

University of Oxford

Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Divisional Office
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From the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division

Dr R.G.E. Pinch

Ref. MPS/25

7 May 2008

Dear Dr Pinch,

MSc in Mathematics and the Foundations of Computer Science

I am writing on behalf of the MPLS Divisional Board I write to thank you for your detailed report as an external examiner for the M.Sc. in Mathematics and the Foundations of Computer Science. This has been considered by the Supervisory Committee for the course, the two departments involved, and the Division of Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences.

The Supervisory Committee for MFoCS has commented:

“The Committee would first like to thank the Examiners for the care with which this examination was conducted, and for their thoughtful observations. Particular points will be addressed below, but the Committee would like to express its especial gratitude to the external examiners for their support for this course, both in terms of their contribution to its success and also for the very positive comments they have consistently made about its intellectual standing.

We are grateful to Dr. Pinch for bringing to our attention administrative matters that he felt were deficient at the earliest opportunity so that action could be taken both for the remainder of last year and in preparation for this. We are grateful too for his general comments about the students’ academic standards on the course.

In response to his specific comments:

1. The nature of miniprojects set necessarily varies considerably from topic to topic. Also, there is only a two week period between the date by which students give notice of their wish to be examined on a particular course and when a draft miniproject has to be submitted by the lecturer. It would be unfair on students to force them to bring their selections forward, especially in the first term when the whole process is “new”, but this year lecturers have been given advice to think about miniprojects well in advance of their submission. We believe that many (though we know sadly not all) complied. But the need to be

vigilant as to the quality of setting has been brought to the attention of the Chairman of Examiners.

[We understand that it is not universally the case on other programmes that external examiners are even involved at this stage, so we should express our thanks, too, for the effort that Dr. Pinch put in to draw attention to deficiencies in the setting.]

2. Rubrics have been tightened where possible. In particular, the old rubric that was better suited to an examination paper has been replaced by one that encourages cohesion in the candidate's thinking, rather than an attempt to answer a series of questions, and this point was stressed in the Introductory Talk given to the entire cohort.

3. We note Dr. Pinch's remarks about mark schemes. But we do have concern that too strict a mark scheme is incompatible with allocating a USM when the sample to be scaled is very small. On the issue of miniprojects having a "point", this has always been the intention of MFoCS, and lecturers were reminded of this (and candidates via the rubric; cf. previous paragraph). In particular, candidates are aware that they should "assume and continue" when they are unable to answer a particular stage."

Since you are continuing as an examiner, I hope that you have been able to see the points that you have raised fully addressed.

The role of external examiners is vital both to ensuring the maintenance of high standards and to enabling us to demonstrate an independent verification of the high levels at which we aim to provide education and training for our students. [Section related to employer removed.]

Yours sincerely,

Dr Nigel Berry
Assistant Registrar

c.c. Dr A. Curnock, Mrs C. O'Connor