

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2017**

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Eleanor Knox	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	King's College London	
<b>Course examined:</b>	Maths and Philosophy Parts A and B	
<b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)	Undergraduate	

***Please complete both Parts A and B.***

<b>Part A</b>				
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?	✓		
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 6 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?			n/a
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?			n/a
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, please provide further comments in Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>				

## **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?*

Standards, particularly in first marking, were uniformly extremely high. Generous standards were generally enacted for students on borderlines, but this was in keeping with what I've seen elsewhere.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

As is almost always the case, Philosophy marks were bunched more tightly than mathematics marks, and there were fewer top marks in philosophy. Philosophy examiners should be reminded again to use the full range of the mark scale. It might also be worth examining how first and second markers agree marks to discourage simple averaging, which drags marks towards the mean. (On this final point: I also found it odd how widely the mark agreement practice of the two examiners varied. In particular, some essays were awarded marks outside the range of the two original marks awarded, which seemed particularly puzzling. There is a trade-off here between asking for standardised practice and achieving a wide spread of marks.)

### **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 assessment process is exceptionally rigorous, with huge effort put in by all examiners to ensuring a high standard of scrutiny. There is substantial latitude for exam boards to take mitigating circumstances into account in their own ways. Although this leaves more room for human judgement than the systems in my own university, this has prevented the creep of examining duties that other universities have experienced. Compassionate, thoughtful examination of mitigating circumstances is much better than the 'fit-to-sit' policy the holds sway elsewhere. This latter kind of system replaces any consideration of mitigating circumstances with exam deferrals, leading to huge strains on staff and the mental health of students. Oxford should be vigilant in defending its policies in the face of any pressure for a more mechanised system.

### **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?*

Only one issue arose in my examining: One philosophy exam contained an error, and, due to an unfortunate sequence of events, the examiner was not contacted to clarify the error during the exam. This lead to the need for exam boards to consider mark adjustments for a small handful of students. However, this was done individually at each exam board, with no central coordination of the appropriate mark adjustment. Indeed, it was unclear in this case whether the examiners had already factored in the exam error in their marks. In this case, the number of students involved was exceedingly small, and no major problems were caused. However, in these rare cases, it would be much better to have central advice from the philosophy faculty on how to deal with the exam as a whole, rather than have each exam board make up their own

adjustment system. The current system leaves open the possibility of wide disparities in how students experiencing the same problem in the same exam are treated.

#### **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.*

The assessment method in Oxford philosophy is unusually uniform, in that, with the exception of a few part C options, everything is exam based. As all my colleagues know, not everyone's philosophical talents lend themselves to timed exams, and timed exams themselves do not always encourage deep thought. The pedagogical case in philosophy for some element of assessment to be based on non-exam essays seems to me exceedingly strong.

I also note that, given the amount of work that goes into examining students' work, it seems a shame that they receive no feedback. Some simple feedback, in the form of a couple of sentences, could be of great help to students and would not increase staff workload meaningfully. That said, Oxford students already receive more feedback on written work than most via the tutorial system.

#### **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.*

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	14.09.17

Please email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.