



EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2024

External examiner name:	John Hunton		
External examiner home institution:	Durham University		
Course(s) examined:	Part B in Mathematics, Maths&Computer Science, Maths&Philosophy		
Level: (please delete as appropriate)	Undergraduate		
Year of term of office: (please delete as appropriate)		Last year	

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

**** A6. and A7. If you are in your first year of term of office you should enter select N/A / Other.**

Part B

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?*

The standards achieved are very comparable with other good UK institutions at which I have taught or examined.

- 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).*

The assessment activities are demanding and the high performance of the best students is excellent, as to be expected at a top institution with high achieving students. By the third year of studies one would expect to see reflected a wide range of abilities and levels of engagement with the taught matter, but even the weaker students showed mastery of a respectable quantity of high level material. The assessment process reflected this variety of performance with appropriate classifications.

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 rigour and conduct of the assessment process was very good. Unlike previous years, there were hardly any problems with individual examinations and the Department has clearly done an excellent job in creating a robust mechanism for preparing papers. There was one isolated examination that threw up issues with its level and I understand the chair of the examiners is taking the matter forward appropriately.

The difficult or borderline cases were dealt with carefully and in detail and I believe these were handled well.

The problem of ensuring that a student is not advantaged nor disadvantaged by taking specific choices of topic for examination is a tricky one with which all mathematics departments wrestle. The solution is of course to apply appropriate scaling to individual papers so as to ensure, as far as is possible, and in the professional judgement of the examiners, that a first/second/etc level of performance on one paper is equivalent to such performance on any other. In the past, as I have commented before, it was somewhat opaque to me how this process worked, but I was satisfied this year by a clear and full explanation of the approach the board had taken in preliminary meetings, and I am confident this difficult aspect has also been handled well.

As far as I can tell, the process has been as fair as is possible, and in line with the University's regulations.

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?

Two items come to mind.

First, I noted quite a variation in degree of annotation applied to scripts by markers. Now, clearly it is correct that verbal comments or discussion should not be added by the marker, but some markers were so minimalist in their annotation that when the board needed to look in detail at individual scripts it was impossible to see where the candidate had lost marks. This is clearly not satisfactory. It would appear that some markers are taking too extreme an interpretation of the rule not to write discursively on scripts and I would recommend that clear guidance is given for next year to markers, requiring enough indication – for example underlining or highlighting points where there are issues or omissions by candidates – to show where marks have been lost.

Secondly, it was observed that candidate code numbers were very short – they appear to have no check digits, so a simple mistype somewhere in the system of one digit in a candidate's code could erroneously attribute the work or special circumstances to another candidate. This is an issue that would of course need to be dealt with at a University level, but I would strongly recommend that it is considered so as to avoid the risk of serious mistreatment – or at the very least significant trouble occurred by examination and other boards.

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.*

During my previous years as external examiner at Oxford I have been surprised that the position of Chair of Examiners has changed every year. As I understand it, Prof Green, who was chair this year, will be staying on for next year as well and I strongly welcome this: not only did he do an excellent job this year, but in general I think it greatly enhances any examination process to have continuity of chair. A chair who is in place for several years has an opportunity to carry the experience and observations from one year into the next and drive any resulting necessary improvements, or follow up first hand issues where there have been problems. They also carry an institutional memory that indirectly supports the process as it goes. Indeed, Oxford is the only institution I have taught or examined at that does not have a chair of examiners in place of a three year period, and I would suggest that such a period ought to be understood as good practice, and indeed normal at the national discipline level.

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.

Overall the process ran well and I have every confidence in its outcome.

Signed:	John Hunton
Date:	5 July 2024

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to:
external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk AND copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.