

**The University of Leeds**  
**EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT**

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QA Team received 16/07/2019

**Part A: General Information**

**Subject area and awards being examined**

*Title and Name of Examiner:*

*Faculty / School of:*

Fine Art, Art History & Cultural Studies

*Subject(s):*

*Programme(s) / Module(s):*

Culture and Media (Cultural Studies modules)

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

BA

**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 overwhelming impression from this first encounter with the BA is that the programme expects and produces the highest standards of work from its students. The modules are interesting, and overall offer a solid grounding in core theory as well responding flexibly to current events and specialist research-led expertise (ARTF2064 *Live Issues* is a particularly good example of curriculum design being responsive to current events and concerns). Across the programme, there is lots of evidence of students developing sophisticated skills in close reading and sensitive powers of analysis. The grading is fair, and the feedback is generally very detailed, constructive and supportive.

While the forms of assessment are dominated by 'traditional' essays and exams, there is also some evidence of innovation on this front, for example, the inclusion of 'digital storytelling' on ARTF3173. As my predecessor noted, it would be advisable for the team to reflect on the pros and cons of introducing more diversity into the assessment patterns (it might be that more variety is provided on the media side of the programme, of course). Having said that, the focus on traditional academic writing clearly produces graduates with advanced skills in this area. In general, the quality, stylishness and rigour of their writing was striking.

**Enhancements made from the previous year**

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

**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*

**For Examiners in the first year of appointment only**

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/N
3.	Were you provided with an External Examiner Mentor?	N

**For Examiners completing their term of appointment only**

4.	Have you observed improvements in the programme(s) over the period of your appointment?	n/a
5.	Has the school responded to comments and recommendations you have made?	n/a
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?	n/a

*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*

This is my first year as External, and there was no report available for the past year. I did receive the report for 15/16 (for Cultural Studies, rather than Culture and Media), but this did not include the School's response. It is, of course, a matter of some concern that the reports for the last two years are not available, and that there does not seem to be any School response to this.

Some of the issues raised in 15/16, I am repeating in my own report: specifically the need for more detailed information on the moderation process, and the suggestion to use more of the feedback functions on Turnitin.

**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.*

This is a joint programme. I did not have access to the assessments on the media side of the degree, and I think several of the Cultural Studies modules listed on this degree are reviewed by another External, so it is hard to comment on the coherence of the overall programme structure (Q8 above). In fact, it would have been helpful to have been given more of a sense of the media side, and indeed to have been given more direction about the degree as a whole when I was appointed. It would be useful, for example, to have access to the first year core module guides. My answers to 9-12 above, and from here on in therefore refer to the Cultural Studies side of the degree.

The modules I reviewed were a good mix of broad survey courses and in-depth, research-led ones. It is interesting that several final year modules serve double duty as postgraduate modules. Although I did not look at the postgraduate work, it is clear that the undergraduates are being encouraged to work at a very advanced level.

The progression from Year 2 to 3 is evident in terms of the compulsory modules, but it was not always easy to see how some of the second year modules are distinguished from final year ones.

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
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<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>		
The influence of research is a particular strength of many of the modules that I reviewed. They are clearly taught by subject specialists who inflect the modules with their own research expertise and enthusiasm while also providing the requisite breadth of coverage and perspective.		
14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	N
<i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	N
<i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i>		
16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	N
<i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i>		

#### Assessment and Feedback

17.	Does the programme design clearly align intended learning outcomes with assessment?	Y / N
<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 focus of the modules is very much on various forms of textual analysis (with a suitably generous definition of 'texts') and on engaging with 'theory' in various ways. The resulting work is on the whole extremely competent and in some cases practically publishable. It might be an explicit decision to specialise in this form of critical analysis, and there might be good grounds for doing so; but in principle there is probably scope to introduce or encourage more variety in the kinds of research questions and methods undertaken by students. Similarly, it is genuinely admirable how students are encouraged to work with 'primary' texts, but I did get the impression that sometimes essays bypass relevant critical analyses in the secondary literature, or seem a little reluctant to venture much beyond the key readings. I am aware this is an impression gleaned from a relatively small sample, so I mention this as something for tutors to reflect on, rather than suggesting it is definitely a problem to be solved.</p> <p>The vast majority of the work I saw took the form of written essays. There are lots of advantages to essay writing, and the students clearly become adept at academic writing; but the team should keep this under review, particularly in light of the programme learning outcome that successful graduates will have developed 'an ability to initiate, develop and realise distinctive and creative work within various forms of writing (analytical, creative, aural, visual, electronic, digital etc).' A notable exception was ARTF3173 <i>Movies, Migrants and Diasporas</i>, which had a variety of modes of assessment, including an innovative digital storytelling exercise (although I could not access these submissions). Elsewhere, there were references to presentations leading to written work. The practice of getting students to submit draft essays before a final submission clearly works well in supporting students to do their best work.</p> <p>A few modules include an unseen essay as part of the assessment. Again, ARTF3173 was the best example of this, limiting the questions to analyses of two films previously announced. Elsewhere, the value of the exam was less clear. For example, ARTF2047 <i>Image, Music, Text</i> seems to be testing recall and rehearsal of fairly basic tenets that will already have been tested and applied in the students' essays. Furthermore, the rubric says 'do not substantially duplicate material used in your assessed essay', but if these are marked anonymously, how is the marker to know if this has happened or not? (Note I did not see a sample of exam scripts from ART3034 <i>From Trauma to Cultural Memory</i>).</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>This is clearly a strong cohort of students who are engaged by a rich curriculum and supportive teaching staff to produce academic work of a very high standard. The quality of the academic writing across the board was very impressive, as was the students' willingness and ability to work with challenging material in a confident and sensitive manner. The standards are certainly in line with comparable courses.</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> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. There was a great deal of care, support and detail in the feedback, for which the staff should be commended. Grading on the whole seems fair and consistent; if it's generally on the upper end of the scale, this simply reflects the quality of work across the board, and by association, the quality of the teaching, which certainly comes through in the encouraging tenor of much of the feedback.</li> <li>ii. Having said that, there is a good deal of bunching around the 70 mark, with very few scripts getting grades below 65, while many were awarded marks in the mid 80s. It is certainly good practice to use the full range of marks at the upper end of the scale, but markers could be less reluctant to use the full range at the lower end too, particularly in marking exam scripts. Nonetheless, I think only one of the CMS students graduated with a First overall. This might be something for the Programme Leader to review.</li> <li>iii. Some of the in-text feedback is almost at the level of copy-editing, and although this level of attention might be one reason students' written work becomes so strong, it must be very time-consuming. As the previous External noted, it would make sense to encourage the use the 'QuickMark' facility on Turnitin – (both pre-set and bespoke).</li> <li>iv. I would also recommend that the School looks into adopting the 'rubric' function (to supplement the summative comments) to ensure that students can match the feedback against the whole range of marking criteria and identify strengths and weaknesses across all their work. You could, for example, indicate performance in relation to your three key criteria, 'Knowledge &amp; Understanding; Intellectual Skills; Presentation and Referencing'. You might also consider separating out feedback on the given assignment and 'feeding forward' for future assignments.</li> <li>v. Using a rubric would also help ensure that the grades are consistent with the feedback across the board.</li> <li>vi. Rather less of the work seemed to have been marked anonymously than I would have expected given that anonymous marking is supposed to be the norm. Having said that, there were examples where it was clear from the feedback that tutors had worked closely with students in developing their work, and the personalised feedback in these cases worked well. My recommendation is simply to ensure that all concerned are confident which assessments are to be anonymously marked, and which are the exceptions.</li> <li>vii. Care should be taken, though, to ensure that the feedback in such cases is always about the work and not about the student. It does also raise questions about the latitude that individual tutors have in relation to the guidelines, for example, I saw one tutor reassure a student that they wouldn't penalise for a late submission.</li> <li>viii. Where feedback is not anonymous, the moderation process is all the more important. In only one or two cases did moderators write any comments on the moderation sheets, but where they did so, it was really useful, not only to me as External Examiner, but also, I imagine, to the colleagues concerned.</li> <li>ix. In some cases the moderation sample did not seem to meet the given criteria, and in some cases were weighted to the upper end of the grades.</li> </ol>		

### 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 / N
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 / N
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 / N
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/N
28.	Was sufficient assessed work made available to enable you to have confidence in your evaluation of the standard of student work?	Y/N
29.	Were the examination scripts clearly marked/annotated?	Y / N
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 / N

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

I have answered some of these questions 'yes/no' because although I did eventually get the information I needed, it was not always easy. I am aware that some of the issues this year were due to a key staff member going on sick leave, and I do want to record my sincere thanks to colleagues (who I named in my oral report) who stepped in to sort various things out, particularly in the run up to the Exam Board. However, there are various ways in which communication with the External could be improved from the outset. The numbers relate to the questions above:

20. I was sent the guidance and request to look at materials by the School before I had heard any confirmation from the University of my appointment. That followed from the QAD on request. This rather set the pattern where I have continually had to ask for information, rather than just being sent what I needed.

22. I was not initially sent any programme documentation; indeed, it was only made clear to me after I'd been appointed that this was a joint programme, and that I would not be looking at the media and communication modules. I had to ask before I was sent the School Handbook, but was not told where to find the specific programme information. It would be advisable in future simply to provide Externals with the link to the relevant programme information along with the other materials, including marking criteria.

The list of modules I was given did not indicate that some were not running this year, nor was I told that some doubled up as MA modules. This kind of basic information in advance would have avoided some of the later confusion.

It was not clear to me until the day before the Board which dissertations I should be looking at, as the submissions are not grouped by degree cohort on Turnitin. It does become difficult to assess the overall performance by CMS students on the dissertation – and to compare it to the performance on other programmes - without access to a dedicated array of marks.

23. I did, eventually, get access to the relevant module materials. It took a lot of email traffic to get access to Minerva, and then a great deal more to get access to the relevant information on the module sites. I was not given instructions about how to access the scripts until I requested it. I was then given contradictory advice about whether I should review the moderation sample or generate my own sample. The EE Handbook is good

for regulations, but does not include practical instructions, so it is important that some of this information is provided at the outset.

It would be very helpful to be told when materials are ready for review (ideally at the point where the marking and moderation is completed, with the reports uploaded), although I realise this was a problem exacerbated by staff absence this year.

I would note that there is a lot of variation in terms of handbooks – some simply list one reading per week (without even full bibliographic details); others are extremely fulsome, and used as a site to provide learning resources and inspiration. The use of Minerva varies a lot, too. Variety is good, but some attempt to meet within these two extremes might be advisable in terms of managing staff workloads and student expectations.

24. The marking criteria are detailed and appropriate, but there seems to be no standard practice in publishing them in module guides and Minerva sites. The only grading criteria I have seen relate to written work. The feedback only in rare instances refers explicitly to the published marking criteria.
27. Having made comments on a couple of exam papers, I was not sent the revised versions, so I can't assess the arrangements to consider my comments, other than to say that I was sent the papers very late in the day. I did not see the exam paper or the scripts for the paper (ARTF3034) where I had made substantive suggestions.
28. It was very helpful to have access to all the module submissions via Turnitin. I did not get to see the exam scripts nor the dissertations until the day before the Board.

I was concerned that the exam scripts had been over generously marked on ARTF2047 (e.g. short and superficial answers graded in the first class band; a 10 line response graded at 55%; feedback acknowledging key elements left unaddressed, but still awarded first class grades); but with the Board meeting the following day there was no time to follow the recommendations (3.1.7 in the EE Handbook) to review these marks.

For these reasons, it would be useful to see exam scripts in advance next year, even if this means sending them through the post. It would also make better use of my time in Leeds to meet more of the faculty and to have more of a chance to talk about the individual modules.

In terms of the dissertations, I understand why staff prefer to mark these in hard copy, even though the students submit online. I was told that new procedures were introduced this year which made the process even more labour intensive. You might want to consider using Turnitin to upload the summative feedback, even if marginal comments are done on hard copies. This might help with the internal marking process, access to feedback; and enable the External to review the dissertations in advance of the Board

29. Please refer to comments under 17 above.
30. The range of topics on the dissertations was appropriate and demonstrate that the programme supports the study of a wide spectrum of cultural forms. There was not a great deal of variety in terms of research methods, which is something the team could perhaps keep under review, particularly in terms of distinguishing a dissertation from an extended essay. Some titles were impossibly broad, e.g. 'The effect of the internet on social behaviour' or 'Music and Fashion', while others were focused on a single text. For a BA in Culture and Media, the range of media studied was rather limited; there is a clear emphasis on film. Similarly, where students do write about media, they seem more comfortable in applying critical theory to a media object, rather than engaging with contemporary media research and media theory. This is not necessarily a criticism – but is something that the team on this joint degree should keep under review. My only other general comment would be that there was not a great deal of self-reflexivity in the work that I saw – in other words, positioning themselves in relation to their objects of study rather than adopting a universalising voice (the use of an abstracted 'we', in particular).
31. The double marking of the dissertations is certainly very good practice, albeit labour intensive; but where there are significant disagreements between internal markers – a difference of 10% or more, for example - I would recommend that a third marker be involved as a matter of course. There was one case where the discrepancy was two whole classification bands, but even this was not referred to a third marker. The comments on how a compromise grade is reached should refer directly to the grading criteria.
- I would note that I was given contradictory advice about whether to sample scripts across a whole module, or focus on CMS students in particular. In the end, I was given the CMS dissertations to review on the day before the Board.
32. See previous answers for suggestions for improvements to smooth the process, but the arrangements were, in all significant ways, satisfactory.

34. The Board was run efficiently, professionally, and with good humour. I am satisfied with the recommendations it made.
35. The Special Circumstances were communicated with due discretion. However, I was surprised to hear tutors bringing in information about individuals in relation to some of the borderline cases. While on the one hand, this demonstrated a high level of care for the students, it was not clear to me how the Board manages such cases where individual students do not happen to have an advocate in the room. I assume those tutors who spoke were programme leaders who had access to information on the whole cohort, but it wasn't clear to me at the time.

#### Other comments

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

Although I have raised a number of issues in this report, I should make it clear that the overwhelming impression I have is of a distinctive, challenging and flexible degree where the students are working to a very high standard, taught by dedicated tutors and well supported by professional services staff. The examination systems are robust and the programme as a whole compares very favourably with similar programmes elsewhere. Moreover, despite the various problems I have encountered in accessing the information I needed, I would like to thank all the staff at Leeds who at all stages have been very understanding, patient and helpful in their communications with me.

**Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)**

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Programme(s) / Module(s):

Cultural and Media Studies

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

Title and Name of Responder:

Position\*:

Programme Manager

Faculty / School of:

Fine Art, History of Art & Cultural Studies

Address for communication:

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) must be sent directly to the External Examiner. A copy must also be emailed to the Quality Assurance Team at [gat@leeds.ac.uk](mailto: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 take note that appreciated signs of innovation in terms of modular content (engaging with current affairs) and forms of assessment (exploring modes- such as digital storytelling- other than the traditional essay form). We will continue to be open to such new possibilities for teaching and learning.

**Response to Enhancements made from the previous year**

Last year we did respond to our previous External Examiner's remarks about introducing a more transparent and systematically implemented form of moderation. In the light of remarks, it is apparent that yet more needs to be done in this area.

**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:

does not highlight Matters for Urgent Attention

**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:

Re: 7. Our previous External examiner was very diligent and most constructive when it came to giving feedback on our work around the Exam Board period, but had difficulty thereafter writing up Report, despite repeated requests.



## 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:*

Re: 12 is right to draw attention to how strange it is for , as an External Examiner of CMS, not to know anything about the media side of the programme (and indeed not to see all the modules that our students take within the School). Maybe this is a situation that is not necessarily problematic -given that this work is moderated by other Externals- but it is to be noted that for our CMS External maybe more of a sense of what is being taught elsewhere as part of this degree should be given, so that can more roundly assess the students' experience.

## 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 should note that for the first time an External is asking us to consider using the lower bands (65 or under) and has also noted a bunching around the mid-70s with many scripts being awarded in the 80s. In previous years, we were at once commended on our rigour, yet advised to range more widely upwards (for reasons of parity with other institutions). It now seems that some work that is only of satisfactory standard, or below, is being overgenerously assessed.

## 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 our full intention that the problems evoked by in relation to systems management- gaining access to Turnitin, receiving information and work in a timely fashion- will not recur next year.

Re: 28. Overgenerous marking on ARTF2047 (Image Music Text) is an issue raised that requires consideration, especially given that we as a team are often encouraged by our External Examiners to be more generous in our grading. The concern was also raised that students could repeat the same material for their essay and their exam.

Re: 31. The wide discrepancy across bands between the dissertation markers mentioned by is indeed an instance where a third marker should be appealed to. We should investigate why this was not the case. Also the contradiction information given about the composition of the sample was being asked to consider should be clarified.

## Other comments

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

We would like to thank for diligence, helpful comments and understanding and patience: as mentions, there were indeed problems gaining access to the information, systems and work needed. We will do our best to avoid this situation next year and we look forward to second year as our External Examiner.