

MA Town and Regional Planning 2017/18

External Examiner's report summary

Please indicate in the relevant boxes below whether you agree with the statements about the threshold standards of Leeds Beckett University's awards, student achievement and the conduct of the University's assessment processes, using as a reference the framework for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements / Qualification Characteristic Statements.

Please also list any shortcomings and areas for commendation. You should expand on any issues you mention here in the main report. If any boxes are ticked "No" the Dean of School or nominee will be alerted and will oversee the response from the Course Director.

Standards set		
	Yes	No
"In my view, the threshold academic standards set for the modules/awards are appropriate."	X	
If your answer is 'no', please provide a brief statement (bullet points) of the respect(s) in which they fall short.		

Student achievement			
	Yes	No	N/A *
"In my view, students' achievement is comparable with similar course(s) or subjects in other UK institutions with which I am familiar."	X		
Please provide any further comment on the comparability of collaborative provision.			
* Not applicable – if you are a practitioner and are not in a position to assess this please indicate here.			
If your answer is 'no', please provide a brief statement (bullet points) of the respect(s) in which they fall short.			

Conduct of processes		
	Yes	No
"In my view, the processes for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are rigorous and fairly conducted."	X	
If your answer is 'no', please provide a brief statement (bullet points) of the respect(s) in which they fall short.		

Areas of good practice
Any particular strengths or distinctive or innovative features in relation to learning, teaching and assessment.
I say more below, but in brief: students are well supported, material is well organised and challenging.

Main report

In this section you are asked to describe more fully how the University has or has not maintained threshold academic standards and the quality of the student experience in relation to the course(s) for which you are the external examiner, using as a reference the framework for higher education qualifications and applicable Subject Benchmark Statements / Qualification Characteristic Statements.

Please complete all sections of the form fully and where not applicable please state N/A. Where applicable please also complete the sections for any collaborative provision sampled.

If you are an external examiner for any of the University's Pearson Licensed Centre Programmes (HND/HNC level) provision, please also complete the section on page 9 sections l, m and n entitled "for External Examiners Associated with Pearson Licensed Centre Programmes."

Professional Body Requirements			
"In my view, the professional body requirements for this course have been met. <i>*Not applicable if the course is not a professional body course please indicate here.</i>	Yes	No	N/A *
	X		
<i>If your answer is 'no', please provide a brief statement (bullet points) of the respect(s) in which they fall short.</i>			

(a) The operation and conduct of the Progression and Award Board (and/or Module Board meeting you may also have attended).
Every board I have attended as External Examiner for the TPLAN has been conducted to highest professional standard by all participants. In addition, the administration upon which the Board rests has been exemplary and I am very grateful for it.

(b) The action, if any was required, taken in response to your report of last year. (This will not be relevant if you are examining for the first time.)
Incremental improvements were made in line with my suggestions from last year (where possible) and the module leaders and programme directors are very responsive and reflective in their practice.

(c) The overall performance of the students, in relation to that of comparable levels of work in other institutions.
I am familiar with the work of students across a number of institutions and I can say with certainty that what I have seen at Leeds Beckett University is comparable with other places. The very best students here are excellent and they are challenged to develop and their talents are nurtured throughout the year. This applies also to the whole range of students on the TPLAN, as evidenced in many cases between Semester 1 and 2 performance.

(d) The strengths and weaknesses of the students in general with respect to knowledge, conceptual grasp or application of skills.

From reading the work in a variety of modules, and particularly the Dissertation (supported by the Research Methods module) it is clear to me that students are often weaker in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the links between theory and practice, yet this is not a major concern for me. It is a common feature of such courses, particularly when people come from different disciplinary backgrounds. There are, thankfully, many more strengths than weaknesses on display among the TPLAN student body. For example, the work of students in Managing Places and Spaces and (e.g.) the Group Reports for Strategic & European Contexts was very impressive in its breadth and depth. Students clearly put a lot of work in and it is clear that staff are making a real difference here, as they are in fact across the board.

(e) The standards of the structure, organisation, design and marking of all examination papers and/or other forms of assessment.

There is much to commend here, so I cannot include it all but I thought it would be useful to pick out one example I was particularly impressed with: the overview guide for the Halifax project for Managing Spaces and Places. Overall in this module there were four out of eleven in the 70+ category and the highest individual component mark was 85. But it is the quality of the work overall, which stems from excellent teaching and the development of critical thinking faculties that really helps here in my view.

The only think I would say here about potential improvements is in that cases of weak students there could be more in the way of guidance on exactly what is needed to improve and how to achieve a better mark and, as a consequence, fully meet the learning objectives. The vast majority of feedback I saw was of a high quality, just a couple of cases where it could have been more detailed for weaker students (though I appreciate also that time is limited).

(f) The curriculum, teaching or resourcing of the programme of study as indicated by the performance of the students in the assessment.

Based on the performance of the students across the programme, I can only come to the conclusion that teaching, resourcing of the programme of study and the general approach to learning and teaching is sound.

(g) Comments on the use of My Beckett (Virtual Learning Environment) within the course (if applicable).

My view on the platform is that it is terrible and I hold this view of my own institution's view of Blackboard technology. You make the best of it but in my opinion the technology used here is very outdated, not fit for purpose, is neither intuitive nor efficient. Frankly, I think the HE sector as a whole is very poor on this front. These comments, however, are not directed at module tutors or programme leaders of the TPLAN but at the institutional arrangements that mean we are saddled with VLEs not fit for purpose in a 21st century learning environment.

So, in summary – you do as good a job as you can with the tools you are given but those tools are not good enough.

(h) Module content, consistency of modules and module assessment across the course and the achievement of learning outcomes. (You may be asked by your School to provide detailed comments on the modules that you examine.)

Dissertation and Dissertation – I thought that the Module Guide for this module was very useful and packed full of detail. It is really good that everything is together like this in one place and I got the sense from looking at the dissertations that it really helps when it comes to writing. Expectations are clearly set out here and clarity is a hallmark. I would like to have seen a bit more guidance on the rationale for the word count/limit and how students should treat it with respect to figures and images because in some cases this was important. In terms of quality, there is a good variety of levels on show here but at the very top end the quality is really good. The Hunt dissertation in particular was very strong. One thing I'd like to see in the feedback sheet is a text box or section explicitly titled 'Specific Areas for Improvement' or suchlike so that it is 100% clear how students can improve. This may only apply to the outline perhaps but this element would be clearer and really help in formative assessment feedback. The information is sort of there right now but could be collated perhaps.

Managing Places & Spaces – a good spread of marks in this module and some really high quality work on display, which is testament to the teaching team – and student engagement. One weaker student here but from what I have read there is not much tutors could have done about this – though, perhaps, there is a way you could think about how to identify weaker students earlier on and use existing structures to help, if at all possible.

Strategic & European Contexts – a good spread of marks in this module also and some very high quality work, for which the tutors and students together should be commended.

Sustainable Communities – I took a closer look at the teaching materials here and was impressed on the whole. I do wonder what some of the students might have made of the Trumpton clip but it's a nice idea. The use of walls as a concept was also very interesting. Overall, very good module here and nice range of marks, which are more varied than the others I looked at – but still some very strong performances.

I looked at a range of other material and, as above, I was impressed with what I saw. There are some minor areas for improvement in relation to clearer feedback for weaker students and helping students understand where they can improve with very specific guidance but overall this is a strong course with good students and excellent teaching staff.

(i) Areas of student/staff engagement in teaching and learning, scholarship, research or professional practice.

Staff/student engagement in learning and teaching, from the evidence I have been presented with, is exactly as it should be. Student expectations are clearly set in relation to learning and teaching and there can be no doubt that staff are well prepared, professional, thoughtful and organised in their professional practice.

(j) The University welcomes external examiners' comments on its academic regulatory framework. Such comments may not have a direct bearing on standards set and achieved or the conduct of processes and so it may not be appropriate to include them elsewhere in this report or its summary. Please record any concerns or comments you may have here.

I have no further comments here. I am pleased with the way this course is run.

(k) Collaborative Provision: please include here any comments you wish to make on elements of collaborative provision for which you have responsibility (in addition to those you may have indicated previously in this report).

For use from March 2017



External Examiners' Report Checklist

Please comment for all boxes

Course Materials				
Did you receive?		Yes	No	N/A
a.	Course Handbook(s)?	X		
b.	Academic Regulations including any Professional Statutory Body requirements where appropriate (these may be included the Course Handbook)?	X		
c.	Module specifications (these may be in the Course Handbook)?	X		
d.	Assessment briefs/marketing criteria?	X		

Draft examination papers				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	(i) Did you receive all the draft papers?	X		
	(ii) If not, was this at your request?			
b.	(i) Was the nature and level of the questions appropriate?	X		
	(ii) If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			
c.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?	X		

Draft coursework				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	(i) Did you receive all the draft coursework?	X		
	(ii) If not, was this at your request?			
b.	(i) Was the nature and level of the coursework appropriate?	X		
	(ii) If not, were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			
c.	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?	X		

Marking Examination Scripts				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	(i) Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts from both home and (if appropriate) collaborative partner students?	X		
	(ii) If you did not receive all the scripts, was the method of selection satisfactory?			
<p>Recommended sample sizes at Leeds Beckett University are as follows:</p> <p>a) Samples should be determined by a square root of cohort size, no smaller than 6, no larger than 15. However it should be borne in mind that not all work is assessed in a way that makes a square root sample possible and allowance should be made. For example in subjects such as the performing arts where there may be a requirement for an external to come and view a performance instead, or to visit the exhibition of art work.</p> <p>b) Samples to include all classification categories, and it is helpful to concentrate around the boundaries to include some fails.</p> <p>c) Samples to consist of internally moderated work, clearly evidencing the moderation process.</p>				
b.	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	X		
c.	Were the scripts marked in such a way to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?	X		

Dissertations/project reports				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	Was the choice of subjects for dissertations appropriate?	X		
b.	Was the method and standard of assessment appropriate?	X		

Coursework/continuously assessed work				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	Was sufficient coursework made available to you for assessment from both home and (if appropriate) collaborative partner students?	X		
b.	Was the method and general standard of marking and consistency satisfactory?	X		

Orals/performances/recitals/appropriate professional placements				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	Were suitable arrangements made for you to conduct orals and/or moderate performances/recitals/appropriate professional placements?			X

Module Board/Progression and Award Boards				
		Yes	No	N/A
a.	Were you able to attend the meetings?		X	
b.	Were the meetings conducted to your satisfaction?	X		
c.	Were you satisfied with the recommendations of the Module Board/Progression and Award Boards?	X		