

Dear Vice-Chancellor

External Examiner's Report -- Dr Richard Pinch

M.Sc in Mathematics and the Foundations of Computer Science

I am reporting to you on the conduct of this examination in 2006/7 for which I was one of the two external examiners. As requested I address the following issues:

"Whether the academic standards set are appropriate"

"The extent to which assessment processes are rigorous"

"The standards of student performance in the programme"

"The comparability of standards with other HE institutions"

"Good practice"

I restrict my remarks on the academic content of the examination to the Mathematics projects and dissertations. However I believe that as far as I can judge they are also applicable to the Computer Science work.

0. Conduct of the examination

The local arrangements for the examination were efficiently conducted by the Chairman and Computer Lab staff.

I was disappointed not to receive background material such as guidance for project setters before being called on to assess the first round of projects. The timetable for comment on these projects was too tight, and it was only by chance that I was able to comply with it, as it had not been arranged in advance.

I raised this and some related minor points of administration directly with the Chairman and I believe that they have been addressed for subsequent years.

1. Academic standards

The standards of the majority of the projects were entirely acceptable for M.Sc. work. There were instances of projects which had clearly not been fully thought out and where the work to be performed by the candidates was not adequately specified. These were brought up to an acceptable level of clarity by rapid redrafting.

The dissertation subjects were acceptable for M.Sc.level.

2. Assessment processes

In the absence of the background material referred to under 0.2 it was not possible for me to be certain that candidates and their advisors had been adequately informed of the precise amount and standard of work required for some of the projects. Some rubrics were lacking in clarity (again it was possible to have these redrafted) and in particular there was no clear policy on what credit a candidate would obtain for project work where results of an initial part of the project had not been carried out.

I would recommend that project setters are given more explicit guidance on the construction of projects and that this guidance is also communicated to candidate, their tutors and advisors, and of course to the examiners.

It was clear to me that some projects had been written in haste and some had missed the internal deadlines. This falls below the professional standard that I would have expected to see.

I was not concerned about guidance for setting dissertation topics since these were of a standard M.Sc. type and I presume that the criteria are correspondingly more widely understood.

I noted that one candidate whose performance had been poor was set a special project. I reviewed the performance on that project and agreed that it was below the pass standard.

3. Standards of student performance

The performance of the candidates was high on average with several outstanding. I was satisfied that the grades we awarded were appropriate.

4. Comparability of standards

An obvious point of reference would be the Mathematical Tripos, with project work especially in Part IIB and with dissertations in Part III (CAS). My view is that the standard of MFOCS topics, and the performance of the candidates, is equivalent.

5. Good practice

I commend those project setters who had developed a marking scheme for their project and communicated it to students; projects where there was a "point" which a successful candidate should recognise and which had an intrinsic educational value; and projects which integrated course material with novel and even current research.

(signed)

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