

# EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2019

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Corina Cirstea		
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	University of Southampton		
<b>Course(s) examined:</b>	MSc in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science		
<b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)		Postgraduate	

**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?			✓	
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		✓		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete 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?*

Over the last three years I have been extremely impressed by the academic standards achieved by the MFoCS students, which exceed in both breadth and depth those achieved at most other UK higher education institutions. By the end of the course the students have an in-depth understanding of a wide range of topics in advanced mathematics and theoretical computer science, have been exposed to state-of-the-art research, and many have already carried out research of a publishable level.

- 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).*

Performance and achievement are excellent, with the majority of students graduating with distinction. This is a direct reflection of both the quality of the intake (the course attracts very strong students) and the quality of the course.

### **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.*

On the whole assessment is rigorous and students are treated fairly. Cases of students with mitigating circumstances are carefully considered during examiners' meetings. These meetings are well organized and excellently supported by the course administrators.

### **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?*

Throughout my time as external examiner there has always been a slight difference in marks between mathematics courses and computer science ones, with the latter having generally higher marks. This is almost certainly due the nature of questions in a mini-project, with mathematics mini-projects much more likely to have an open-ended component than computer science ones. This can make it difficult to differentiate the most able students from the rest of the cohort, when it comes to some computer science courses. To alleviate this I suggest that, when requesting the setting of assessments, the setters are reminded of the importance to provide such differentiation.

On a related note, the process of setting assessments could be improved by requesting setters to (i) respond to changes suggested by the examiners (currently there is only a mechanism for

the examiners to suggest changes, with no confirmation of any action that was taken), and (ii) explain how the mini-projects they set ensure differentiation as mentioned above.

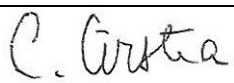
#### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*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 somewhat unusual assessment through mini-projects for the MSc in MFoCS suits the type of students this MSc attracts extremely well, and fosters an in-depth understanding of the subject areas. While I am aware that this type of assessment will not suit any degree program, there may be other MScs that could benefit from similar assessment.

#### **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>	12/12/2019

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and 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.

# EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2019

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Dr Ivan Tomasic		
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	Queen Mary University of London		
<b>Course(s) examined:</b>	MSc in Mathematics and Foundations of Computer Science		
<b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)		Postgraduate	

**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?	✓		
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?		✓	
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		✓	
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete 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?*

The standards are extremely high compared to most other UK and international institutions.

- 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).*

*Most students achieve a remarkable level of understanding of the research area associated with their project, and many even engage in original research of publishable quality. In my opinion, some of the best MFOCS MSc theses are comparable to PhD theses elsewhere. It was brought to my attention that internal examiners often raise questions regarding the number of distinctions in MFOCS programme, but, in view of the level of results achieved, it is completely justified and fully deserved that almost all students achieve a distinction.*

### **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 is conducted rigorously, although the level of rigour and criteria vary between different assessors. Some projects are set as very open ended and allow students to demonstrate a high degree of independence and originality, while others (especially mini-projects) are in the form of a take-home exam, with a precise marking scheme, and it is clearly easier to score higher on the latter type. Given the generally high quality of the work by the students, this does not seem to affect the overall degree classification.*

### **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?*

*There was a discussion, initiated by Oliver Riordan, whether the role of the externals should be to actively intervene to ensure that the level of projects is more uniform. This was somewhat contradictory to what I was led to believe my role was previously. Unfortunately, that request arrived too late (after I was already ready to return a batch of mini-projects), and there was no time to properly discuss the consequences, so I preferred to keep my comments moderate on that occasion.*

*The issue of exactly how strict the externals should be during the process of setting mini-projects has not been properly discussed to this date, although a new process was initiated to attempt to make the level more uniform and ensure that projects have an open-ended component, which consists in forwarding externals' comments to setters and asking them to react. I was more strict in the latest batch of comments, but the timelines are too tight to allow the setters to implement any significant changes, and to allow any feedback to the externals as to which comments were actually taken on board.*

#### **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.*


*This is a well-designed programme that attracts very strong students and helps them make their first steps toward independent research, preparing them well for pursuing either PhD studies or a career in industry research. It is clear that most candidates have either PhD places or high-profile placements in the commercial sector lined up.*

*I am happy to observe that the following good practice persists: the presence of assessors during vivas was helpful to interpret the numerical grades and comments made on projects, especially in cases where there was a significant gap between the first and second assessor's marks.*

#### **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.*

None.

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	04 Dec 2019

**Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and 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.**