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Examinations for MSc Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science 06/07

This was my second year as external examiner for the M.Sc. in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science at Oxford. Like last year, my experience has been overall very positive. The quality of the set exam papers was very high, in terms of the depth of the questions, and the students' work was impressive, in terms of the scholarliness of the answers. I found the final projects on average of very high quality.

I was pleased to observe that the points I raised in my report last year, in particular about the marking scheme, were considered seriously, and that satisfactory solutions had been adopted.

A change was made this year to the way MSC dissertations are marked: the supervisor is not anymore required to mark, and effectively there is now only one marker besides the exam board and the viva. I have not noticed any drop in the accuracy of assessment; in fact, this year the vivas have in general confirmed the markers' findings. I will keep monitoring this next year.

In way of suggestions for future improvements, I would like to make the following comment.

- There has been some discussion during the examiners meeting in September that—since the University requires marks to be given as percentages—a formulaic translation will be adopted from the Computing Lab and Mathematics marking scale $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \dots$ to the 0–100 scale. I do not think this is the best way to proceed, as it will leave the final scale not entirely used. (What is the translation of α ? 70? 80? Can anybody obtain 100%? And what is the translation of γ ? Will all the fails be 30%?)

I suggest that the School reflect on this issue and if they are not in the position to keep their alphabetic mark scale, then they better abandon it entirely and pass to a '%' scale; that is, no automatic translation, if you must mark in hundredths because of new regulations, then mark in hundredths.

I conclude this report by briefly commenting on the headings suggested by Oxford's guidelines for full reports.

1. *whether the academic standards set for its awards, or part thereof, are appropriate.* Indeed they are.
2. *the extent to which its assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance.* I found all the processes rigorous, duly adhered to, and fairly conducted.
3. *the standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine.* I found such standards to be delight-

fully high.

4. where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions. I thought the standard were very high, indeed as high as I have had the opportunity to observe in UK HEIs.
5. *good practice they have identified*. I found the care put in the examination process to be an element of good practice.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vlad Sassone', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Prof Vladimiro Sassone