



## 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:	2012-13	Date of Report:	27 June 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 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 student work is high, demonstrating that staff succeed in inspiring students to think sociologically and to apply sociological thinking to 'real world' problems. I was particularly impressed with the originality of much of the work produced by students. Student work is comparable with other institutions that I have worked in.

There are several points on which I wish to commend the modules that I examined:

- All the modules were highly interesting: fascinating topics, well structured, providing a lot of reading material, numerous essay topics or then the option for the students to focus on theories of their choice.

- The quality of paperwork was overall very good e.g. the Undergraduate Module Catalogues and the Assessment Handbook for staff and students.
- Students were often provided with good instructions on how to write their essays, what was required in terms of focus and content; on some modules such guidance was also provided on the exam booklet.
- The average quality of student work was very good, and in some cases excellent. Overall, the students write well and seem to have a good grasp of the subject matter. I noted that on the whole, essays and exam answers were original, in some cases highly original; it was indeed rare for two essays to resemble each other. I was also impressed by students' ability to structure their essays and exam answers. Overall, these are well-read students who have successfully been taught how to write an essay.

These issues are key to running a successful programme and go to the heart of what university students should be learning. Thus overall, I would say that this is a very healthy programme that is successful in its pedagogical aims. I only have one minor point to comment on, in addition to my comments concerning assessment below, that the department may wish to consider in their future discussions over teaching:

- Module outlines vary quite a bit regarding the information they provided: some did not list aims and outcomes, one did not inform the students of essay word counts, one did not list essay titles, one did not provide a list of tutorial/seminar topics, one did not clearly list readings for lectures. This is an issue of consistency and of making it easier for students to find out basic information about their modules in one place. I did not have access to Learning Central, so am unable to comment whether this information is provided in a systematic manner online.

On that last point, I would like to emphasise how important it would be in future years to secure access to Learning Central for external examiners. With the increasing emphasis placed on e-learning within higher education, and as technology improves, staff are increasingly making use of such VLEs, sometimes in very creative ways. It would be a shame if externals at Cardiff University did not have access to this learning platform.

### **3. The Assessment Process**

In modules in Levels 2 and 3, which I examined, each module was assessed 50% on the basis of coursework and 50% on the basis of exams. This constitutes an appropriate balance between different types of assessment.

The essay and exam questions set required students to engage in depth with the course material and to demonstrate their skills in line with the intended learning outcomes.

The assessment process was overall fair and transparent, and I felt that the criteria and marking schemes were well adhered to and were consistent across modules. I was impressed

by the clearly written and structured ‘Undergraduate Assessment Handbook for Staff and Students’, which contains all the important information that any student needs to submit a piece of assessment, but also to understand how this is then assessed.

The essay feedback sheet is excellent, providing a section on things to commend and things to improve in future work. There were however instances when the ticks on the feedback sheet, indicating the level of work along the different assessment criteria, did not correspond with the final mark. For example, one essay is given ‘lower second’ ticks across the board and is given a 65, another essay with ‘upper second’ ticks receives a 58.

The quantity of written feedback varies somewhat within modules. There is some excellent feedback (e.g. on one module particularly to failed and poor essays), but the feedback on the forms is at times a bit sparse and generic, e.g. just a copy-pasted sentence or two per box. Sometimes the only comment is that the referencing is poor. This means that students are not always provided a clear idea of why they were given a certain mark or how they could improve in future work. This is an especially important issue given that essay scripts are not annotated.

I also found that markers tended to be very cautious in their use of marks in the upper end of the scale, the ‘outstanding first’ column in the feedback sheet. If one of the ideas behind adopting a categorical marking scheme is to be able to distinguish between ‘high’ and ‘low’ firsts, it would be an idea to make more use of marks above 78. The quality of some student work is excellent enough to warrant such generosity. This would be particularly important in helping students to reach a first class degree classification. I noted that there was not an excessive number of firsts rewarded, and most of these were borderline cases. The use of a fuller range of marks might help in clearly distinguishing first class students.

I was unclear whether the principle of moderation had been followed in all second marking; in some cases, when first and second marker disagreed on a mark, the agreed final mark was the second marker’s mark, i.e. the original mark given by the first marker was changed. This appeared however not to trigger a review of all similar marks on that module.

Exam times vary from 1,5 hours to 2 hours across the modules – issue of consistency

I also noted that essay word counts are the same across Levels 2 and 3 (3,500 words). I learnt from staff that this is wider policy, but I wonder if it would be worth raising the suggestion of lowering the word count for Level 2 essays. This provides students with a sense of progression across the years, while also helping manage staff workloads.

While I did not spot any essays that went over the word count, there were some essays that were only 3,000 words long, which raises the question of what the acceptable range is. I did not find any regulations on word length of essays, e.g. whether students are allowed a +/-10% range, or whether there is a minimum word count that they must reach.

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

N/A

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

I received all relevant paperwork promptly and received excellent guidance from department staff, who patiently answered all of my queries. I found the process to run smoothly – it is clear that the Undergraduate Office is a well-oiled, efficient and organised system, and the staff deserve to be congratulated for this.

An important part of the process for me was meeting the module convenors for individual chats before the exam board. This was especially helpful during my first year because it gave me the opportunity to gain a fuller picture of how the different modules are run and the different pedagogical approaches that staff take.

The exam boards were chaired in an efficient and transparent manner, with key aspects of university regulation explained at the outset.

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

I met with all module convenors and found them to be enthusiastic about their modules and about what they wish to teach students. It was clear that all had continued to develop their modules over the years, and had plans for how to improve them even further. It was clear from my discussions that student learning is taken very seriously at Cardiff.

The one thing that really stood out for me this year was the originality and quality of student work. Not only do students at Cardiff University know how to write, but they are also able to construct an argument and think independently. It is difficult to pinpoint what it is exactly about the teaching they receive that encourages such development, but I am sure that the above-mentioned staff enthusiasm plays an important part. Another contributing factor no doubt is the fact that students are not handed everything on a plate, but are challenged to do some research and to think for themselves, skills that they will find invaluable once they graduate and enter the labour market. For example, some module convenors make use of extensive themed reading lists, which means that students must find the readings that are appropriate to their essay or exam topic, rather than merely relying on a list of required readings. This work has clearly paid off, because some of the essays I read were highly original and presented some very exciting sociological ideas.

## **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)
<b>Programme/Course Information</b>				
8.1	Did you receive sufficient information about the Programme and its contents, learning outcomes and assessments?	x		
8.2	Were you asked to comment on any changes to the assessment of the Programme?			x
<b>Draft Examination Question Papers</b>				
8.3	Were you asked to approve all examination papers contributing to the final award?		x	
8.4	Were the nature, spread and level of the questions appropriate?	x		
8.5	Were suitable arrangements made to consider your comments?	x		
<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?	x		
8.7	Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	x		
8.8	Were the scripts marked in such a way as to enable you to see the reasons for the award of given marks?		x (only one marker wrote comments on exam scripts)	
8.9	Were you satisfied with the standard and consistency of marking applied by the internal examiners?	x		
8.10	In your judgement, did you have the opportunity to examine a sufficient cross-section of candidates' work contributing to the final assessment?	x		
<b>Coursework and Practical Assessments</b>				
8.11	Was the choice of subjects for coursework and / or practical assessments appropriate?	x		
8.12	Were you afforded access to an appropriate sample of coursework and / or practical assessments?	x		
8.13	Was the method and general standard of assessment appropriate?	x		

		Yes (Y)	No (N)	N/A (N/A)
8.14	Is sufficient feedback provided to students on their assessed work?	x		
<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?	x		
<b>Examining Board Meeting</b>				
8.17	Were you able to attend the Examining Board meeting?	x		
8.18	Was the Examining Board conducted properly, in accordance with established procedures and to your satisfaction?	x		
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?	x		
<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?			

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

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Clive Brown, Registry Officer, Registry & Academic Services, Cardiff University,  
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