

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2017-18

QAT Received 15/01/2019

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

School of Geography, Faculty of Environment

Subject(s):

Geographical Information Systems and Geographical Information Science

Programme(s) / Module(s):

MSc in Geographical Information Systems
MSc in Geographical Information Systems (Online Distance Learning)

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.

This is my first year in post hence I am still gaining familiarity with the programmes, their core and optional modules and varied forms of assessment. However, I have been particularly impressed by the following:

1. The thoroughness of the moderation process. The moderation forms provide an excellent overview of student performance and give a very clear account of the moderating activities undertaken, including blind marking, with action points identified where applicable. It is clear that staff take quality control procedures very seriously and they should be commended for this. This is the most rigorous moderation process I have seen as an external examiner to date.
2. I have had the pleasure of reading ~10 dissertations over the course of the 12 months. I have been impressed with the quality of some of these dissertations, some of which are of publication standard, and the range of application areas covered. I was particularly impressed by some of the more technical dissertations in which students had written code to retrieve and/or analyse geospatial data. I believe the coding modules to be a particular strength of the MSc programmes in GIS at Leeds which provide students with excellent skills from an employability perspective.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

As stated previously, this was my first year in post hence I am not able to comment on enhancements to the programme or processes over the last year.

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?	N

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

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

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

Not applicable

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.

I believe that both programmes provide students with an excellent blend of theory, applications and hands on experience. Each programme builds from a carefully designed series of core modules to a series of specialist modules in which students can develop specific skills or follow specific lines of academic interest. The dissertation represents the natural endpoint of the learning process and there is strong evidence to suggest some that students produce work of the highest academic standard.

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)

I have not engaged with the syllabus in sufficient depth to fully answer this question yet. The GIS programmes include a range of modules designed for different purposes. Some of these are highly technical in nature, such as the introductory and advanced programming modules hence cannot really be classed as research led. Others more clearly align to areas of research expertise, such as Applied Population & Demographic Analysis and GIS & Environment. Some of the dissertations I have seen are also clearly linked to areas of staff research expertise.

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
<p><i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i></p> <p>Not Applicable</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> <p>There have been too many modules (20+) for me to review in detail, however, I have looked at specific modules through the VLE, focussing on module documentation (including module outlines, intended learning outcomes and assessment briefs), submitted course work (and related feedback) and module evaluation scores and comments. I have also looked at a selection of moderation reports and have been impressed with the quality and consistency with which this process is implemented. The ILOs and associated forms of assessment seem appropriate for programmes of this nature and seem, effective at differentiating between different levels of student performance.</p>		
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
<p><i>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:</i></p> <p>As stated earlier I am in my first year of appointment. I have spent most of my time getting familiar with the structure and content of the two programmes (Face to Face and ODL) and have looked at ~10 dissertations in detail prior to board meetings in February, June and November. I can confirm that the quality of these dissertations (graded from high distinction through to pass with merit, pass and fail) is comparable to that of master's level dissertations from other UK universities with which I am familiar. Some of the best dissertations are of publication standard. It is more difficult to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the cohort since the students take different option modules, however, I have looked at the mark distribution of each module and can confirm these look reasonable in terms of marks awarded relative to university norms.</p>		
<p><i>Please use this box to provide any additional comments you would like to make in relation to assessment and feedback:</i></p> <p>I have four comments to make here:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There appears to be a good mix of assessment techniques, some requiring the students to submit multiple short pieces of work which contribute towards a portfolio (and provide rapid assessment of skill acquisition) and others that are more traditional in nature including extended reports and essays. Some assignments are highly innovative, such as the online portfolio and project work associated with GEOG5990M (Programming for Geographical Information Systems: Advanced Skills). As an external examiner it was great to examine some of this content online (e.g. GitHub repositories) and run some of the code. It was also nice to see that the students had freedom of choice in terms of project scope and coding environment. 		

2. Linked to my previous point I do wonder if some staff are over-assessing their students (and possibly setting false expectations in terms of return of marked course work). I think this was the case for GEOG5032 (GIS Data Visualisation and Analysis) in the previous academic session and was certainly the case for GEOG5050M (GIS & Environment) in the current session – a point raised by some students in the end of module evaluation exercise.
3. On the issue of feedback, students were generally appreciative of the feedback given, however, one commented that the amount of feedback tended to decline once marks of >70% were achieved. Perhaps staff could give a little more feedback to students under such circumstances in the future?
4. I appreciate that there may be institutional guidelines in relation to the length of a 60-credit dissertation, but in my view, there may be some merit in reducing the word limit for the dissertation to 10,000 words. This would encourage students to be more selective in their use of material and more concise in their writing. Furthermore, it would make the process of converting dissertations to publications easier for students and supervisors alike.

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?	N
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	N
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?	NA
26.	Was the nature and level of the assessment questions appropriate?	Y
27.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments on assessment questions?	NA
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?	NA
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 do not wish to criticise any particular individual, however, I have at times struggled to understand the structure and content of programmes under my responsibility in this first year. It would be useful for me to have up to date programme specifications and module listings so that I can understand, for example, subtle differences between face to face and online distance learning versions of a module. It would also be useful to know which modules are not likely to run in the future – such as those linked to the WUN programme with Southampton. I note also that the Web GIS module is not running next year but am not sure what the reasons are behind this.

Other comments

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

I have three comments to make here:

1. Having looked at several dissertations produced by students on the face to face (F2F) and online distance learning (ODL) programmes I think there may be some merit in revisiting the guidance given in the respective dissertation handbooks. It would be good to provide an explanation of the differences between 'application based' and 'development-based' dissertations in both handbooks. Currently this information appears in the F2F handbook only. Likewise, I think there is scope to improve the learning outcomes in the F2F handbook. The learning outcomes in the ODL handbook are much more specific from a GIS perspective in this respect.
2. I had the pleasure of talking to a group of 10 students when I visited Leeds in February 2018. The group was made up of 4 students on the F2F GIS programme and 6 students on the River Basin Dynamics programme. All were extremely complimentary about their respective programmes, however, students on the GIS programme appeared slightly disgruntled that they had fewer opportunities to engage with real-world practitioners than their river basin counterparts. They wondered whether it would be possible to provide more exposure to GIS companies or consultancies through the taught component of the programme either through guest speakers, internships or placements. They also stated that they would welcome more opportunities to present their work in front of others to develop their presentation skills. It is not clear whether these employability concerns would have arisen had they not met with the river basin students (since this programme includes strong links to industry, e.g. through JBA Consulting). It is also conceivable that some of these concerns are already addressed in GEOG5022M (Professional and Personal Development), however, I thought I should raise them here in case this is not the case.
3. I have been attending the annual GISRUK conference for many years. The conference organisers are always keen to promote participation from early career researchers who are given the opportunity to present their ideas through posters and papers to leading academics in a friendly, supportive environment. GISRUK is an exceptionally useful conference for students on a GIS programme to attend because it provides them with immediate exposure to some of the latest developments in GIScience and provides them with opportunities to network with other students, vendors and a variety of end users. The Leeds team have recognised the value of this conference to their students for many years and I believe it provides significant 'value added' to the MSc programme. I encourage you, therefore, to maintain your support of this venture in the future with no additional cost to staff or students.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)*Title and Name of Examiner:*

Subject(s):

Geography

Programme(s) / Module(s):

MSc Geographical Information Systems and MSc Geographical Information Systems (ODL)

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

MSc, PGDip, PGCert

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Head of School

Faculty / School of:

Geography

Address for communication:

School of Geography, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT

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 appreciate the positive feedback on these areas. We agree that the moderation process needs to be thorough and not merely be a 'tick box' exercise and we recognise that taking the action points and translating them into practice is important. The dissertations do represent the culmination of study and we do look to help the students achieve the best that they can.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year**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:

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:

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:

12. This summarises very well the programmes' learning objectives, from the skilling-up phases and core modules through to more applied and technical optional modules.

13. We believe there is a balance to be struck between providing students what they should know in terms of skills and knowledge to meet employability needs, and what staff spend their time researching. Research led teaching though provides both case studies and important real world datasets for use in practical sessions. Applied Population & Demographic Analysis is a module based on staff interest but a realisation that the courses we teach need something different has led to a new module being devised bringing several staff specialities together.

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:

17. We appreciate these positive comments in relation to the assessment methods and appropriateness of these to the ILOs.

19. We are delighted that over the years we have had a number of dissertations of particularly high standard that are considered of publishable quality. In these cases we nominate their work for awards (such as the RGS-IBG Best Student Dissertation) or encourage and support students to convert their dissertation to a journal publication. One dissertation this year has just won second prize in the GISc research group competition.

19.1 Aligned with the core and optional modules, we seek a balance which allows a demonstration of a skillset building through to more project based. In Semester 2, where we possibly can, we give choice in assessment and theme assignments clearly to align with students' developing interests.

19.2 2017/18 was the first running of GEOG5032 (GIS Data Visualisation and Analysis). It is a core 30 credit module for the GIS students so the assessment workload will be higher than other taught modules (that are generally 15 credits). River Basin students take a 15 credit version of this module. During that first running of this module we realised there was some bunching of assignment deadlines and feedback was too late in the Semester to benefit the students as they worked on their later assignments. In 2018/19 early formative feedback is provided. In addition, the timings of uploads has been evened out to provide timely feedback sooner and ongoing in the module in order to help students stay on track. GIS & Env came into line with other modules with fewer assignments and a better balance.

19.3 This is something for us to reflect on. It is harder to write how something good can be even better compared with something where the drawbacks are more readily noted.

19.4 We recognise the pros and cons of the dissertation word limit. Currently, for the ODL dissertation we need to stay in line with the University of Southampton (as it is a collaborative programme) and, for parity, we need to have the same word limit in our f2f dissertation. This is something we could revisit in the future when the Leeds-Southampton ODL programme is no longer running.

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:

The information on Banner (viewed via the Module Catalogue at <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/modulesearch.asp?T=S&L=TP>) provides the definitive programme and module specifications and should be up to date and clear. The module handbooks are all available within each module area. Year 2 ODL modules and the ODL dissertation module will be delivered as normal until all students have completed their studies (July 2024 at the latest). We are not sure where the Web GIS information has come from as this module continues both f2f and ODL in 2018/19. For f2f, the advanced programming will be dormant in 2019/20 though.

Other comments

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

1. Thank you for the observation. We will review the handbooks and most likely start with the stance that the ODL handbook is a better template and update the f2f accordingly.
2. The River Basin students do have more obvious external contact earlier on their course. The placement possibilities and visiting speakers tend to be second semester for the GIS students. There is also a day meeting at which students present their work. We, to date, have seen GISRUUK as at least equivalent for GIS students compared to RBs who don't get that experience (and who later in the year asked why not?).

3. We firmly believe that GISRUK has been a fantastic experience for the students in a wide variety of ways. Sadly, attendance seems to be beyond what can be budgeted by the School so the future of an activity like this is unclear.

Head of School of Geography
28 February 2019