

University of Oxford External Examiner Report - 2024/25

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EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT for the academic year 2024/25

1. Please check your title is correct, and select another option if needed

Dr

2. If you entered other, please specify

No response

3. Please check your first name(s) is correct, and amend if needed

Ed

4. Please check your last name is correct, and amend if needed

Brambley

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

University of Warwick

6. Please check the course level of the course(s) you acted as external examiner for is correct, and select another option if needed

Undergraduate

7. Please check the Division(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for comes under are correct, and amend if needed

Humanities Division; Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division

8. Please check the Faculty/Department(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for comes under are correct, and amend if needed

Department of Statistics; Faculty of Philosophy; Mathematical Institute

9. Please check the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for are correct, and amend if needed

DMPB: Honour School of Mathematics and Philosophy (Part B); DMST: Honour School of Mathematics and Statistics (Part B); DMAB: Honour School of Mathematics (Part B)

10. Please select whether you have just completed your first year of your term of office as external examiner, whether you have now completed your entire term of office, or whether you are in another year of your term of office

Other year of term of office

11. Please check the date the final Examination Board took place is correct, and amend if needed. If you acted at external examiner for multiple courses which had separate Examination Board meetings, please check the correct date for the latest Examination Board meeting is showing, and amend if needed.

04 July 025

Part A

12. Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?
(Please refer to paragraph 15 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

12.1 A1. i) Academic standards of students

Yes

12.2 A1. ii) Academic achievements of students

Yes

13. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:
(Please refer to paragraph 16 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

13.1 A2. i) The frameworks for higher education qualifications?

Yes

13.2 A2. ii) Any applicable subject benchmark statement?

Yes

14. In relation to the academic process:

14.1 A3. Does it measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?

Yes

14.2 A4. Is it conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?

Yes

15. In relation to the information and evidence provided to you:

15.1 A5. Did you receive it in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

16. Regarding your previous report, please indicate whether you:

16.1 A6. Received a written response to your previous report?

Yes

16.2 A7. Are satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?

Yes

Part B

17. B1. 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?

Academic standards are high, and compare favourably with other universities I have experience of (Cambridge and Warwick).

18. B1. 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).

Students perform well, with the examination process is clearly able to distinguish between the very best, 1st class, upper second class, and the rest. Performance between maths and maths & stats is clearly equivalent, as demonstrated by the maths & stats candidates also being included in the maths list of candidates. I found it hard to distinguish whether the standard for maths & philosophy students is also comparable, but this would be difficult anyway owing to the small numbers taking this course. In particular, I found it difficult to decide whether the custom for maths & philosophy students who just missed the 1st class boundary to be awarded a 1st class degree anyway based on their performance in only one of maths or philosophy was fair and comparable with maths only and maths & stats students, but since this is a long-standing custom and well understood by students and faculty alike, I am not unhappy with the arrangement.

19. B2. 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 assessment process, as far as I could observe, is rigorous and fair, and great attention was evident to the University's regulations and guidance both before and during the meetings.

20. B3. Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University? If you acted as external examiner for multiple courses, please indicate whether the issues related to all or selected courses.

I have one issue which I would like to highlight. This has probably already been extensively discussed, and sensible conclusions arrived at, and I do not suggest revisiting discussions that have previously been resolved, so this is likely just for information only:

1. The algorithm for rescaling exam marks has changed significantly this year from last year. In previous years, the algorithm was certainly not perfect, and required extensive meetings and academic time in order to fine tune. This year, the new algorithm was designed to achieve the required outcome (percentages of students achieving each overall grade), and it did this efficiently. However, the old algorithm understood the differences between exams and cohorts, and it gauged how difficult an examination was by how able the students who took that exam were in the previous year's exams. This meant that the previous algorithm could understand the difference between an overly hard exam, and an exam predominantly taken by less able students (for example, those who do not intend to continue to their 4th year). The new algorithm does not. I make three observations in particular:

a) It was unclear to the external examiners how the results would have been different had the old algorithm been used instead of the new one. Indeed, it was unclear which students were advantaged and which were disadvantaged. Usually, with such a change, the two algorithms would both be run in parallel for a year or two to see how the results compare. I understand some comparison was run, but the external examiners did not have access to this.

b) The argument for changing the algorithm, and not using previous year's results, is a strong argument for the 4th year, where some external students have not taken previous year Oxford exams. But I did not feel any of the arguments proposed for changing the algorithm were convincing for the 3rd year examinations.

c) While the new algorithm achieves the objectives of getting the correct percentages of 1st, 2is, etc, it seems to completely ignore the statements on the quality of examination responses needed to get the given grades. Individual academics, while marking the exams, are putting this information into their marks (e.g. taking care that, in their opinion, the answer to a questions gets a 1st class mark if it deserves the text description in the student handbook of a 1st class answer), but this is then being undone by the algorithm in order to get the correct percentages. For example, it was admitted in the exam board meeting that the new algorithm is intentionally undoing scalings that the assessors have put on their own exams in order to account for a higher or lower than expected quality of students taking the course percentages that year.

21. B4. 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.

One minor point. As I commented last year, I would like to see, after the examiners meeting, what the results of the deliberations in the meeting are on the gender balance of marks. The current system can highlight who the examiners meeting considered and made changes regarding (for example, being allowed to continue to the 4th year, or having their grade

reclassified by finding extra marks or changing exam scalings), but it does not record who the examiners considered but decided not to change. I worry that there is some unintended bias that could be indirectly creeping in here, where by the examiners perceive a marks distribution more typical of male candidates as more deserving of bumping up a grade than a marks distribution of a female candidate, even though the candidates themselves are anonymised. This could be investigated after the meetings, but only if further information is recorded on which candidates were considered near grade boundaries, irrespective of whether changes were made or not.

22. B5. a) 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.

It was suggested after the Maths & Philosophy meeting that Maths & Philosophy candidates are included in the list of candidates considered during the Maths examiners meeting, as that way if and when scalings are changed the effect on Maths & Philosophy candidates can also be flagged up to the Maths & Philosophy meeting. This is similar to the way Maths & Stats candidates are included in the list of candidates for Maths, but are considered at the Maths & Stats examiners meeting.

23. B5. b) Now that your term of office is concluded, please provide an overview here.

No response

Thank you for completing your 2024/25 external examiner report for the University of Oxford