University of Oxford External Examiner Report - 2024/25

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Submitted: 15 Oct 2025 1:03 PM

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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

Miriam

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

Backens

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

Inria

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

Postgraduate

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

Department of Computer Science

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

Master of Science in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science (MFoCS)

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

Last 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.

25 September 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:

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

No

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

Not applicable

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 academic standards achieved by students on the MFoCS are very high compared to those at other higher education institutions with which I am familiar: the vast majority of students achieved a Distinction.

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).

I did not notice any major differences in student performance between the Mathematics and the Computer Science parts of the programme.

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.

Mini-projects are either marked according to a mark scheme or they are independently assessed by two markers. The latter procedure is also applied to the final project theses. This process is largely conducted rigorously and according to regulations. Previous issues with some markers agreeing a grade before submitting their assessments (that were supposed to be independent) have been fixed. On the whole, there was good agreement between the independent grades, with the expected occasional outliers.

Compared to previous years, markers provided more detailed comments on their mark sheets this year, which was useful both to examiners and (for those parts of the comments that will be passed on as feedback) the students. It also made it easier to follow the decisions made in cases where reconciliation had been required.

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.

Some markers of final projects mentioned very short turn-around times for marking, particularly when students had received extensions.

I also heard from some less experienced project markers that they were unsure about the expectations and struggled with not having a basis for comparison when marking a single project. It might be useful to provide more training and/or advice to less-experienced markers to help bridge the gap between the theory and practice of marking theses (which, after all, is a somewhat unusual form of assessment for computer scientists and mathematicians). At other universities, I've also seen exemplars of previous theses from different grade ranges being made available to markers: with the highly specialised and advanced topics of the MFoCS, this might become more difficult to really make work, but it may be worth a try -- or if it is already done, it might need to be advertised better or otherwise adapted to become more useful to inexperienced markers.

For the mini projects, there seemed to be quite a wide range of expectations in terms of length and also different policies around the use of generative AI. It might be useful to students (and save time for staff) to standardise some of that.

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.

The programme broadly uses good practices but I am not aware of anything particularly innovative.

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.

In the project vivas, some students did a very good job of making technical topics accessible to non-experts; others explicitly or implicitly assumed a huge amount of specialised background knowledge. It might be useful to clarify more to students whether they should assume an audience of experts (in which case there is not much point to having the examiners sit in on the vivas as they will not generally be experts on all the project topics) or pitch their presentations to a more general computer science audience.

At the final examiners meeting, it was mentioned that it would be useful for second markers and examiners to know more about the degree of involvement of project supervisors in final projects.

While the programme uses mainly take-home assessments (mini-projects and theses), it is good to see there do not seem to have been any major problems around the use of generative AI such as large language models, although it may be worth remaining careful around this topic.

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

Throughout my term, student achievements on this programme have been high, reflected in very high grades.

There were some issues in the past around the use of independent double marking, with some markers agreeing marks before entering them into the system rather than entering independent marks and then using the processes for reconciliation (if necessary), that seems to be resolved now. Documentation of grades of mini-projects and theses has also been spotty but has definitely improved this year.

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

University of Oxford External Examiner Report - 2024/25

Response ID:	cmjwlo1k9000d02k16ijpi54x
Submitted:	02 Jan 2026 8:16 AM
Duration:	00:15:30

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

Mark

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

Walters

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

Queen Mary University of London (until end August 2025; I left academia at that point)

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

Postgraduate

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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

JMFC: Master of Science in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science

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

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25 September 2025

Part A

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12.2 A1. ii) Academic achievements of students

Yes

13. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:
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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?

No

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?

My view here is identical to what I said last year: "I have experience at both Queen Mary University of London, and the University of Cambridge. I think the standard is comparable to Cambridge, but is higher than QMUL and likely higher than most other UK universities. Overall this seems appropriate given Oxford's status, but I have seen in an increasing trend of employers and universities treating degrees from all universities equally (e.g., asserting that, at UG level, a second from Oxford is "worse" than a first from a random other university)."

The only thing I would add is that the trend of treating degrees from all universities as the same standard seems to be increasing. For example at Queen Mary when considering applications for Masters courses we were required to accept anyone with a first in a relevant subject from any university, and it was typically very difficult to accept people with a 2ii (and definitely a third) even from Oxford or Cambridge. This was true despite the fact that we had had people from Oxford and Cambridge with thirds who had done exceedingly well.

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).

I essentially answered this above. But I would say that the standard was exceedingly high.

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.

I think the procedure was robust. The viva process is very reassuring -- I am confident that the all the students did the work themselves (which with the prevalence of AI etc is becoming an increasing issue in HE)

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.

No, everything was very good.

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.

I can't really comment on how the students were taught as that is not something I see as an external examiner. However, it is clear that the outcome was very good -- the work produced by the students was outstanding.

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.

I have no further comments.

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