

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2021

External examiner name:	Prof. James Robinson	
External examiner home institution:	University of Warwick	
Course(s) examined:	Maths Part C (MMath and MSc, also Maths & Philosophy)	
Level: (please delete as appropriate)	Undergraduate (MMath)	Postgraduate (MSc)

Please complete both Parts A and B.

Part A				
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	Yes	No	N/A / Other
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	Yes		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	Yes - MMath	Query on MSc	
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?	Yes		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?	Yes		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?	Yes		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?			N/A
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?			N/A
* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.				

Part B

In your responses to these questions, please could you include comments on the effectiveness of any changes made to the course or processes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic where appropriate.

B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

Standards are very high. A wide variety of modules are offered, the papers are challenging, and the students clearly very able.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

Sorry, I couldn't distinguish this question from part a.

B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.

The setting/checking process for the exams was rigorous, although I would welcome some feedback on externals' comments on the exam papers before they are finalised.

Clear adjustments were made to take into account the fact that the exams were online and open book.

The scaling process – which is a crucial component in guaranteeing a fair assessment – was (even though the outcomes were appropriate) surprisingly *ad hoc* and suffered this year from having as its starting point a now outdated algorithmic calculation. I strongly support the suggestion in the Mathematics Part C Examiner's report that the department revisit this algorithm, and indeed consider the entire scaling process in some detail, with the Assessors' suggestions taking a more central role (perhaps as the starting point). In particular I believe it crucial that any algorithm is able to take into account the entire cohort (MMath + MSc) rather than just the MMath students who completed their third year in Oxford; this means that data from previous years should not be used (it is the basis of the current algorithm).

It should be made clear to all Assessors that 50 is the mark required for a pass at this level.

Some issues of (un)fairness arose around some regulations that arise at the University level, as far as I could tell:

- The penalties for late submission seemed draconian (zero if over five minutes late) and a more staggered system would be preferable.

- We had a query over a clearly unfair regulation that appeared to suggest that a candidate who had scored sufficiently highly enough in the required number of credits might be at risk of failure for not having submitted one exam. [It turns out that this regulation did not apply in this case, but this does not make the regulation any more reasonable. It seems to me both unjust and

unjustifiable that non-attendance should be considered any different to submitting a blank paper, particularly (but not only) when the exam is online.]

- Adoption of the Inspira online system caused some major issues, which resulted in significant stress to a number of students and much extra work for certain academics. I believe some of these problems had been anticipated by the Mathematics Department, so this was particularly frustrating. All being well future years will see a return to traditional exams (open book exams create particular problems in Mathematics, which I am sure the department would be happy to detail to you), and so this should be a one-off problem.

B3. Issues

Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?

While the MMath and MSc ("OMMS") are two different degree programmes, the candidates take the same modules and are assessed in an identical way. Nevertheless, they are identified by their degree programme throughout the process, at times in the discussion of outcomes (X% of MMath students vs Y% of OMMS students awarded a Distinction, for example), and in a significant discrepancy in the award of prizes (e.g. £500 for the top MMath mark, £100 for the top MSc mark). This made me consistently uncomfortable, and I would suggest that it is worth considering whether it is possible only to identify and separate candidates on these two degrees once the final classes have been decided. (To be fair, they did appear together on the final ranked list, although still identified MMath/MSc.)

B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

B5. Any other comments

Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.

I am a little surprised that the requirements for the Oxford MSc are no more stringent than for the final year of the MMath. In particular, the QAA framework requires 180 credits at level 7 for an MSc versus 120 credits in the final year of an MMath. The lack of an explicit credit framework at Oxford does not seem sufficient to bypass the qualitative expectation implicit in these guidelines. I am seeking some clarification on this from the OMMS team, but it would seem a little odd not to raise this here too.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Prof Dominic Joyce (Part C Examiner), Barbara Galinksa, and Charlotte Turner-Smith for their help and support during my first year as a Part C External Examiner. They were all consistently helpful and patient with my many questions and made the whole process much easier than it would otherwise have been.

Signed:	James Robinson
Date:	8 th July 2021