earth and Environment
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

16 March 2017

Re: Response to External Examiner's Report (MRes Climate and Atmospheric Science), 2015/16

Dear

Many thanks for agreeing to become the external examiner for our MRes programme. The views of our external examiners are always an essential part of our quality assurance mechanism and we welcome your input into our teaching process and look forward to working with you for the next few years.

We are delighted to read that you consider there are currently no matters requiring urgent attention, and appreciate the suggestions you have made for our consideration. We are pleased that the overall tone of your comments continues to be very positive and that you found the course design excellent and the dissertation projects to be well done.

In response to the specific issues that you have raised:

On the standard, I would suggest a review of the Level of certain optional elements of the supermodules.

The highly diverse backgrounds of the students does mean that that of many occasions the students do not have the foundation knowledge to undertake a full set of level 5 modules. As a school, we are currently reviewing level 3 and 5 assessments and as part of this we have also reviewed how the MRes assessment system operates. In order to address this issue for the MRes, we will be introducing an additional synoptic assessment as part of SOEE5910M, this assessment (end of term two) will require the students to review the new skills they have learnt and how these build upon their underlying skills and knowledge from their first degrees.

The backbone of the assessment on the programme – the proposal, the literature review and the dissertation – is incredibly well thought out and provides a framework that is fully aligned with the programme ILOs and gives students the opportunity to develop their practice throughout the programme. This latter point is, however, dependent on **feedback being worded in the appropriate fashion and ensuring that students have a minimum level of contact with supervisors – whether these criteria are being met perhaps requires a review.**

The school has a Code of Practice on Assessment (CoPA) which is reviewed each year, based on a University template. This provides clarification of what is required. Already this year the supervisors have been advised of the expectations that the school has of them as project supervisors, previously it was rather informal due to the small size of cohorts, but an influx of new staff has meant that we will need to ensure that the staff are aware of the CoPA during induction. This year we have been monitoring with students that they feel they are having appropriate levels supervision from both the lead academic as well as others involved in the research, be these other academic staff, PDRAs or PhD students.

*I would say that **the benefit of the website coursework could be reviewed**. I'm not sure many employers, let alone PhD supervisors, are that interested in html skills now and the students specifically mentioned an interest in python or MatLab. Perhaps a data analysis/programming assessment would be more appropriate here? Alternatively, if this assessment is focussed on science communication, a blog post or an example of "popular" writing might be more useful to the students*

The webpage submission is simply a route to encouraging them to develop a bit of a webpage and profile, which is good for PhD/job applications. It allows them to link to datasets more easily. The students are instructed that it is simply a tool for them to submit their work, it is not about their skills in web design, it simply needs to be functional and this is a transferable skill that is useful in data analysis and writing code in itself. There are existing modules which teach MatLAB skills, there is a wider project within the school to provide end to end python training (through UG programmes with access for PGT and PGR students). Currently in the absence of this, students are advised of the existence of some excellent online resources such as MOOCs that provide training. We do like the alternative idea of a blog post but it needs to still provide access to the work done for the computer project.

*The students did note that they would like a **longer period to work solely on the dissertation***

We do try to keep as much time for the research project as is possible alongside access to a full portfolio of taught modules. They are encouraged to manage their time during the teaching sessions, they have a light taught component giving them time to be working on their projects. We will continue to remind them that they should maintain a multicomponent work schedule.

*Some students noted that the **fieldtrip to Arran occurred too early in the programme for them to perform well***

This is counter to **all** previous cohorts who felt that the Arran fieldcourse is an excellent start to their time together, it allowed them to bond tightly as a group.

*There seemed to be some confusion (perhaps mostly my own) about whether the dissertation should be formatted as a standard dissertation or written as a manuscript for publication (as suggested by the programme documentation that I saw). Most of the students had not heard of the "manuscript" idea, which might have been a good thing as I'm not sure that a manuscript would score a high grade when being assessed as a dissertation. I'd suggest that the guidance across **all programme documentation is reviewed so that there is coherent message on the dissertation format**.*

As part of the transition process to the new programme leader, there is a review of all documentation going forward. We previously aspired to the publication ready format, but the time taken to get a research project to this stage is often beyond the MRes schedule. Going forward we plan to move towards the dissertation only format.

*In general, the standard of the students seemed incredibly high and it seems clear that **the programme has significant value to the School and the students**. A weakness appeared to be the cohort's high expectations of getting a PhD place before the end of the MRes programme – only one student had managed this. They were interested in having some more training and advice on how to secure a PhD place.*

The emergence of the DTPs from the research councils has made PhD studentships much more competitive, this year we will be managing expectations more. In previous year's MRes students have been very successful in obtaining funded studentships whilst still enrolled on the MRes course. Students are given advice on where they can find PhD opportunities and the relevant mailing lists that they can subscribe to. Both the outgoing and incoming programme leaders also forward any opportunities that they are aware of.

I saw most of the relevant documentation but, as I have joined as External Examiner at the end of an academic year, I had not seen coursework briefs or assessment criteria. I assume this will happen over the coming year.

The new programme leader (), will provide all this material.

The School deserves significant credit for maintaining a dedicated programme administrator.

We appreciate your acknowledgement of our support team, they provide an excellent level of service to our students and our students also regularly comment on this.

Going forward, as you know the programme management is moving from to and I know that their discussions during the transfer have resulted in some new ideas for the programme such as the 'look back' synoptic assessment which is being put forward in the current round of programme reviews and module amendments (for 2017-18).

I would like to thank you once again for your support to our MRes programme as External Examiner, and look forward to working with you in coming years.

Yours sincerely,

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