

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2016-17

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Faculty / School of:	Faculty of Environment/School of Geography
Subject(s):	<i>Geography</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	Geography
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	BA (Hons)

Part B: Comments for the Institution on the Examination Process and Standards

Points of innovation and/or good practice

Please highlight areas of innovation or good practice within the programmes or processes you have been involved with in this box.

- The comprehensive collection of annual **Module Moderation Forms** (very well organised in the green file!) are exemplary, and should set the benchmark for good practice within the wider sector. The thoughtful and positive contribution of module moderators, and the varied diligent tasks undertaken by the moderators during the moderation (e.g. scripts, overall grades, operationalization of modules) processes, and the subsequent reflective commentary of the module convenor, should be widely championed and celebrated by the School/University.
- **Module Handbooks** across the programme are extremely well-detailed, finely-tuned for the student audience, and informative. It is clear that module handbooks are important for crystallising student expectations about modules and work. Reading lists within module handbooks are up-to-date, refreshed, and effectively sign-post students to leading-edge debates in the relevant fields of study. The teaching team make use of novel resources, and cutting-edge technologies to enhance the distinctive learning experiences of students.
- The teaching team consistently make **effective use of VLE** and provide **novel on-line resources** for students such as blogs and podcasts (e.g. Spaces of Migration and Encounter).
- **Written/electronic feedback** to students on *both* assessment and examination scripts is constructive, detailed, and provides feed-forward comments. There is some clear evidence that this is enhancing the performance of students in subsequent assessments.

Enhancements made from the previous year

Please highlight any enhancements made to the programme(s) or processes over the past year in this box.

- A positive development to ensure smarter teaching and learning experiences and reduce stresses within the student population has been the **streamlining of the total number of assessment components** on modules: Political and Development Geographies (3 to 2); Citizenship and Identity (4 to 3); Creating Alternative Futures (reduced by one assessment component). It is also notable that two other modules are considering a reduction in the total number of assessment components: Making of the Modern City (urged to go from 3 to 2 by moderator), and Careers Skills in Geography.

This will also have numerous benefits for the teaching team, without compromising the delivery of learning aims and outcomes, and specific objectives on modules.

- It is pleasing to note that the Insider European Cities module will be split into 3 distinct separate modules/trips (Helsinki, Belgrade, Montpellier). This is an important development given the different academic agendas and nature of work on these modules. It will also allow the School to **more fully showcase the breadth, quality and diversity of fieldcourses** for recruitment and retention, NSS, and more fully emphasise the positive learning experiences that are delivered in very diverse spatial contexts.
- There have been some beneficial revisions to the key module **Research Methods**, which more fully expose students to a breadth of methods and designs in a more effective structured and planned way. I would expect these changes to have positive impacts on the performance of students in Dissertations, in their following year of study.

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

1. MARKING CRITERIA AND LINKS TO MARKING / GRADING OF ASSESSED WORK / AWARDS

There is preponderance to award 2:1 grades on the programme, and a relatively low number/absence of 2:2s (and below). On some module moderation forms, module convenors suggest that this is in the expected range. I would suggest that this may be related to two key factors, and I would encourage the teaching team to consider these factors and have some discussion about the expected range for the programme and modules:

First, I would strongly urge the teaching team to explore the effects of the current marking criteria on overall and individual grading. It would appear that there are a number of 'loop-holes' in the marking criteria for 2:1 grades, which mean that markers are generally steered away from giving a 2:2 grade to some work that is more worthy of a (higher end) 2:2 grade. Instead, the marking criteria tends to steer grading of some of this work to a 2:1 grade. Perhaps the marking criteria could more effectively distinguish between different levels of originality and cognitive ability between 2:1 and 2:2 grades, as well as stressing the difference between works that is essentially descriptive versus work that includes more critical/analytical reasoning to the argument/discussion.

I would also recommend the fuller use and stretching of 1st class grades. It is possible that having two bands of 70-74 and 75-79, respectively, is steering some markers to narrowly grading 1st class work in the 70s. As a starting point for discussion, I would suggest that there could usefully be 3 wider bands in the 1st class range: Excellent (70-79), Outstanding (80-89), and Exceptional (90-100; publishable-quality work).

Second, the relatively high number of assessments that are tied to large student groups may be bunching the grades into the 2:1 zone. Large groups of students and associated assessments may be uplifting the grades of weaker performing students, and, at the same time, dampening the grades of the higher performing students. I would strongly urge the teaching team to reconfigure current large group work for summative assessments (particularly at Level 1). This large group work could be maintained for formative assessments, given the transferable skills that can be enhanced via experiences of large group work/interactions between students. The teaching team would need to monitor and track the impacts of these changes on overall grades.

In addition, it is possible that the current uplifting effects on grades of large group work may artificially raise some student expectations about their typical level of grades/performance, and exacerbates 'disappointment' in later years of study (and perhaps lead to complaints/appeals about subsequent grades in L2/L3; see below).

2. CONTESTING MARKS/GRADES

It would appear that there is a growing culture of some students contesting the marks/grades for their assessed work. The teaching team could usefully consider more effective strategies to manage student expectations, such as making clear marking criteria in Semester 1 Level 1, and more fully stressing/explaining the robustness of academic judgements by the teaching team, and the rigorous assessment processes and layers of moderation. I am slightly concerned that some members of the teaching team feel 'under pressure' when (rightfully) giving students a 2:2 grade (with the expectation that the student will then contest the mark). The use of anonymous marking of coursework essays would mitigate possible allegations of bias/unconscious bias by students, if this is possible using VLE.

3. DISSERTATION PROCESS

The delivery of high-quality work tends to (seemingly) 'run out of steam' on some dissertations, particularly within Analysis and Conclusion chapters. I would suggest that the teaching team consider implementing a new deadline for the later submission of Dissertations. For instance, is it possible to extend the March deadline to late April, particularly as I understand most marking of the dissertations is undertaken in early May. This also begs the question: do students undertake their fieldwork for dissertations during the Summer vacation between level 2 and 3? Does the Dissertation planning process in Semester 2 level 2 provide an effective link for students to do this fieldwork during the summer vacation? Is it logistically possible to assign mentors before the end of Level 2 (e.g. is it possible to know which students are going on placement and which students are returning from placements?). It would also be valuable for the teaching team to consider the possible wider negative effects on other modules tied to concentrated efforts/phases by students when working on their Dissertations in Level 3 (does this lower attendance of students at lectures, for example?).

4. DISSERTATION MARKING

It is notable that only one Dissertation was marked by a 3rd marker, despite there being 7 dissertations with a divergence of 10 or more marks between 1st and 2nd marker. Although there is clear evidence of the diligent process for the 1st and 2nd marker to agree a final mark, it is apparent that agreed marks tend to be located at the mid-point between the first and second mark. I would recommend that the (experienced) Dissertation Module convenor acts as Dissertation Adjudicator for any Dissertations that have different class grades between first and second marks.

5. MODULE EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

The response rates for on-line, student module feedback are very disappointing, and may be constraint (clearly this is a sector wide problem) for robust evaluation of modules. Could the teaching team consider the implementation of dedicated slots at the end of modules to more effectively capture student feedback? Perhaps module convenors could provide iPads in class - with a direct link to on-line module evaluation surveys, to encourage more responses from students. It is important to capture the breadth of student feedback on the module evaluation forms to obtain a fuller representation.

Minor (not urgent) matters for consideration

- I would recommend that the teaching team consider the value of anonymising student names within Module Moderation Forms (if this is possible using VLE), and consider the ways in which

the process/dynamics for agreeing marks/grades of individual students are articulated on the forms.

- In the interests of smart teaching and efficient use of staff resources – the teaching team could consider the value of a single Placements module? Is there a need to have two distinct modules given the overlaps/similarities between Work Placements and Research Placements?
- The teaching team could usefully consider the wider resilience of the programme if it is not possible to deliver a fieldcourse (due to unexpected circumstances) during one academic year. Are there any lessons from the logistics of dealing with the Mumbai/Miami fieldtrips this year?
- There has been some discussion of possibly renaming successful modules (e.g. People, Place and Politics). I would urge caution here - ‘why mend something if it is not broken’?
- Clearly there are some concerning issues about low attendance of students at some lectures, particularly towards the end of the semesters. The teaching team need to explore if this is influenced by the rolling-out/uptake of Lecture Capture, and / or other factors.
- There has been some discussion of possible ‘tactical decision-making’ by some students on modules (i.e. not completing/submitting one assessment). The teaching team could usefully consider the adoption of ‘pass-to-progress’ stipulation on respective modules, if appropriate.
- On some team-taught modules, and when there is the marking of an assessment component by more than one academic member of staff, there are some concerns of consistency of grading (identified by moderators). It may be beneficial for individual member of the teaching team to mark specific assessment components on team taught modules to ensure more consistency of grading.
- There are clearly increasing stresses/pressures of deadlines for marking examination scripts by teams of markers that need to be more effectively managed and timetabled. Can team taught modules be scheduled/prioritised for the first phase of the examination period?
- What about students who straddle the Physical (BSc) and Human (BA) Geography – is the Dissertation Handbook/process set up and flexible to cater for students at this interface?
- There have been some problematic clashes this academic year between assessment deadlines that could (perhaps) have been more effectively timetabled (e.g. Careers/Research Methods).
- There is need to more fully monitor the use and quality of electronic, on-line, feedback to students. This clearly works very well on some modules, but it does not work well on other modules. Members of the teaching team should share good practice on the use of electronic feedback to students, perhaps via a morning workshop.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

1.	Were you provided with an External Examiners Handbook?	Y
2.	Were you provided with copies of previous relevant External Examiners’ reports and the response of the School to these?	Y
3.	Were you provided with a External Examiner Mentor?	Y (other external examiner)

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

4.	Have you observed improvements in the programme(s) over the period of your appointment?	Y
5.	Has the school responded to comments and recommendations you have made?	Y
6.	Where recommendations have not been implemented, did the school provide clear reasons for this?	Y
7.	Have you acted as a External Examiner Mentor?	N

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

Standards

8.	Is the overall programme structure coherent and appropriate for the level of study?	Y
9.	Does the programme structure allow the programme aims and intended learning outcomes to be met?	Y
10.	Are the programme aims and intended learning outcomes commensurate with the level of award?	Y
11.	Did the Aims and ILOs meet the expectations of the national subject benchmark (where relevant)?	Y
12.	Is the programme(s) comparable with similar programmes at other institutions?	Y

Please use this box to explain your overall impression of the programme structure, design, aims and intended learning outcomes.

13. Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?

Y

Please explain how this is/could be achieved (examples might include: curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research)

There is a clear connection between the content of the modules, pathways through the programme, and the research skills and expertise of the teaching team. This cross-cuts into more foundational modules, specialist modules at Level 3, and more research and design training modules through the three years of the programme.

14. Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?

N

Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:

15. Does the programme include clinical practice components?

N

Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:

16. Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?

N

Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
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Please comment on the assessment methods and the appropriateness of these to the ILOs, in particular: 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.

18.	Is the design and structure of the assessment methods appropriate to the level of award?	Y
19.	Were students given adequate opportunity to demonstrate their achievement of the programme aims and intended learning outcomes?	Y

Please comment on 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:

The academic standards demonstrated by the students are in alignment with the wider sector; although there are a high number of students obtaining 2:1 grades.

Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make in relation to assessment and feedback:

The Progression and Awards Process

20.	Were you provided with guidance relating to the External Examiners role, powers and responsibilities in the examination process?	Y
21.	Was the progression and award guidance provided sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?	Y
22.	Did you receive appropriate programme documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
24.	Did you receive full details of marking criteria applicable to your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
25.	Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments?	Y
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	Y
28.	Was sufficient assessed work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?	Y
29.	Were the examination scripts clearly marked/annotated?	Y
30.	Was the choice of subjects for final year projects and/or dissertations appropriate?	Y
31.	Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate for the final year projects and/or dissertations?	Y
32.	Were the administrative arrangements satisfactory for the whole process, including the operation of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y
33.	Were you able to attend the Progression and Awards Board meeting?	Y
34.	Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Progression and Awards Board?	Y
35.	Were you satisfied with the way decisions from the School Special Circumstances meeting were communicated to the Progression and Awards Board?	Y

Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make on the questions above:

Other comments

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

I would like to thank _____ and team for organising course materials in an effective way. I am grateful to the teaching team for engaging with the external examiners in a transparent, open and professional manner. The Board was Chaired in a professional and fair way to all the students. It was pleasing to note that the majority of the teaching team attended the examination board. As ever, thanks for the wonderful hospitality and looking after the external examiners in a supportive and welcoming way.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Faculty / School of:

Address for communication:

Email:

Telephone:

Head of School

School of Geography

School of Geography
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT

*If the individual responding to the report is not the Head of School please state their position within the School.

Completing the School response

The completed School response (including the full original report) should be attached to an e-mail and sent to the Pro-Dean for Student Education in the relevant Faculty. Following approval by the Pro-Dean for Student Education, the School must send the response (including the full original report) directly to the External Examiner. A copy must also be emailed to the Quality Assurance Team at qat@leeds.ac.uk. External Examiners should receive a formal response no later than six weeks after receipt of the original report.

Response to Points of innovation and/or good practice

It is pleasing to receive such positive feedback on several of the core processes which underpin our teaching, assessment and examination system.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

We will continue to monitor our schedule of assessments, paying particular attention to the number of individual components per module and the overall balance of assessment types.

The creation of three separate field trip modules at Level Two has already allowed individual trips to refine the preparatory work which students undertake in Leeds and the specifics of their assessment in ways which are more appropriate to their particular learning outcomes.

Effective preparation of students – both JH and SH – for dissertation research through the Level Two methods module continues to be a priority.

Response to Matters for Urgent Attention

If any areas have been identified for urgent attention before the programme is offered again please provide a specific response to them here:

1a. Marking criteria. Prof Smith's comments accord with our own perceptions that it would be beneficial to review the way in which academic standards are articulated through our marking criteria. The criteria were thus redrafted over the summer and re-issued for the start of the 2017-18 academic year. We have simplified the way in which the criteria are set out. There is now only one set of descriptors for each class of work and these cover the full range from the very best work to the very worst in a consistent fashion. This makes it easier to establish the key distinctions between different classes of work, which should be of benefit to both staff and students.

1b. Group work. Planned changes to the programme at Level One will provide us with an opportunity to review the balance between individual and group work. In other instances the size of student groups working together on a particular project has already been substantially reduced (e.g. Geographies of Economies). Future review of individual modules and the overall structure of our programmes will explore further opportunities for redressing the balance between individual and group work.

2. Contesting marks. The general perception amongst students that at least a 2:1 degree is necessary for their future success in the job market undoubtedly causes some academic stresses. Having redrafted our marking criteria

we will, as _____ suggests, use the opportunities presented by tutorials at Levels One and Two to clarify our expectations and explain the logic of our academic judgements. It is clearly important that students understand how our marking system works and the role of module moderation in promoting overall consistency in standards. It is currently difficult to ensure full anonymity in coursework marking as individual colleagues reserve the right to mark in different ways (electronically and on-paper). This makes it a challenge to configure the VLE in a way which preserves student anonymity whilst also ensuring administrative efficiency, especially for our large, team-taught modules. We will discuss this further with our VLE support team.

3. Dissertation process. We have taken the decision in principle to move the dissertation submission deadline from March to May for students graduating in 2019. We also plan to ensure that all other Level Three teaching is rescheduled so that modules finish at the end of the spring term; where necessary fieldtrips will also be rescheduled. This is intended to free up time for students to develop the full potential of their dissertations. These changes will be accompanied by a revision of supervisory arrangements. Students will remain with their existing academic tutor throughout the whole of Level Two, including the initial stages of the dissertation planning process. The switch to Dissertation Support Groups will thus be made at the start of Level Three. This should allow us to define more intellectually coherent groups; and increase the efficiency of the process by which individual students are allocated to DSGs.

4. Dissertation marking. We agree that the Dissertation Module Leader should have an enhanced role in adjudicating in individual cases where 1st and 2nd markers come to different conclusions. We also plan to give increased weight to the judgement of the 2nd marker as an 'independent' internal examiner who has not been involved in the supervision of the project concerned.

5. Module evaluation by students. It has generally been our experience that essentially voluntary, on-line systems for garnering student feedback lead to low response rates. The only solution is to set aside dedicated time in class; we will do this where possible.

We note that _____ has included a substantial list of other matters for consideration. These will be used to inform our teaching planning process for future years. We already have plans which pick up on some of _____ points:

- We will issue additional advice to colleagues about the way in which individual student cases are discussed on module moderation forms.
- We are attracted by the suggestion that the Level Three Research Placement and Workplace Co-operative Project become a single placement module.
- In future we will issue separate dissertation handbooks for BA and BSc students, both of which will include advice intended to support students studying environmental issues which straddle the human/physical interface.

Response to questions 1-7 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

It is pleasing to note a positive set of responses to all relevant questions.

Standards

Response to questions 8 to 16 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

It is pleasing to note a positive set of responses to all relevant questions.

Assessment and Feedback

Response to questions 17 to 19 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

It is pleasing to note a positive set of responses. We are, of course, aware of the high proportion of 2:1 grades awarded to our graduates. As indicated above we have redrafted our marking criteria and we will review the use made of group projects as part of our overall portfolio of assessments. We note, however, that _____ considers our academic standards to be consistent with the wider sector.

The Progression and Awards Process

Response to questions 20-35 (and related comments)

Schools may provide a general response; however, where Examiners raise specific points these must be addressed individually:

It is pleasing to note a positive set of responses.

Other comments

Response to items included in the 'Other Comments' section of the report

It is pleasing to note positive comments about the School's engagement with our external examiners; this is a relationship which we continue to value greatly.