The University of Sheffield



School of Mathematics and Statistics

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Vice-Chancellor c/o Mrs Sally Powell Assistant Registrar Education Policy Support University Offices University of Oxford Wellington Square Oxford. OX1 2JD

Dear Vice Chancellor

I am writing to give you my report as Mathematics external examiner for Part A of the Honour School of Mathematics (Part A - XMAT), Honour School of Mathematics and Statistics (Part A - XMST) and Honour School of Mathematics and Philosophy (Part A - XMAP).

I would like to start by thanking Professor Henke as Chair of Examiners, all the other examiners, markers and assessors, and the support team (Sandy Patel, Margaret Sloper, Vicky Archibald and Waldemar Schlackow) for the efficient way in which the whole process was organized, for their patience in dealing with my many questions, and their hard work in maintaining the high standards to which I have become accustomed during my time as external examiner.

All paperwork and draft examination questions were received in good time. I thank all the examiners and assessors for a range of interesting and challenging examination questions, clear solutions and markschemes. I should particularly highlight the improvements in the algebra questions over the past couple of years, which are now much more approachable for students across the class list, while maintaining challenge for the very best. Many solutions were helpfully annotated to indicate which parts were bookwork, simple problems, and difficult unseen questions. There was some exemplary practice in marking, for example, indicating that all pages had been seen by the marker.

I continue to be impressed by the procedures for checking the marked scripts and entering the marks for the students. Oxford is fortunate to have the resources to implement these procedures. I would particularly like those involved with the checking process to know that their hard (and fairly tedious) work on this is greatly appreciated. The examination marks database is excellent and makes the work of the examiners' meetings much easier. The mechanisms for converting raw marks to USMs are eminently sensible and ensured that students were appropriately rewarded for their work. Overall, the procedures for all aspects of the examination process are excellent and the department is to be commended on them.

The curriculum is varied and interesting, enabling students to specialize in particular areas of mathematics and giving them a flavour of the advanced courses to follow. At the top of the class list, the students' work was truly outstanding; but in all the scripts I read there was evidence of understanding of the material. It was noticeable this year that there were fewer students producing work of third class or lower standard - I looked carefully at all scripts towards the bottom of the class list and the marks awarded reflected the students' achievement.

I would make two very minor comments. Firstly, on a practical note, it might be helpful to the department to not have both the mathematics and statistics external examiners changing in the same year. Secondly, I wonder whether there is perhaps too much choice for students on papers AC2 and AO2. I understand the reasoning behind the structures of the papers (essentially one question for every eight lectures' worth of material), but I am not convinced of the need for nine long questions on a compulsory paper where only marks from four questions count and there are usually a few very unpopular questions. It was also a shame that some of the specialist statistics questions on paper AO2 received no attempts. These are very minor comments and I am not recommending any changes to the current system, which works well.

Yours sincerely

Professor Elizabeth Winstanley