

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2016-17

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

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. There are three commendable aspects related to excellent practice that I would like to highlight here:

1. Continuity and constant improvements to improve the student experience, even when they are minor.
2. Impressive attention paid to dissertations: choice of topic and support stretch the best students to produce outstanding dissertations, while careful marking and feedback ensure fairness and manage student expectations.
3. Professionalism of the Programme Leaders in particular and the GIS/ODL teaching staff in general.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

Two enhancements from previous years :

4. The dissertation process/supervision/markings/feedback are now outstanding; congratulations to all.
5. I am very pleased to see that [redacted] has now switched [redacted] programming teaching from Java to Python in line with student feedback and industry demands (e.g. Data Science jobs & ArcGIS programming).

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: the programmes are outstanding, but the School should continue resourcing them.

For Examiners in the first year of appointment N/A

1.—	Were you provided with an External Examiner Handbook?	Y/N
2.—	Were you provided with copies of previous External Examiners' reports and the School's responses to these?	Y/N
3.—	Were you provided with a External Examiner Mentor?	Y/N

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 an 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

The programmes were already running very well when I was appointment, thanks to the professionalism of staff and the attention to detail from my predecessor. However, there was feedback from students that implied space for improvement for a couple of modules, namely, the placement project module and the programming module (Java) as well as minor inconsistencies with communicating dissertation feedback and agreed marks (the actual dissertation marking has always been very thorough). During my tenure, I have been impressed by the improvements I witnessed, not only responding to my queries and to student feedback, but also through genuine pedagogic engagement and sense of professionalism the GIS/ODL leaders and staff exhibit.

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
<p><i>Please use this box to explain your overall impression of the programme structure, design, aims and intended learning outcomes.</i></p> <p>As in previous years, the programmes' aims and ILOs are commensurate with the MSc level. I feel that the programmes have now reached a point where the breadth and depth of material covered exceeds similar Masters schemes offered elsewhere. Thorough learning materials that provide clear indications of what is expected to achieve the respective awards and assessments that reflect the learning outcomes enable the best students to produce impressive work and some outstanding dissertations.</p>		
13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
<p><i>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)</i></p> <p>Absolutely yes, these are cutting-edge GIS/ODL Masters programmes not only in the UK but also at the European, possibly global level. The overall curriculum design and available modules clearly reflect the research interests of the academic staff who are leaders in their respective fields. Strong connections between staff's research interests and their teaching benefit the students immensely as is evident from the publishable quality of some dissertations and the success with RGS-IBG Dissertation prizes. I am aware of students graduating from these programmes continuing with PhD studies in the UK and abroad; this is a testament to the research-active staff that inspire the best students to continue with research careers.</p>		
14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	N/A
<p><i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i></p>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i></p>		
16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i></p>		

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
<p><i>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.</i></p>		

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. 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 modules are transparent, thorough and auditable, especially the Dissertations.

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:

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.

The Progression and Awards Process

20.	Were you provided with guidance relating to the External Examiner's 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:

I am fully satisfied of the progression and awards process and the professionalism of the programme leaders and PGT director.

Other comments

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

This was the last year of my tenure as external examiner for these two programmes. Upon reflection, I would have liked to engage with the students more during the last year of my appointment, but I was too busy to visit Leeds more often; this is something my successor may want to look into: meeting the students in person once a year.

Leeds was my first appointment as external examiner for UK PGT programmes and I would like to thank the GIS/ODL colleagues for their professionalism and patience. I certainly learnt a lot the past few years and I am confident that in the process, I helped my colleagues improve the very good programmes. It has been 20+ years since I graduated from the School of Geography at Leeds University with a Masters in GIS and it delights me to see that the programmes are growing stronger. Thank you and keep up the excellent work, genuine care for the students and, of course, your passion for the programmes.

Part C: School Response to External Examiner Report**Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)**

Title and Name of Responder:	
Position*:	Head of School
Faculty / School of:	<i>Geography</i>
Address for communication:	School of Geography University of Leeds Leeds LS2 9JT UK
Email:	
Telephone:	

*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 gat@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

We are grateful for the positive feedback on these elements. In the main, there will inevitably be incremental change to modules and how we engage with students. It is our practice to reflect on activities through the year prior to and after student-staff forum meetings and from items raised in module evaluation surveys. It remains hard, though to get timely and relevant feedback from students, especially on the ODL programme.

We impress on students in advance, the importance of dissertation planning. In the past we have found students to be lax in getting datasets in place prior to starting. Addressing this feasibility aspect, amongst other elements, means that students are more likely to be able to make the most of the time they have available for the practical aspects of dissertation research.

Programme leaders (f2f) and (ODL) work closely and use each other as sounding boards. Together with consultation with colleagues and a move towards team teaching has engendered improvements in quality of material and delivery.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

We have settled on a good model of independent marking and mark agreement consultation. All dissertations and feedback are made available to the external well before exam boards so that a reflection on each student's achievement can be best informed when we reach final classification.

The nature of the more technical modules is that advances in the field can be step changes rather than incremental revisions as with other modules. It is demanding of staff time to re-group and change the programming language(s) being taught. Python is the language of choice and we are grateful the and colleagues for the new modules and for other technical aspects now being incorporated into modules which were previously peripheral.

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:

The school will continue to resource these programmes as required to maintain the highest levels of student satisfaction and achievement.

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:

We are pleased with the message in this regard. We have been frustrated with student feedback on the placement situation and other less obviously academic training and information. We therefore developed (for f2f students) a Professional Development module. After running this for two years, we have further revised and enhanced the scope to now be a 30 credit module Professional & Personal Development. Elements of the new module will be used as ODL materials.

In general, the above is a good example of how we have improved the courses in response to an awareness of student views and in consultation with the external examiner to review the previous academic experience and to plan for new modules.

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:

Again we are grateful for the affirmation that our courses and standards are high, academically competitive and are providing students with relevant knowledge and skills for their ongoing careers in the workplace or for further academic research situations. During the period of _____ term as external we have had several students win national competitions for their dissertations (as noted at December's graduation ceremony) and have had work published in relevant journals.

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:

We aim to have a variety of means through which to assess students. Underpinning this is the use of real world datasets and scenarios (often recycling data which staff have used in research and publications). We are pleased that, when looked at across the board by the external examiner, the assessment packages, feedback and moderation processes are functioning well.

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:

We have striven to improve the exam board process during _____ period as external. We were aware that attendance by staff at boards was sketchy due to competing commitments. _____ (as Director of Masters Education during 2015-17) and assessment lead _____ have set dates further in advance and communications with staff have emphasised the importance of the progression and awards process.

Other comments

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

It has been excellent to work with _____ as external. It was useful at the outset to spend time with him explaining the courses; what we do and why and _____ and _____ travelled to _____ to do this. Thus, the relationship with the external started with clear information, open discussion and a good sense of purpose. These elements have continued to the present day. We are really pleased that _____ has been able to report positive progress and the success of the programmes.