



## EXTERNAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT FORM

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	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Professor Elaine Sharland		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	University of Sussex		
Programme and / or Subjects Covered by this Report:	MSc Social Science Research Methods		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2012-13	Date of Report:	08.11.2013

For completion by External Examiner in the spaces provided. Please extend spaces where necessary. **Please note this Form will be published online.**

### 1. Programme Structure

The programme as currently configured offers an extensive range of methods based modules, core and optional offered by different schools. It offers a good balance across qualitative and quantitative methods (with some cutting edge elements). I am confident that this provides students with an excellent foundation of core and specialist knowledge and skills in social science research methods. With the exception of some large subject specific modules (BST) of 30 or 15 credits, all others are 10 credit. Offset against the benefits of this diversity are some detriments to coherence, and some inevitable overlaps.

I am aware of plans, in line with wider Masters developments at Cardiff, to introduce a revised structure with 20 credit modules. In the main this is a positive development, should enhance coherence reducing fragmentation and overlap. The progression from foundations to applications should allow sound balance of general social science research knowledge and skills with more advanced and specialist training (including subject specific training that is more research focused than previously). Inevitably, however, with change to larger modules and larger/fewer assignments, some of the diversity of methodological coverage in research training that is distinctive and valuable will be lost. I would encourage the programme to minimise this loss. I understand the Application module is intended to be the site for offering a diverse array of specialist methodological teaching and learning; it will be important to ensure that this diversity exists not just at programme level but for individuals learning and development tailored to their research interests and needs.

## **2. Academic Standards**

The standards of the programme are comparable with equivalent, prestige Masters programmes offered by other Doctoral Training Centres. Student performance likewise seems comparable, with the expected normal distribution of achievement, some examples of very high quality work indeed, and a few outliers struggling to achieve Masters level.

## **3. The Assessment Process**

The assessments seen were predominantly essays, with some elements of practical assignment, and a portfolio of tasks in the case of one module. These were appropriate to the modules involved. In a few, subject specific modules, it was difficult to detect the research methods elements since their focus was on knowledge and understanding of substantive topics (hence my answer to 8.11 below)

As I have shared my role with a Co-External Examiner, I am unable to comment on the overall balance of assignments across the programme, but I understand that there is a greater emphasis on assessed exercises in quantitative methods. Among the assignments I saw, there was a commendable balance between requiring students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the principles of research, with application of these in the process of doing research.

The marking scheme is clear and appropriately calibrated, with clear indicators of quality associated with each band. Learning outcomes are also clear in the case of most modules; for those delivered and assessed in two parts it will be helpful to clarify whether all or some learning outcomes apply to each part. Examiner feedback provided is often very full, sometimes from two markers, giving the students both a clear indication of why they have achieved the mark awarded, and formative guidance for future work. In particular, it is good to see students producing high quality work encouraged to stretch their learning still further. Occasionally it was hard to make sense of markers' feedback, in particular where hand written and hard to read, or where very brief. It would also be helpful consistently to provide feedback in a way that is more directly linked to the learning outcomes (hence my answer to 8.8 below). In the case of just one module (SIT070 Research and Study Skills) there appeared sufficient confusion among several portfolios about the nature of the task set that I queried how well this had been explained during the course. I was reassured that all those attending will have received full explanation.

## **4. Year-on-Year Comments**

This is my first year as External Examiner for the programme – as far as I am aware there have not been significant changes from the previous year. I have had sight of my predecessor's final External Examiner report. This was positive and made no specific recommendations, so there were none to my knowledge to be implemented.

I note that my predecessor highlighted: *“At times the range of courses offered make it difficult for one examiner to comment in detail about all the courses with the same detailed knowledge, on the other hand it helps to allow an oversight.”* I was pleased that the then Director of the Programme, and the University, agreed at my request to appoint a Co-External Examiner, to ensure the appropriate range of expertise could be brought to fulfil the needs of a programme as diverse as this. I would suggest that the compromise to oversight of the whole programme might be mitigated in future by the opportunity for informal discussion between External Examiners, perhaps at a meeting immediately prior to the Exam Board.

## **5. Preparation / Induction Activity (for new External Examiners only)**

There were no induction activities as such. However, the programme was discussed in full with me by the then Director, in advance of my agreement to accept the appointment. I was very well furnished with all relevant documentation before commencing my work, and all responses to my queries have been made in a professional manner.

As a newcomer to the role, I have one or two suggestions for how induction might be enhanced. My suggestions are in no way intended to criticise the professionalism of those involved; I note in particular that there was a change of Programme Director during the course of the year, which inevitably brings administrative challenges and the opportunity for some things to slip through the net. Not having met before either the Programme Director or the Co-External, and being new to the programme itself, the opportunity for an informal 3-way meeting and conversation before the Examination Board meeting would have been very welcome. Additionally, at the Board meeting, it would have been helpful for those participating to be introduced to the new Externals. In the event, only introductions vice versa were made, so the Externals did not know the identifies or roles of most of those with whom we were meeting (hence my answer to 8.18 below).

Two additional administrative suggestions going forward: For an External travelling from some distance (9 hour round-trip in my case) to attend the Examination Board meeting, an offer of overnight accommodation would be welcome. It would also be most helpful to be advised in advance of the date when I could expect to receive scripts to examine. I was well provided with the assignment submission dates for students and dates of the Examination Boards; but it was difficult to elicit the date for receipt of scripts to enable me to plan the work into my diary. One suggestion (a practice I'm familiar with elsewhere) is to publish in the Programme Handbook all dates (for student submission, return of marks by Internal Examiners, sending of scripts/marks to External Examiners, return from Externals, Exam Board), making these transparent to all for purposes of planning.

## **6. Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement**

As noted above, the emphasis on providing students with opportunities both to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of research principles, and to apply these in research practice, is distinctive and commendable.

I was impressed that learning outcomes were in most cases clearly articulated, and MSc marking criteria are helpfully broken down into: knowledge; skills; understanding. I would recommend that feedback is more closely tied in to outcomes and marking criteria, to enable students to understand the reasons for the summative mark received, and to learn formatively.

I was not party to the decision to remodel and streamline the programme for further iterations; I understand that one driver was bringing this Masters programme into line with others at Cardiff. I was, however, invited to comment on proposals for re-configuring the programme and was pleased to do so. As noted, I welcomed the prospect of improved coherence and consolidation – it is particularly difficult to achieve this in programmes of this sort, spanning a wide range of disciplines. I also expressed the hope that diversity of offering would not be too greatly compromised, with individual students able to benefit from tailored learning packages to cater to their specialist interests and to include innovative and cutting edge approaches.

## **7. Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)**

N/A

## 8. Annual Report Checklist

Please include appropriate comments within Sections 1-7 above for any answer of 'No'.

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
<b>Programme/Course Information</b>				
8.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	√		
8.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?	√		
<b>Draft Examination Question Papers</b> ( <i>Note: I marked only course assessed work, no exam scripts; I have answered these questions with reference to the assessed work I examined</i> )				
8.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?		√	
8.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?	√		
8.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?	√		
<b>Marking Examination Scripts</b>				
8.6	Did you receive a sufficient number of scripts to be able to assess whether the internal marking and classifications were appropriate and consistent?	√		
8.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	√		
8.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?	mostly		
8.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?	√		√
8.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?	√		
<b>Coursework and Practical Assessments</b>				
8.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	mostly		
8.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	√		
8.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	√		
8.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	√		

<b>Clinical Examinations (if applicable)</b>				
8.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			√
<b>Sampling of Work</b>				
8.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?	√		
<b>Examining Board Meeting</b>				
8.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	June not NoV		
8.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	mostly		
8.19	Cardiff University recognises the productive contribution of External Examiners to the assessment process and, in particular, to the work of the Examining Board. Have you had adequate opportunities to discuss the Programme and any outstanding concerns with the Examining Board or its officers?	√		
<b>Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)</b>				
8.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?		√	
8.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			√
8.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			√

Please return this Report, preferably in a Microsoft Word format, by email to:

[ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk](mailto:ExternalExaminers@cf.ac.uk)

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Clive Brown, Registry Officer, Registry & Academic Services, Cardiff University,  
McKenzie House, 30-36 Newport Road, Cardiff, CF24 0DE