



EXTERNAL EXAMINER ANNUAL REPORT FORM

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	For completion by External Examiner:		
Name of External Examiner:	Vanessa May		
Home Institution / Employer of External Examiner:	University of Manchester		
Programme and / or Subjects Covered by this Report:	Sociology		
Academic Year / Period Covered by this Report:	2014-15	Date of Report:	30 June 2015

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 structure of the programme is appropriate, with the core modules covering theory and method, and an impressive range of optional modules. Learning outcomes for all modules are helpfully documented in the Undergraduate Module Catalogues that are published for each level of study. The content of the programme reflects the latest developments in the field.

2. Academic Standards

The programme maintains relevant subject benchmark standards. The quality of paperwork was overall good, particularly the Undergraduate Module Catalogues and the Assessment Handbook for staff and students. The quality of student work on the modules that I examined was overall high. As in previous years, I was particularly impressed by the fact that all of the modules required students to apply sociological thinking to 'real world' issues of their own choice. The quality of student work is comparable with other institutions that I have worked in.

This is my third year as external examiner for Cardiff University, and once again I can note that module convenors put a lot of work into keeping their modules fresh. Two of the modules I examined had undergone quite significant changes in content and assessment since last year, while the third module was a new one. In discussions with staff it was clear that members of staff are continuously striving to improve their modules so as to ensure that pedagogical and academic aims

and objectives are met. This is a sign of active engagement with teaching. All modules also engaged with current social developments, most notably developments in ICT and social media.

3. The Assessment Process

All three of the modules that I examined were assessed on the basis of coursework, but each module contained a different mix of types of coursework. One of the modules I had previously examined had adopted new types of assessment – again a sign of active engagement with teaching. For one module, the assessments were designed to build up, step-by-step, to the final small project through a literature review and the setting of a research question. For another module, the students had to write a rather longer essay detailing a small research project they had conducted. Two of the modules contained a group work element in one of the assessments. This is all testament to the creative ways in which staff at Cardiff University approach the delivery of their teaching.

I did not receive paperwork regarding the moderation process (though I understood during the exam board that other examiners had received this). The response to external examiners from the Faculty indicates that paperwork is only filled in when there is a discrepancy in marks between first and second marker. But given that the role of external examiners is to audit whether processes and procedures are correctly being followed, then there should be some paper trail available, e.g. in the form of an Excel spreadsheet that indicates which essays and exam scripts were moderated, and whether or not the moderator agreed with the range of marks. It was only when I queried the aggregate marks for one of the modules that I was sent the moderation form and the 1st/2nd marker excel spreadsheet indicating whether there were any discrepancies and what the agreed final mark was – it would be very helpful to receive these automatically for each module we examine.

The style and quantity of feedback differs between modules. Some markers provided comments in relation to marking criteria, others did not. Some markers provided specific comments on each essay and provided advice on how to improve, while others provided fairly generic comments with little annotation of essays. For example, in one module, a student who was given a 72 received identical feedback to a student who gained a mark of 82. There is also uneven use of ‘feed forward’ comments that tell the student how they could in the future improve on their work. It is therefore difficult at times for students to work out what they could have improved on to get a better grade.

I would like to suggest that the School consider the use of the ‘rubric’ function on Grademark. This would serve two functions. First, it would be a quick and easy way for staff to give feedback related to the marking criteria, without having to write this in their general comments, thus giving them more time to give specific comments on each essay. Second, this would be an easy way for students to gain an overview of which marking criteria they did well on and which they need to still work on.

It was clear that some markers were trying to use a wider range of marks at the upper end of the scale, with some modules marking essays and exams into the mid-80s. However, there were still modules where the highest marks were 75 and 78. The use of a fuller range of marks might help in clearly distinguishing first class students in their overall degree classification.

In my report two years ago I noted how good the essay feedback sheet was, providing a section on things to commend and things to improve in future work, as well as an indication of how well the student did on the key assessment criteria. Some markers have kept up this good practice even after the transfer to online marking, but I fear that it is at risk of being lost. I would therefore reiterate my suggestion from last year that the teaching and learning committee consider ways in which aspects of the old feedback form could be incorporated within Grademark (e.g. by utilizing the rubric function as suggested above) and an agreement that all staff include in their general essay comments sections highlighting things to commend and things to improve would also be helpful.

I also noted that dissertations were rather strictly marked, and I am pleased to hear that next year supervisors will act as second markers for dissertations. This will offer an important corrective, whereby students' marks will not be pulled down on issues that have been agreed with the supervisor.

4. Year-on-Year Comments

This year, the issues I have raised in terms of procedure and assessment are mainly to do with marking, most importantly in relation to the full set of paperwork related to the moderation process. One of the assessments was marked offline, for good reason, but this meant that I did not get to see any of the feedback that students had received and was consequently looking at the coursework 'blind' as it were.

I am happy to note that Blackboard is being used more consistently, but due to module handbooks varying widely in content, it is still difficult for external examiners to piece together what a module consists of. For one module, I had to download three separate documents in order to find out all that I needed to know about a module, including lecture and seminar topics, reading lists and assessment information.

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

6. Noteworthy Practice and Enhancement

There are some examples of good practice that I would like to particularly commend:

Cultural Sociology: Excellent use of Blackboard, containing lecture notes and several readings in PDF form per lecture. The main assessment, which consisted of a small research project, also worked very well and produced some interesting essays that allowed students to apply sociological theories to their everyday experiences. The essay writing guidance was detailed and gave students step-by-step and exhaustive advice on how to go about conducting and writing up their research project. This year I also noted that the lectures were centred around particular 'real life' questions that the theories were aimed to answer. In lectures, students are also asked to apply these theories to their everyday lives – this is good both in terms of getting students to apply their sociological imagination, but also in preparation for the assessment. Thus the lectures are able to demonstrate the relevance of sociology to students' everyday lives, and I appreciate how much work has gone into rethinking the lectures in this way.

Digital Sociology: The logic of the module works well, starting out with theories of information/digital society, followed by digital methods of research. The module handout was well structured and gave students all the key information in one place. Each lecture was structured around a key question, sparking students' interest in the topic. The assessments were well structured: first a literature review, then setting up a research question, followed by conducting a small research project to answer this question. The module taught students important research skills, and I noted that in their coursework, students had made use of a wide range of analytical software, including Ncapture and NVivo.

New Frontiers: It was with pleasure that I noted that this module has been updated again, this time addressing (in the Autumn semester) the issue of social media, thus really living up to its name *New Frontiers*. In the spring semester, last year's exam has been replaced by group coursework, thus making use of more creative ways of assessing students which also teach them important team working skills. The group work element has also led to a clear improvement in seminar attendance.

7. Appointment Overview (for retiring External Examiners only)

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)
Programme/Course Information				
8.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	Y		
8.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?			N/A
Draft Examination Question Papers				
8.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?			N/A
8.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?			N/A
8.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?			N/A
Marking Examination Scripts				
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?			N/A
8.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?			N/A
8.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?			N/A
8.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?			N/A
8.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?			N/A
Coursework and Practical Assessments				
8.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	Y		
8.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	Y		
8.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	Y		
8.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	Y		
Clinical Examinations (if applicable)				
8.15	Were satisfactory arrangements made for the conduct of clinical assessments?			N/A
Sampling of Work				
8.16	Were you afforded sufficient time to consider samples of assessed work?	Y		
Examining Board Meeting				

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
8.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	Y		
8.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	Y		
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?	Y		
Joint Examining Board Meeting (if applicable)				
8.20	Did you attend a Composite Examining Board, i.e. one convened to consider the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
8.21	If so, were you made aware of the procedures and conventions for the award of Joint Honours degrees?			N/A
8.22	Was the Composite Examining Board conducted according to its rules?			N/A

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

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