

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2016-17

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

<i>Faculty / School of:</i>	School of Geography (Faculty of Environment)
<i>Subject(s):</i>	<i>MSc River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS</i> <i>MSc Environmental Water consultancy</i>
<i>Programme(s) / Module(s):</i>	MSc River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS; GEOG5042M Geographic Data Visualisation & Analysis GEOG5230M Professional Development GEOG5285M Dissertation GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management GEOG5680M Hydrological Processes and Analysis GEOG5060M GIS and Environment GEOG5530M River basin management for water quality GEOG5710M Digital Image Processing for Environmental Remote Sensing GEOG5790M Programming for Geographical Information Analysis: Advanced Skills. GEOG5830M Environmental Assessment GEOG5990M Programming for Geographical Information Analysis: Core Skills <u>MSc Environmental Water Consultancy (additional modules to the above):</u> GEOG5679M Water Consultancy: Contract Development GEOG5689M Water Consultancy: Project Management
<i>Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):</i>	MSc/PgD

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 many examples of good general practice in both MSc programmes. The degrees have an interesting fabric and deliver an excellent range of skills. Despite my slightly negative comments on some particular items below and suggested recommendations, I have been impressed by these programmes over my three years as examiner and the willingness of staff to improve the delivery of the material.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

MSc Environmental Water Consultancy – This is the first year this programme has run and is an excellent innovation with two distinct and novel modules: GEOG5679M Contract Development and GEOG5689M Project management. To the best of my knowledge the course is distinctive in the UK context. The two new modules have been well delivered and well received. Including industry professionals (JBS staff) as module contributors provides an excellent opportunity for professional engagement and ensures the material delivered is current and relevant. The scope of the work is also good covering UK, EU and International contexts.

GEOG5230M Professional Development – Following the successful introduction of this module last year, module staff continue to improve on the delivery and structure of the teaching

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

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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

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

Having acted as external examiner on the MSC RBD+MwGIS from 2014-2017 and MSc EWC in 2016-17 I am pleased to report both degree programmes are in good health overall and in general there have been year-on-year improvements in the course structure and range of modules offered.

However, this is no place for complacency and I have observed a few indications where standards have dipped a little below that which is desirable. Examples are to be found in thee moderation process, marking proformas, a weaker than desirable dissertation marks profile and in some of student feedback comments of the quality of teaching. A specific example is GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management – This module needs attention as there indications from student feedback that the teaching is becoming somewhat disjointed (e.g. delivery of statistical methods) and responses to moderators comments may not be rigorously implemented e.g. it is stated comments will be considered but no action points are given. Incremental changes over years (progressive development) are good but occasionally you need a programme overview to see where things sit.

BUT to reiterate – both programmes overall are in GOOD HEALTH.

Finally I would like to thank the staff of the School of Geography for all their support whilst I have been external examiner. In particular I am grateful to _____ for their help and insights over this period and _____ for professional support of the process this year.

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.

The programmes are generally well designed and the intended learning outcomes are carefully thought through. Assessment is appropriately structured to test the ILOs and this is met on most modules. With the new degree (MSc in EWC) I think there is scope to look at the dissertation module and tailor it to better reflect the overall goals of the MSc (see other comment on this under 19).

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

The research strengths of the School of Geography are clearly embedded in many of the modules in the degree programmes. Example research data is widely used in practicals and students are encouraged to develop research skills which parallel the research practice employed in the Department. This is most apparent in the dissertation module GEOG5285M. Topics investigated in the dissertations this year included: microplastics in rivers; flood risk; channel restoration; runoff hydrology; woody debris and invertebrates; and SfM survey methods.

14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	N
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Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:

N/A

15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	N
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Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:

N/A

16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	N
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Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:

N/A

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.

Moderation of marks – This is a useful feature of the system you have in Leeds but there is evidence this is not been fully engaged with e.g. weak responses from convenors. Often responses are bland (no action points) or have not been very well thought through e.g. one response was that average marks were higher because the students were simply a good cohort (which is not supported by marks elsewhere). Also in places some of the data appear to have minor errors e.g. in GEOG5230M the range of marks is 42-80 on the mark sheet but is listed as 13-80 in the statistical performance summary?

Statistical summary - The Department is also missing a trick by not looking across all modules and comparing statistics. This would give you a sound basis for making comparisons between modules and show outliers e.g. Dissertation mean 63%; mark ranges differ widely between modules.

Recommendation – You compile summary statistics from all modules and compare these directly (in both Table and graphical form) to identify the rank order of module marks and any anomalies in the statistics e.g. range of marks.

For example:

Module	Students	Mean	Min	Max	Range
5285 Dissertation	15	63	57	76	19
5670 Issues & Skills	17	66	58	77	19
5230 Prof Development	38	67	42	80	38
5680 Hydro Processes	17	71	51	82	31

Marking standards are generally good but there are STILL some examples of cut & paste from your assessment criteria with no specific retailoring for a particular piece of work. This is completely unacceptable and would not stand up to appeal.

Recommendation – Staff adopting this practice must be approached directly and re-educated on best practice.

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 standard of Dissertations is overall below where I would expect it to be for a research-led Department (this is something which staff who teach on the modules are also aware of). Results from AY2016/17 show very few examples of excellent work [*or even '70-79 A very good dissertation' – according to your own marking guidelines*] e.g. only one dissertation obtained a mark greater than 70% and there were no distinctions on the MSc in RBD+MwGIS. Combined dissertation marks for both programmes:

80+	0
70+	1
60+	8
50+	5
Other	1

One word 'lacklustre' – was used by one marker and this would be a fairly accurate description of much of the work. I looked carefully at three dissertations on 69 and similar comments were made on all three pieces of work:

- Lack of attention to conceptualisation
- Gaps in analysis
- Lack of original insight
- Lack of design

Similarly there were five really interesting dissertations on 'Microplastics in rivers'. All use the same idea and basic methodology but were geographically distinct (Rivers Irewell, Ouse, Soar, Calder, Tees) and the analyses differed between students. However, the dissertations all only scored moderate marks in the range 54-60 and similar comments were made across the work:

- Weak spatial and temporal sampling design
- Limited data analysis
- Spatial studies but poorly devised and shown graphically (RBD&M 'without' GIS!)
- Discussion descriptive rather than critical

This raises the IMPORTANT QUESTION are you doing enough to support the dissertation process?

Getting this right is essential because this is a 1/3 of the programme credits but the dissertation module has the lowest module mean. Therefore it is not surprising you don't have many distinctions. A similar pattern to this was observed in AY 2015/16 so this is an ongoing issue.

Recommendation – You need to review the dissertation process and look at ways of improving the quality of this work.

Recommendation – You also need to formally moderate the dissertation module (like you do on all other modules) and report findings / results back to examination board. I can see no reason not to do this except that it is a quirk of timing because the dissertation is the last assessment?

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

With the advent of the MSc in EWC the relevance of the dissertation module in its current form needs to be considered. Students develop consultancy skills in two modules but it is important to ask the question – How much hands on experience do the students get in terms of consultancy? The development of consultancy skills ends up as a bit of a *cul-de-sac* unless there is an opportunity to put these skills in to practice.

Recommendation - You revisit the Dissertation module for EWC to make it more oriented to a consultancy pathway / report. This does not need to be a completely new module but the existing structure could be modified to ensure that the report produced uses some of the consultancy skills.

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?	N
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	N/A
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?	N/A
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?	N
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:

Note (25) – I have never received any draft examination papers/assessments for consideration during my period as examiner. My understanding both programmes are assessed fully by coursework. Therefore (27) does not apply.

Note (32) - Release of Material to externals was extremely late this year (2017). VLE / Minerva is used as the primary portal for delivering material to externals so there needs to be good access to this essential resource. Unfortunately I only obtained access to the online system with less than 24 hours before departing for exam board. This meant I only had limited opportunity to go through work in advance and could not view dissertations until the morning of the exam board. In 2016 a very useful guide was produced for the VLE but this had not been updated for the new Minerva software which lead to further delays in navigating the online materials.

Recommendation: It is important that this is done for next year. More generally it would be good to receive other details in advance of coming to Leeds. I listed in my 15/16 report a series of materials that are needed. These should be sent to the external or there location clearly mapped on the online system.

Other comments

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

Dissertation mark sheets – A full set of dissertations and dissertation mark sheets (individual and joint mark sheets) was not available. In a few cases individual mark sheets were missing, joint mark sheets were missing e.g. the mark sheets for the highest scoring dissertation were not available. This may be partially explained by the recent submission of this work (with some dissertations given extensions) but really a full set of paperwork needs to be available to the external examiner.

10 May 2018

Dear

Head of School response to the MSc External Examiner's Report

I am writing to express, on behalf of the School, my thanks for your work as external examiner on our MSc River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS and MSc Environmental Water Consultancy programmes this year. The role you play in ensuring we deliver high quality MSc's where students receive appropriate advanced training, partially in technical skills, is appreciated by everyone here.

As you note in your report, the programme team have made several enhancements since last year's report. These include:

i) *MSc Environmental Water Consultancy* – This is the first year this programme has run and is an excellent innovation with two distinct and novel modules: GEOG5679M Contract Development and GEOG5689M Project management. To the best of my knowledge the course is distinctive in the UK context. The two new modules have been well delivered and well received. Including industry professionals (JBA staff) as module contributors provides an excellent opportunity for professional engagement and ensures the material delivered is current and relevant. The scope of the work is also good covering UK, EU and International contexts.

ii) *GEOG5230M Professional Development* – Following the successful introduction of this module last year, module staff continue to improve on the delivery and structure of the teaching.

We are pleased that you feel that the programmes are appropriately challenging for MSc students, and research led teaching is clearly embedded in many of the modules, particularly the practical exercises, and choice of dissertation topics, and that marking standards are appropriate. You note no issues that require urgent attention and are of the opinion that both programmes are in good health, but identified a number of issues for the programme team to consider further. I would like to take this opportunity to advise you on how we are responding to these issues.

1. *Moderation of marks* – You note that this is a useful feature of the system in Leeds but there is evidence this is not been fully engaged with e.g. weak responses from convenors. Often responses are bland (no action points) or have not been very well thought through. In response to this, module convenors and moderators have been reminded by the programme leader that the moderation process must be engaged with fully.

2. *Statistical summary* - The Department is also missing a trick by not looking across all modules and comparing statistics. This would give you a sound basis for making comparisons between modules and show outliers. As per your recommendation, the programme leader will compile and compare stats for all modules to note any differences which will be discussed with module convenors.
3. *Marking* - Marking standards are generally good but there are STILL some examples of cut & paste from your assessment criteria with no specific retailoring for a particular piece of work. This is completely unacceptable and would not stand up to appeal. The programme leader has reminded staff that marking criteria should not be cut and pasted as feedback and has suggested to DoSE that the text be removed from our feedback template which suggests that markers should use specific text from the marking criteria.
4. *Dissertations* - The standard of dissertations is overall below where I would expect it to be for a research-led department. In order to try to improve marks we have implemented a system which mirrors our undergraduate dissertation process where students obtain formative feedback on a proposal and interim report. We will consider moderation of the dissertation module as per other modules. You also suggested that we allow EWC dissertations to be more consultancy focused. We discussed this but concluded that it may make the EWC course a 'soft option' compared to RBDM and will maintain the need for students to produce robust science.

Notwithstanding the specific points above, we are pleased that your report is overall very positive. Your input into the examination process at Leeds is greatly appreciated and with your assistance we hope to raise our standards further. Thank you once again for your enthusiastic scrutiny and considerate work and we look forward to your visit next year.

Yours sincerely

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