

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:	POLIS
Subject(s):	<i>International Relations, International Security</i>
Programme(s) / Module(s):	PIED5510M PIED5537M PIED5323M PIED5410M PIED5504M PIED5213M PIED5255M PIED5777M
Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):	MA

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

Points of innovation and/or good practice

The amount and quality of feedback given to the students is exemplary.

Enhancements made from the previous year

This was my first year as an external examiner.

Matters for Urgent Attention

None.

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

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

7.	Have you acted as a External Examiner Mentor?	Y /N
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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

The MA programmes offered by POLIS in the field of International Relations are very well-designed and offer students a wide range of topical modules that are very enticing. In the area for which I am responsible (international security, broadly defined), students have the possibility to take several courses on the most topical subjects, which are taught by academics at the frontline of the research on those.

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
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Academic members of staff teach modules in their area of expertise. The reading lists are fully up-to-date and feature cutting-edge pieces of research.

The overall high quality of the Master's dissertations testifies to the ability of the academic staff to clearly explain to students how to design and conduct a research project.

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:

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:

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:

Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y
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Student performance testifies to the dedication of the academic staff. Staff members generally give excellent, detailed and constructive feedback. Marking is fair, sound and transparent. It would be good to see a wider range of types of assessment in use. What about simulations or policy brief writing to enhance the employability of students?

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
<i>I have been very impressed by the standards achieved by the students, some of whom produced outstanding pieces of work. Overall, students' performance is as strong as, if not better than, that of students on comparable courses.</i>		
<i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make in relation to assessment and feedback:</i>		
I was very positively impressed by the amount of feedback given to students. The double marking of the dissertations (and the necessity for markers disagreeing significantly to explore the reasons for their disagreement) ensures the robustness and transparency of the dissertation marking process.		

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 & 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

I understand that this academic year has been a transition year and that new administrative arrangements are currently being put in place in the School. Communication from the School as to what exactly had to be done by the external examiner and how to go about it was not always clear, which made the process rather time-consuming. I would have liked to receive clearer instructions, especially as it was my first year as an external examiner at Leeds.

What was also disconcerting is that it seems there are various practices within POLIS as far as giving feedback and marks to the students are concerned. I was not always sure where I had to look to find the marks and the feedback as an external examiner and was wondering whether students might also be wondering (and possibly miss on some of the feedback left for them)! For some modules, I was told that students' essays could be viewed on-line via Turnitin, but then it was not possible to see any feedback or annotations (only the original essay as submitted by the student), making commenting on the marking somewhat challenging.

Other comments

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

Thank you for inviting me to act as an external examiner at POLIS. It has been very interesting and rewarding to find out more about your very interesting programmes and the excellent work produced by some of your students.

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:

Politics and International Studies

Subject(s):

International Relations

Programme(s) / Module(s):

PIED5405M American Foreign Policy
PIED5456M Conflict and Insurgency in Southeast Asia
PIED5501M Israel-Palestine Conflict
Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance To
PIED5517M Government
PIED5563M Terrorism
PIED5564M Counterterrorism
PIED5578M Theoretical Approaches in IR
PIED5598M Civil War and Intrastate Conflict
PIED5702M Advanced Political Analysis
PIED5777M POLIS MA Dissertation

Awards (e.g. BA/BSc/MSc etc):

MA

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 exam board process, and this has been maintained through my time. This is most especially true of the special circumstances board, which is convened with externals after an internal meeting to evaluate the merits of special cases, but before the main exam board. This aspect of practice by POLIS at Leeds is the gold standard for the sector, and is to be highly commended.

Many of the modules I assessed provided students with opportunities for developing their skills over the course of the run of the module, with feedback from one assessment enabling them to make improvements relevant to others. This is commendable.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

There have been some changes on the administrative side, with efforts to move everything online and simplify the channels of communication with externals and transmission of materials to them. Things have generally gone smoothly considering the scale of the operation. There have been some teething problems this year: there was not uniformity between modules in terms of whether assessment was being done online or in hard copy, and in what format feedback was to be provided. As a result, material was coming to externals in three different forms simultaneously: scanned hard copy, directions to online learning space, and latterly access to online admin folder space. This made things confusing at times, and in some instances it was not clear what items were to be looked at and where they were to be inspected. But this is very clearly the product of a transitional period between regimes and having discussed it at exam board I would have high confidence that as new systems bed in things will be smoother in the year ahead..

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

In the case of a couple of modules that came to me this year, it was immediately apparent that the module convenor/first marker (who was the same person for both modules) had been strikingly tough in their grading. The moderator had identified this, but had apparently been unilaterally overruled by the first marker, and so the grades remained very low compared to other modules. The tough grades were defensible on the objective merits – the marker was manifestly a deep expert on the subject matter – but this did put the grade distribution for the module very much at odds with the rest of the programme.

As soon as I drew this to the attention of the exams officer, it was discussed and steps taken to rectify; grades were adjusted and all was well. So I can commend the School for their receptiveness to feedback and swift action. In the end, the system worked before student outcomes were permanently affected. The external examiner is intended to be the final fail-safe in these things, so perhaps there isn't a problem, but perhaps worth considering whether an internal process should be in place to deal with something like this before it gets that far: that is, if an internal moderator thinks they see a clear problem and the first marker intends to disregard their view, should there be an internal figure who can step in to arbitrate?

For Examiners in the first year of appointment

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?	N/A
7.	Have you acted as an External Examiner Mentor?	Y

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 programme already operated at a high standard of quality when I began my term as external. Procedures were robust and orderly. Exam boards ran well. Programmes and modules were generally well-designed and delivered on their learning objectives. Academic standards were high. Assessment was robust and feedback was strong.

On the small number of occasions I had concerns about individual modules, they were considered and addressed effectively by the relevant officers.

Over the course of my time there has been a significant shift towards online learning spaces, submission of assessment and feedback. The teething and transition problems noted above notwithstanding, the direction of travel is the right one.

There has also been some improvement in the uniformity of the form in which feedback is provided.

I have always been struck over the course of my time working for POLIS at Leeds by the exceptional rigour and attention to careful detail devoted to the exam board process, and this has been maintained through my time. This is most especially true of the special circumstances board, which is convened with externals after an internal meeting to evaluate the merits of special cases, but before the main exam board. I will repeat here for the record what I have said in past reports: this aspect of practice by POLIS at Leeds is the gold standard for the sector, and is to be highly commended.

I have since taken up a role as an external at another institution, and am already drawing on my experience from Leeds as a source of good practice to recommend to others. I have enjoyed my service as the POLIS external, and wish you well for the future.

What I say below as regards this specific year is also true of my four-year tenure: This is a robust programme operating to a high standard of quality, and organised by a demonstrably committed and competent academic staff and professional administration. It reaches and exceeds the quality benchmarks required for the top tier of the UK university sector.

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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 sample of modules I saw indicated a programme operating at high levels of quality and diversity, contributing to a coherent and appropriate set of learning outcomes. The standards contained in the modules, both in planning and in student work produced, comfortably meet the standards appropriate for this level.

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)

There is clear correspondence in most cases between the research expertise of staff and the modules taught. This is displayed in choice of topic coverage within modules, and the deeper exploration of themes in which the teacher is well-versed. This is often displayed in feedback, where convenors are able to engage with a degree of subtlety and richness that would not be possible if there were not a close connection between their expertise and their teaching responsibilities. This provides a quality of education higher than that which would be available if teachers were merely relating material they themselves knew only at textbook level.

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:

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:

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:

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.

The assessment on modules was thorough and well-balanced: sufficient to allow development in response to feedback over time. The overall quality of output from the students indicates a solid baseline of quality in the core of the cohort, while also providing scope for the strongest students to excel. Work receiving grades at the top of the range was of impressive quality. Quantity of feedback was notably high compared to comparator institutions.

The quantity of feedback provided, often by two markers, at Leeds is striking. It always matches and sometimes exceeds that of comparable institutions.

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:

Yes. Students in the main showed the ability to relay a solid core of knowledge of the debates and issues on which questions were set, and at the upper end there was evidence of levels of independent thought and muscular analytical ability of the highest level. It should not be surprising, but the best students on these programmes are the equal of the best anywhere in the system, and the median level of work is definitely in line with sectoral norms for a top-tier UK university.

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

Other comments

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

The takeaway from the totality of my report should be that this is a robust programme operating to a high standard of quality, and organised by a demonstrably committed and competent academic staff and professional administration. It reaches and exceeds the quality benchmarks required for the top tier of the UK university sector.