

The University of Leeds

EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 19/12/2019

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

Geography

Subject(s):

Geography

Programme(s) / Module(s):

MSc in River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS
 GEOG5042M Geographic Data Visualisation and Analysis
 GEOG5230M Professional Development
 GEOG5285M Dissertation
 GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management
 GEOG5680M Hydrological Processes
 GEOG5060M GIS and Environment
 GEOG5530M River Basin Management for Water Quality
 GEOG5710M Digital Image Processing
 GEOG5790M Programming for Geographic Information Analysis: Advanced
 GEOG5830M Environmental Assessment
 GEOG5990M Programming for Geographic Information Analysis: Core Skills
MSc in Environmental Water Consultancy (additional to the above):
 GEOG5679M Water Consultancy: Contract Development
 GEOG5689M: Project Management

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

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.

Both the programmes have significant levels of innovation and good practice embedded throughout the degrees. The focus on key skills demanded within both the environment sector and research careers is apparent in both programmes, with evidence of excellent attainment of students in high level GIS skills, hydrological analysis and modelling, field survey methods and multivariate statistics. A notable highlight for the applied nature of the skills is the placement in Professional Development (GEOG5285M) which had an associated substantive piece of coursework. The placements offered included an impressive range of relevant organisations with some genuine novelty in the projects the students worked on at these end users. The Environmental Water Consultancy programme offers two modules (GEOG5679M & GEOG5689M) on project management and contract development delivered by an external organisation (JBA Consulting). This provision is particularly novel, challenging and offers skills and experience likely to be of significant benefit to graduate employability that are not commonly encountered in Geography / Environmental MSc provision in the UK to the best of my knowledge.

Notwithstanding some of the minor comments below, the approach to assessment, moderation and module evaluation is generally excellent. There is a challenging suite of relevant assessments for the breadth of skills covered in the programmes, and clear engagement of staff in moderation and review processes to enhance material and student experience on a continuous basis.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

Based on previous student demand, additional sessions were convened for students on both MSc programmes on flood modelling. These were delivered by an external company (Capita) and provided students with an overview of flood modelling approaches used in industry. Although this caused some subsequent student disquiet (see section 19), the sessions further expanded the involvement of practitioners within the programme and is to be commended for enhancing the student experience.

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

For Examiners completing their term of appointment

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 the second year I have looked at these programmes and there has been expansion of provision (see points on external practitioner-led hydraulic modelling classes elsewhere) which have enhanced the programme and potentially improved student employability. The broader moderation process adopted across the school remains excellent and there are clear examples of improvements on a module-by-module basis based on this process. More broadly, it was positive to see a decline in the AI cases apparent last year. It may well be that the improved feedback and guidance provided on early written assessments this year (see below) has assisted here. Some other minor issues remain in terms of consistency of materials on Minerva and marking criteria that could be better tailored for specific skills-based tasks. While student satisfaction has declined (see section 19), I saw nothing within the module material to suggest any obvious drivers of this within the curriculum. Discussion with student representatives seemed to suggest it was perceptions among the cohort that attached particular importance to skills they had a brief taster of without realising the relevance and value (for employability) of the skills they learn in depth throughout the programme. A lack of Student-Staff Committee dialogue may have prompted this. My overall impression of the programmes and standards achieved is excellent. The programmes continue to lead the way in MSc provision for students going into the water/environment sector. One student comment summed this up quite nicely saying: "the skills I learned in this module led to a job offer." The skills provision across both programmes remains outstanding and I look forward to seeing this continue next 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
<p><i>Please use this box to explain your overall impression of the programme structure, design, aims and intended learning outcomes.</i></p> <p>Both programmes are well designed and the intended learning outcomes are relevant, distinctive and well-crafted. An excellent array of assessments are apparent across the modules in both programmes that test the learning outcomes and furnish students with a range of high level skills relevant for careers in the environmental sector and research settings. The Environmental Water Consultancy programme offers distinctive provision in two core modules delivered by externals that offers relevant experience of key consultancy skills.</p>		
13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
<p><i>Please explain how this is/could be achieved (examples might include: curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research)</i></p> <p>The research strengths of the School of Geography at Leeds are clearly embedded throughout the programmes and are particularly evident in the dissertation (GEOG5285M) module. The breadth of research opportunities afforded to students in the 2018/2019 session was particularly impressive, both in terms of the subject matter that covered a range of major contemporary environmental issues (e.g. Natural Flood Management, microplastic pollution, glacial retreat, water resource pressures) and the type of research projects offered (e.g. laboratory experiments, field-based monitoring, computer modelling / GIS-based problems and qualitative data-based projects). As per the previous year, staff in the school should be commended on this breadth of opportunity and endeavour to continue such provision for future cohorts.</p>		
14.	Does the programme form part of an Integrated PhD?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the appropriateness of the programme as training for a PhD:</i></p>		
15.	Does the programme include clinical practice components?	N
<p><i>Please comment on the learning and assessment of practice components of the curriculum here:</i></p>		
16.	Is the programme accredited by a Professional or Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB)?	Y
<p><i>Please comment on the value of, and the programme's ability to meet, PSRB requirements here:</i></p> <p>Both programmes are accredited by the Chartered Institution for Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM). CIWEM are the most relevant body to have involved with accreditation given subject matter and they feed directly into course delivery which develops core skills and nurtures Continued Professional Development amongst the cohort. This involvement is to be commended and clearly many students are engaging with CIWEM judging by the nature of placements (in GEOG5230M), dissertation project subject matter and comments made during student consultations. The involvement of practitioners both in timetabled sessions and informally across both programmes is a major strength of the programmes and provides students with both knowledge and CPD opportunities.</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>Both programmes contain an innovative range of appropriate coursework elements to ensure key programme learning outcomes are attained. Some points of note on specifics of the assessment process are provided below:</p>		

Moderation – the moderating process is very well designed at Leeds and offers clear evidence of continuous evaluation and improvement of the teaching provision. There were examples where the process was very well engaged with by staff with clear action points for improvement (e.g. GEOG5680M, GEOG5060M).

Recommendation: Best practice is apparent in the moderation process. If it is not already (I couldn't see evidence of previous years recommendations being communicated to students at first glance but it may happen within lectures), then means of communicating the outcomes of the moderation/MEQ review process to students at the start of modules would be useful for closing the loop on the evaluation and improvement process.

Marking criteria – it was difficult for some modules to find marking criteria within Minerva. Generally, they were present in the module handbooks or reference to generic School marking criteria were given. As with last year, there are occasions where the generic marking criteria could be better tailored to specific tasks, particularly in modules where there are skills-based assessments (e.g. worksheet exercises) and those with external teaching staff who may not be familiar with the standard School grade descriptors.

Recommendation: Consider tailoring marking criteria more explicitly for these very different styles of assessment (particularly where external markers are used) that appear in some of the modules.

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:

Dissertations – As a capstone module for both degrees, the Dissertation (GEOG5285M) offers an excellent reflection of student attainment and their integration of skills from across the programme. I looked at all the dissertations across the RBD+MwGIS and EWC programmes and as with last year, I was impressed with the breadth of subject matter and type of investigations that were supported by the teaching team (see comments above). The overall performance across the cohort was consistent with other modules across the programmes (mean of 65; median 65; min 45; max 78) with a typical spread of marks:

Mark	Number of awards
80+	0
70-79	4
60-69	9
50-59	3
Other	1 (fail)

This is consistent with the previous year, and having viewed all the dissertations, I would wholeheartedly endorse the marks awarded. There were some excellent dissertations across a range of subjects (notably on Natural Flood Management effectiveness and ecological benefits, microplastic pollution pathways and peat cover estimates) which showcased an impressive suite of high level skills in experimental design, GIS, field sampling, modelling and statistical analysis in places. Clearly the opportunities afforded by the teaching team are allowing the most capable students to flourish. The bulk of students who performed in the Merit and the Pass region of the marking criteria were seemingly performing at levels consistent or above the rest of the programme (from looking across module marks spreadsheets). There was one student who failed the dissertation. I was asked to look at this in advance of the exam board (and in advance of seeing feedback from markers) and marked it according to the criteria in exactly the same classification as the two markers, where the majority of grade descriptors were met. The classification awarded in this case was very-much justified and the marksheets detailed this very clearly. The performance of the student was very-much consistent with the mark profile across the programme (again, this was difficult to work through on Minerva) where good performance was only consistent in group or skills-based assessments.

Feedback on the dissertations follows a slightly different process to other modules and there is no module level moderation seemingly. The marks were however well-justified in the blind marker sheets.

Recommendations:

- Maintaining the breadth of opportunity and current support for students with a view to refreshing and expanding opportunities based on research interests in the school will be key to keeping levels of attainment in this key module.
- From an external point of view, it would be useful to access the dissertation feedback and marksheets via Minerva in advance of the exam board. I appreciate the time constraints on this however.

- It may also be worth considering formally assigning a second supervisor for each of the dissertations to overcome some of the student disquiet (see point about student experience below) about staff availability in summer months. While this would not guarantee staff availability, it may help ease concerns in some cases.
- One of the outstanding dissertations was a qualitative assessment of perceptions of Natural Flood Management schemes amongst a range of stakeholders. This was a really innovative study, but the analysis could have been expanded. I can't seem to find evidence of provision in the skills module for qualitative data analysis. It may be worth considering a session or two on qualitative data collection / management / analysis (e.g. NVivo etc.). Given management is a key component of the programmes and many modern environmental management initiatives are multi-stakeholder partnership approaches, offering skills in gathering and analysing qualitative data may further enhance the skillsets and potential employability of the students.

Academic Integrity (AI) issues Given the academic integrity issues that were apparent last year quite late in the MSc courses, it is encouraging to see a positive response this year. The marking for the first written assignment in semester 1 (WFD essay) was very supportive in guiding students towards good scholarly practice which is key for those students returning to academia after time away or those from different HE systems. Where there were AI issues, these were generally in early assignments and it appears that the process was supportive to students in stopping recurrent issues. There were some inconsistencies in how poor scholarship and plagiarism were flagged on Minerva. In Issues and Skills, there was one flagged AI case, yet the same student had a similar issue in an earlier assignment in the same module that wasn't flagged that appeared to be more obvious at first glance.

Recommendation: Obviously, it's difficult to generalise from a single case, but a standard approach to flagging AI cases on Minerva would help in demonstrating consistency is being applied across assignments.

Student experience During the visit for the final progression board I was made aware of the recent fall in the PGTS overall satisfaction for the RBD+MwGIS programme (from >90% to <60% if I recall correctly). I was asked by the teaching team to speak with one of the 2018/19 cohort who had collated some feedback from their peers. This was instructive given there wasn't an opportunity to speak with students as a group as there was in 17/18. A range of issues were raised that included (a) availability of supervisors during the summer dissertation period (see point above), (b) confusion on guidance for assignments (marking criteria and consistency of word count rules), (c) problems (and costs) associated with printing hard copies of dissertations, and (d) a desire for more time spent on hydraulic modelling and coding.

- A particular thread of concern related to this final point and the additional sessions on flood management (Capita sessions detailed above), which were well-received by the students, but seemingly gave them an appetite for more. The students appeared to attach an unduly high degree of importance to hydraulic modelling approaches for their employability (seemingly above many of the other excellent and useful skills they develop in the programme).
- The confusion on assignment marking criteria and word count rules may in part relate to recent changes in rules, as I understand, that may have taken some of the students continuing from undergraduate programmes by surprise.
- The issue of hard copy submission is easy to rectify and I'm not sure there is a clear rationale for why hard copies are still required.
- Most of the issues raised didn't appear to be out of the ordinary for any programme and look straight-forward enough to manage (see points above). It was noteworthy from talking to the PD that there has not been any genuine engagement from students in the student-staff committees this year.

Recommendation: Encouraging more student-staff dialogue throughout the programme is key and I know the PD and team are aware of this already. It has clearly been difficult to get students to commit to engaging in SSC despite the efforts of the PD, but continuing dialogue could help limit the complaints at the conclusion of the programme. As an outside observer, the only changes in provision this year were to enhance exposure to practitioner skills and boost employability, i.e. what should be overwhelmingly positive developments for the student experience! Both programmes have excellent procedures for demonstrating continuous improvement (through moderation and MEQ response in particular) so staff should make the most of this through communicating this to students in-session. If SSC continues to be problematic even with additional drives for recruitment of student reps, then noticeboards in visible places with MEQ responses or "you said, we did" sessions at the start of each module may help in showing students how their modules are in improving and also demonstrate why they need the skills they are being taught.

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

N/A

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?	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?	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:

Note point (27) and (29): both programmes are assessed in their entirety via coursework so these points do not apply.

Note point (28) and (32): I am really grateful to _____ for helping facilitate access to the Minerva VLE in advance of the exam board. As with all VLEs however, the system was quite challenging to navigate, particularly where there were inconsistencies in module site set-up and modes of feedback (see previous comments). Access to student module evaluation questionnaires (as per the previous year) was very slow via Minerva (some took >5 minutes to load, some did not load at all) that it became unworkable to view all MEQs unfortunately. If there was an alternative system for communicating the MEQ data in advance of the exam boards that would be very useful.

Other comments

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

I'd like to thank _____ for their help and assistance in providing access to all the materials. The meeting with the student representative organised by _____ was particularly useful and provided real insight into the teaching and learning approaches in these programmes.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Geography

Programme(s) / Module(s):

MSc in River Basin Dynamics and Management with GIS
 GEOG5042M Geographic Data Visualisation and Analysis
 GEOG5230M Professional Development
 GEOG5285M Dissertation
 GEOG5670M Issues and Skills for River Basin Dynamics and Management
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 GEOG5530M River Basin Management for Water Quality
 GEOG5710M Digital Image Processing
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 GEOG5830M Environmental Assessment
 GEOG5990M Programming for Geographic Information Analysis: Core Skills
 MSc in Environmental Water Consultancy (additional to the above):
 GEOG5679M Water Consultancy: Contract Development
 GEOG5689M: Project Management

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

MSc/PGDip

Title and Name of Responder:

Position:*

Head of School

Faculty / School of:

Geography

Address for communication:

School of Geography
 University of Leeds
 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 qat@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 greatly appreciate the external examiners very positive comments on innovation and good practice in both programmes, including students' excellent attainment in a wide range of skills and the applied nature of the courses, particularly the Professional Development module. It was pleasing to see the novelty of the modules taught in conjunction with JBA highlighted and their significance for employability. It is also very reassuring that our practices in assessment, moderation and module evaluation were seen as very robust.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

The external examiner's comments commending the provision of additional flood modelling work by Capita and the benefits to students are very welcome. Although this caused some disquiet amongst students, as they subsequently requested additional provision of this material, we reflect that they ultimately saw the benefit of having received the extra tuition.

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:

NA

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:

It is very reassuring that the external examiner sees the two programmes as leading the way in MSc provision in the water/environment sector. Also, that improvements made in moderation and checking of AI have had an impact. Some points were raised that need to be addressed in the current and following years:

- Despite reluctance again from students to spend time on the staff-student committee, we were able to secure a course rep this year who has contributed to discussions very positively. This should improve passage of information between the School and students.
- Our School Taught Student Education Committee (STSEC) will consider providing a more diverse range of marking criteria to cover all of the assessments used and will encourage consistency of materials on Minerva.
- The reduced student satisfaction which resulted from providing additional flood modelling tuition has been discussed with the current cohort who were very positive about this extra provision and were able to see how it fits amongst the wider curriculum.

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:

We appreciate the external examiner's very positive comments about standards on the two programmes, including the skills taught and assessed, the involvement of external organisations and linkages with CIWEM.

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:

Several points were raised which will be addressed in the following ways:

- STSEC will consider making summaries of module moderations available to students.
- The programme leader and STSEC will consider developing additional marking criteria where existing ones do not cover particular assessments very well. All work marked by external organisations is second marked by the programme leader to ensure that standards are consistent with the University.
- Teaching staff will continue to offer an exciting and cutting-edge range of dissertation topics to ensure that students continue to flourish.
- STSEC will consider making dissertation mark sheets available via Minerva.

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:

STSEC will consider making MEQ student feedback data available prior to exam boards given the difficulties in accessing this via Minerva. Staff will also be reminded to populate Minerva in a consistent fashion across modules.

Other comments

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