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Examinations for MSc Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science 05/06

This was the first year I acted as external examiner for the M.Sc. in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science and, more in general, for Oxford. Overall my experience has been very positive. I was impressed by the quality of the set exam papers, in terms of the depth of the questions, and by the students' work, in terms of the scholarliness of the answers. I found the final projects on average of very high quality.

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

- The marking scale $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \dots$ may not provide enough 'shades' to reflect subtle differences in work quality. I do not think however that the solution can be to add any numbers of $+/-$ modifiers to it. In my experience it invariably becomes confusing to handle things like $\alpha--$ as opposed to $\alpha\beta++$, and similarly for $\beta\alpha-$ with respect to $\beta++$.
I suggest that the School reflects on this issue in view of selecting one of two paths: either switch to the usual numeric marking scale expressed 1/100th, or rigidly restrict the use of $+/-$ modifiers in the current marking scheme to a single one, that is $\alpha+, \alpha, \alpha-, \alpha\beta, \beta+, \beta, \beta-, \beta\gamma, \dots$
- Concerning the viva examination of the final projects, some of the examiners reports were received very late, or not received at all. I found this incompatible with the active role external examiners are expected to take during such vivas, and suggest the School puts in place adequate procedures to assure all reports are received by the external at least a full week before the examination
- Concerning the viva examination of the final projects, one of the readers was not available. This made for question/answer session of lesser quality and in a precise sense reduced the chances for the student in question to be examined in the best possible conditions. Of course it is always possible for a reader to fall ill just before the viva session, so I do not expect there can be a fully satisfactory solution here. Nevertheless, I exhort the School to think about a system of "reserve" readers that would allow absent readers to be replaced at a very short notice.
- Concerning the final projects, in one instance this year two projects supervised from the same supervisors resulted somehow similar to each other. I suggest as a measure of good practice for supervisors following more than one project at the same time to assign projects sufficiently apart from each other to minimise the risk of convergence of results.

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 delightfully 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 'Vladimiro Sassone', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Prof Vladimiro Sassone