

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

Matthew

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

Tointon

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

University of Bristol

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

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

Mathematical Institute

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

DMCN: Honour School of Mathematics and Computer Science (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

First 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 2025

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:

No response

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?

The other UK higher education institutions of which I have experience are Cambridge (as a student and Part III lecturer) and Bristol (as faculty). The level and quantity of material that students are required to master appears to be comparable to at Cambridge. Exams for each individual unit appear to me to be of comparable difficulty to those at Bristol, but Oxford requires more units (8 compared to 6).

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).

It is notable that candidates in the Honour School of Mathematics and Computer Science score particularly highly, with the vast majority achieving a first and only a handful failing to achieve 2.i. I understand from the other examiners present that this is typical. There does not appear to be a strong view on why this is from within the institution. I gather that candidates in the joint-honours school have significantly more choice with their unit selections by the time of the third year, which may confer a significant advantage, although one would need to investigate this more thoroughly in order to draw any firm conclusions.

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 rigour and conduct of the assessment process appears to me to be as one would expect. I note in particular that considerable care was taken during the final board meetings to ensure that all candidates near the class boundaries or with mitigating circumstances were considered in detail and with a default inclination towards generosity. I also note that a new scaling algorithm was implemented this year, which was carefully justified and apparently designed after considerable debate within the Institute. I particularly like the fact that this algorithm is generally applied automatically, but with the option of human intervention: the general automation in my opinion lowers the risk of unfairness, but the option of human intervention is important to retain in case of statistical anomalies as might arise e.g. if very few students take a particular exam.

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.

It was realised during the Mathematics board meeting that the guidance on progression from Part B to Part C was inconsistent in the examination conventions. I believe this is already being taken care of, but for the record I will state here that this should be rectified in time for next year's exams.

A minor issue that arose during that Mathematics board meeting was that in one case the conventions were not correctly applied to the marking of a project. These projects are double-marked, and the overall mark should be the average of the two unless they differ by more than 10 USMs. In this case, there was a project whose marks differed by fewer than 10, but the process for marks differing by more than 10 was used. This was to the detriment of the candidate, and was the difference between two different classes. Faculty should make sure that assessors are aware of the appropriate conventions at the time of marking. That said, it is also fair to point out that the fact this was discovered reflects the robustness of the checking that the exam board carried out for candidates near the boundary.

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.

At this point I do not have any particular recommendations.

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.

Overall I found the process to be rigorous, fair and efficient.

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