

The University of Leeds
EXTERNAL EXAMINER'S REPORT

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018-19

QAT Received 28/11/2019

Part A: General Information

Subject area and awards being examined

Title and Name of Examiner:

Faculty / School of:

Social Sciences

Subject(s):

Sociology

Programme(s) / Module(s):

Society, Media & Culture

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.

This is an original and engaging degree, which builds directly on staff expertise in media and cultural studies in order to approach these topics from a specifically Sociological angle. As such, the Society, Media & Culture programme achieves something unique in its framing, which offers something distinct from other comparable MA programmes that come more from a 'purely' media studies tradition. As a side note: I've noticed that even programmes in other Sociology departments have started to take more of a Media Studies approach, whereas this stays true its Sociology & Cultural Studies roots – which befitting of the department as well as ensuring the programme is distinctive. Modules such as Sociology of Media and Culture, for instance, offered a good sense of what's specifically *sociological* about the course as a whole (i.e. what differentiates it from Media) as well as what the relationship between Media Studies and Sociology is. Likewise, modules focused on Reality Television and Researching Inequalities offered an in-depth sense of how some of the most important political and ethical concerns from a Sociological perspective, could relate to the contemporary media landscape.

My main feeling (detailed in more depth below in relevant sections) is that the degree's design has an innovative focus in enabling students to explore and develop their own original project and essay ideas, thus providing important scaffolding for final dissertations. E.g. at various points in the programme students were encouraged to develop mini research projects (Researching Inequalities), or connect theories engaged with on the course to media in their own national context (Reality TV). This approach is invaluable in developing students' conceptual and research skills, as well as the independent thinking necessary at MA level.

Enhancements made from the previous year

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

N/A (first year as external)

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

N/A – a couple of issues emerged during the exam board with module components, but I am sure these are being dealt with after speaking with relevant staff members.

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

Please comment on your experience of the programme(s) over the period of your appointment, remarking in particular on changes from year to year and the progressive development and enhancement of the learning and teaching provision, on standards achieved, on marking and assessment and the procedures of the School

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 programme was comparable to programmes at similar institutions, but the learning objectives and overarching programme design applied a specifically Sociological to the study of Media and Culture (as described above). I felt the structure of the programme was good (focusing on research methods in the first semester, followed by more specialised modules). The modules also complemented one another well, covering core skills as well as contemporary issues in Sociology and Media (e.g. the nature of 'reality' in contemporary television, globalization and the media, inequalities). The fact that this is a relatively new degree with large numbers of students will inevitably generate a few teething problems, as touched on in individual informal module feedback and the exam board, but the way the programme has been put together should ameliorate some of the more difficult issues I have seen on programmes at other institutions (where students have struggled to attain the necessary skills to prepare them for dissertations). It's always a challenge to put together programmes like this, so I commend staff for their work on creating what – from an external perspective – seems like a both a coherent and a distinctive MA programme.

13.	Is the influence of research on the curriculum and learning and teaching clear?	Y
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Please explain how this is/could be achieved (examples might include: curriculum design informed by current research in the subject; practice informed by research; students undertaking research)

The department has such as strong reputation in Cultural Studies and Gender Studies that I was hoping to see capitalised on in the programme, so it was good to see that this was the case. Evidence of the relationship between staff members' research and the programme was very clear. Staff highlighted their research interests at the start of handbooks and modules were tailored to ensure these interests informed appropriate MA level study, e.g. staff expertise in celebrity, gender, and cultural theory had clearly informed the Reality TV module but the materials were also presented in an accessible way that students could relate to their own experiences and cultural context. Please note: While I've just picked this one module as an example, I want to emphasise that I felt all modules seemed to have a similar research-led focus, which was good to see.

The programme as a whole also moved students toward doing their own research, by framing module content in a way that offered guidance not just about particular themes or topics themselves but how to actually develop research related to that theme/topic. For instance, the Inequalities module was not just about how inequalities are depicted in the media but focused on how to *research* this issue. I was impressed that the assessment of the module allowed the stronger students to develop their own mini-research projects as an alternative to the essay. Likewise, the Sociology of Media module enabled students to understand how different textual and audience research based methods can be undertaken. These modules were in addition to the core research methods module, where students began to develop their own dissertation project ideas.

I was impressed at the higher end of the marking spectrum that this scaffolding in research skills and development resulted in some original research projects in students' final dissertations, with even slightly weaker students seeming to grasp what a research project actually was and that original research was required (even if this wasn't always executed as well as it could be).

Moving forward, I felt that the only thing holding students back slightly was out of staff control somewhat: the majority of students seemed very bright, engaged, and hard-working, but some students were let down in realising some of their ideas by language skills and other basic study skills. From speaking to staff and the director of learning & teaching though, it sounds like there is increasing scope to embed study support into the programme still further, to offer students much-needed support without putting further burden on the staff teaching on it – something that I think will be increasingly important if the degree continues to expand (as seems likely).

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.

All assessments seem appropriate and align with the aims of their respective modules, as well as speaking to the overarching aim of the programme (to explore media from a specifically Sociological perspective). As above, I felt it was important that students were given flexibility to be original and develop essay/project ideas that met their own research interests. The range of assessments is also good, including posters, essays where students were encouraged to apply theory in original ways, mini-research projects, and research proposals.

In general I felt all marks were awarded fairly. I did have a few small comments about a couple of issues: e.g. some wording of module components, the awarding of marks at the higher and lower end of the spectrum, and about the

formatting/parity of feedback (which varied very, very slightly). Any concerns of this nature were dealt with via informal comments that I left in relation to specific modules and I feel satisfied with the responses I received in person from staff at the exam board. In general feedback was clearer and more helpful than I've often seen elsewhere.

The most important thing is that I felt that all final awards were given very fairly and I was impressed with the running of the exam board in particular to ensure fairness (see below).

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:

Student standards were definitely comparable to other MA courses I've seen, in relation to similar cohorts of students at similar Russell Group institutions. A couple of modules had high numbers of fails, which was a pity, and mostly seemed to be due to some language issues leading to confusion (as above, it sounds like students will be getting further support with this in the future).

In terms of students themselves: At the upper end of the cohort there were some strong students who produced original work about topical issues in Media and Cultural Studies throughout the course. As I've described elsewhere, even at the lower end the students mostly seem very bright, intelligent, and motivated but pedagogical and linguistic challenges meant that some students struggled to attain the necessary standard for MA level work. I would like to stress though that these issues are shared by similar cohorts of students I've seen and staff here seem to be taking a pro-active approach to monitoring and acting on issues that arise.

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

As I am broadly happy and feel overall marks are fair, I don't need to make any further comments here but did leave some informal written feedback related to issues that I felt staff could discuss further amongst themselves – that can perhaps be revisited informally again next year in advance of the exam board.

On a minor note: To ensure greater parity of feedback length and lessen the burden on staff, I wonder if guidance that directs students to learning resources etc (which is incredibly useful and currently included in some people's individual feedback) could perhaps be sent to the cohort as a whole rather than typed separately on essays – even if this sort of material is cut & pasted it can take time to do this. In addition, some modules had students who made the same typographical/citation errors etc; while it wouldn't be possible to flag up these issues separately on individual essays (as the amount of time it would take would be overwhelming), a general email outlining common mistakes could perhaps be sent to the whole cohort at the same time as marks are released. This might save time in the long run.

The Progression and Awards Process

20.	Were you provided with guidance relating to the External Examiner's role, powers and responsibilities in the examination process?	Y
21.	Was the progression and award guidance provided sufficient for you to act effectively as an External Examiner?	Y
22.	Did you receive appropriate programme documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
23.	Did you receive appropriate module documentation for your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
24.	Did you receive full details of marking criteria applicable to your area(s) of responsibility?	Y
25.	Were you provided with all draft examination papers/assessments?	N [this may have been due to when I started]

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 [see 25]
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

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

I was particularly impressed with the thorough way the exam board dealt with two module components that could have negatively affected student marks. Marks were looked at for all students this could have affected, even though this took time, and marks were awarded fairly and consistently. I was very impressed with how fairly a (quite tricky) situation of this nature was handled and felt it reflected the overall care and attention given to ensuring due process was followed.

Other comments

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

This is quite a new and evolving area of study in the school, with a large intake of international students who have not necessarily had experience in the subject or with certain teaching and learning methods before. Having spoken to various staff members, people seem very aware of the potential challenges posed by these developments (for both staff and students). I was impressed in particular by the commitment shown by the director of learning and teaching, who seems to be taking a very proactive role in monitoring the situation to maintain quality.

Overall, I just wanted to commend both staff teaching on the degree and the DLT for their work as this looks like a great programme. Likewise, thank you to the programme administrator for making the externalling process so straight-forward, as all materials were made available in a very timely and accessible way.

Name of School and Head of School (or nominee)

Title and Name of Examiner:

Subject(s):

Programme(s) / Module(s):

Society, Media & Culture

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

MA

Title and Name of Responder:

Position*:

Director of Student Education

Faculty / School of:

Sociology & Social Policy

Address for communication:

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) must be sent 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

Thank you for recognising our attempts to ensure that the dissertation is provide with careful scaffolding, we have recognised the challenges that this module places upon students and our monitoring it carefully. It is pleasing that you recognise that the programme has maintained a sociological identity, whilst some of competitors have not – this is central to our plans and important to the student experience we wish to deliver year-on-year.

Response to Enhancements made from the previous year

N/A

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:

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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:

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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:

Thank you for detailed comments, and understanding that a new programme of this scale will have teething problems. I am particularly pleased with your assessment all students have been supported to produce a coherent research project. We are exploring further and deeper collaboration with the language centre to extend our study skills support offer.

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:

I note your comments about variety of the length of feedback and will reiterate to colleagues the importance of parity. Your suggestion of increased utilisation of group feedback in addition to individually tailored feedback is very helpful and I will pass this suggestion on to colleagues.

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:

Thank you for recognising the care in which we dealt with specific issues on modules that good of detrimentally effected classifications.

Other comments

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