

## **Natural Science Tripos Part II, History and Philosophy of Science**

### **Senior Examiner's Report 2023-24**

#### Examiners

Senior examiner: Stephen John

Examiners: Lewis Bremner, Philippa Carter, Michael Diamond-Hunter Tom McClelland, Charu Singh

Assessors: Helene Scott-Fordsmand, Edwin Rose

External examiner: Sabina Leonelli (Exeter)

#### Numbers of students examined (including BBS and borrowed papers)

33 HPS, 21 BBS Minor 45, 3 BBS Minor 65, 4 BBS Minor 66, 4 BBS Major 13\_1-4, 22 History SS11, 3 Classics 2 PBS, 2 HSPS, 17 Phil IB

#### Examination format (HPS Part II)

Coursework: One primary source essay (5,000 words, 20%) and one dissertation (8,000 words, 20%; Option A only). Open-book examinations: 6 papers offered, with candidates writing three (Option A) or four (Option B).

#### Examiners' meetings

A preliminary meeting was held to set examination papers and clarify the exams timetable on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2024. A second meeting was held on 24<sup>th</sup> May, where examiners agreed provisional marks for the dissertation and primary source elements of the course, and identified sample work to be sent to the external examiner. The final, full examiners' meeting was held in a hybrid format on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2024, with all examiners, assessors and the external examiner in attendance. Prior to this meeting the external examiner received sample scripts, and provided feedback. During the meeting, the examiners scrutinised the draft markbook,

paying particular attention to borderline cases and cases involving significant disagreements, as well as receiving advice from the external, before agreeing on the final markbook.

## Report

Thirty-three candidates sat the HPS Part II examinations in 2021-22. This was a notable increase on the 26 candidates in the preceding year, but in the range experienced since 2020. As in previous years, six Part II papers were offered. Three students chose Option B, writing four papers and a primary source essay, while the remaining thirty chose Option A, writing three papers, a primary source essay and a dissertation. Last year's report noted that the class of 2022-2023 did worse than recent years' performance. This trend continued with the 2023-2024 cohort, where only a fifth of students achieved Firsts (down significantly from previous years), and we saw a marked increase in the number of 2ii and Third class grades (Table 1). Although lower than normal, the overall distribution of Part II marks is not markedly out of line with other tripos subjects or long term trends, but the sustained dip since 2021 is notable. It is hard to explain this phenomenon, but one part of the puzzle is that very many students who performed very well on the coursework elements of the course were pulled down by their performance in the unseen exams. Obviously, we consulted on these issues with the External Examiner, but Prof Leonelli was content that we were applying the same standards to exams as in previous years. Partly, it seems that this phenomenon was due to an ongoing pattern, noted often by previous examiners' reports, of exam answers which simply repeated lectures, rather than engaging critically with the material. However, this year we also noted an alarming trend of students who seemed incapable of completing the exam; a surprising number of scripts contained three full answers, but only a paragraph or brief plan for the fourth answer. These issues are discussed in greater detail below.

Year	First	2i	2ii	Third	Deserved Honours	Total	A	B
2024	6	22	2	3	-	33	30	3
2023	9	16	1	-	-	26	22	4
2022	12	24	1	-	-	37	33	4
2021	13	11	-	-	-	24	20	4
2020	14	15	1	-	-	30	29	1
2019	8	5	-	-	-	13	10	3
2018	16	10	2	-	-	28	19	9
2017	12	11	-	1	-	24	19	5
2016	12	17	2	-	-	31	25	6
2015	12	12	1	-	-	25	20	5
2014	15	23	2	-	-	40	27	7

Table 1: Distribution of HPS Part II marks, 2014-24

The HPS Part II Examiners also mark papers for BBS candidates and pass the marks on to the BBS Board where the candidates are classed, and papers borrowed by other triposes. Three BBS Minor candidates sat the paper ‘Early Medicine’ (BBS Paper 65), four took ‘Modern Medicine and Biomedical Sciences’ (BBS Paper 66), and 21 took “Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine” (BBS Paper 45). On Paper 65, one student got a First, one a 2i, and one a 2ii;, on Paper 66, there was one First and three 2is. On Paper 45, there was a spread of marks: four Firsts; fourteen 2is; two 2iis and a Third. Four BBS Minor students chose to write a dissertation, with a remarkable range of marks, including a strong First. Performance on all three BBS Minor papers was in-line with previous years. There was a slight increase in the number of firsts, although students taking paper 65 did slightly worse than in the previous year on average.

2024 was the third year, in which a BBS Major in HPS was offered. The four students on this course sat four examination papers: Early Medicine (identical with BBS Paper 65), Modern Medicine and Bio Medical Sciences (identical with BBS Paper 66), Philosophy of Science and Medicine (a combination of questions relating to HPS Papers 4 and 5), and Ethics of Medicine (with questions relating to HPS Paper 6). Three of these students also wrote a

dissertation in HPS. It was pleasing to note that there seems to have been an improvement over time in the marks of students taking the BBS Major, with some strong performances.

Three Classics student borrowed Paper 1, receiving a normal spread of marks. 22 students from History Part II sat Paper 65; a fuller report has been submitted to the History faculty, but it is worth noting here that, perhaps surprisingly, the average mark for these students was not much higher than BBS minor students. Three PBS students took Paper 4, Philosophy and Scientific Practice, with a First, 2i, and 2ii. Two HSPS student borrowed Paper 6, both receiving a First. We also examined Philosophy IB students on Paper 5. This option attracted 17 students (four Firsts, eight 2i, six 2ii and one failure due to incomplete answers). Again, it was notable that, as with the HPS cohort, many candidates failed to write four full essays, and there was a tendency to regurgitate lecture material.

### Class and mark distributions

Table 2 below shows the distribution of marks for each assessed element of the HPS Part II course. Several important trends stand out.

The first is that, although Papers 1-5 were roughly equally popular, Paper 6 was extremely popular, with all but four candidates taking this option. This is in-line with a historical pattern, but a change on past year, when there was no marked discrepancy.

Second, as in previous years, the vast majority of students wrote dissertations; given the gap between exam performance and coursework performance (discussed below), students who didn't write a dissertation tended to be disadvantaged. Given the pedagogical benefits of writing a dissertation, we suggest that the HPS Board should discuss whether to make this aspect of the assessment compulsory.

Third, mean and median marks for Papers 2-6 were roughly equivalent, hovering in the low 2i range; these average marks are a decrease in last year, where mean and median marks for examined elements were typically in the mid 2i range. Paper 1 was, however, an exception, with mean and median marks of high 2i. The two examiners for Paper 1 seemed in-line with

their co-examiners for other papers; therefore, we are content that this discrepancy reflects better student performance, rather than more lenient standards being applied to Paper 1.

Fourth, there is a significant difference between performance on the coursework elements of the course and examined elements. This was also a feature of the results in 2023, but the gap in 2024 was, with the exception of Paper 1, even more marked; for example, the mean mark for a dissertation was 70, but for students taking Paper 3 it was only 58.3. Furthermore, this general pattern was reflected at the individual level, where many students had an extremely uneven performance between coursework and examined elements of the course; for example, several students who received very high First Class marks for their essays received low Upper Seconds for their exams.

Element	First	Upper Second	Lower Second	Third	Fail	Total	Max	Med	Mean
Primary Source	14	15	3	1	-	33	80	68	67.1
Dissertation	21	6	1	1	1	30	81	71.5	70.0
Paper 1	8	6	1	1	-	16	76	69.5	67.9
Paper 2	1	8	2	1	-	12	75	65	62.8
Paper 3	1	9	7	1	1	19	72	60	58.4
Paper 4	2	10	-	1	-	13	70	63.5	63
Paper 5	1	7	3	1		12	70	63	60.6
Paper 6	6	15	7	-	1	29	75	64	63.1

Table 2: Distribution of HPS Part II marks per element of assessment. Note: BBS, PBS, History and Philosophy students are not represented

The discrepancies between coursework and examined elements of the course were discussed by examiners. It was noted that our Senior Examiner was of the opinion that the exam marks awarded were consistent with previous years. Therefore, we suspect that it is unlikely that examiners were marking examined work more harshly than in previous years. Rather, the key issue seems to have been that a relatively high number of students – including those with strong coursework performance – were unable to complete four essays in three hours. Very

many scripts contained three decent essays, but were dragged down by a fourth, far weaker answer. It was unclear to us, as examiners, why this problem should be so much more marked this year than in previous years. Furthermore, even when scripts were complete, answers were often summaries of lecture material; given the examiner guidelines, highly competent summaries of lectures can, at best, receive a mid- to high-2i.

In terms of gender, this was a highly unusual year. Unlike in recent years (see Table 3 below), there was a notable gender split in candidates, with 21 female students and only 12 male students. Furthermore, in a notable break from previous years, female students were disproportionately well-represented in the First Class category, with only one male achieving a First. As noted, this is an unusual set of results given the historical precedent. However, it is difficult to understand the extent to which both the skewed ratio of female to male students and the skewed ratio of First Class performances are related. Certainly, this year's result should dispel the concern that a return to 3-hour exams was likely disproportionately to benefit male students. It will be interesting to see whether this year's results are a statistical blip or represent the start of a longer-term shift.

Year	First		Upper Second		Lower Second		Third		Total		Total candidates
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
2024	1	5	8	14	1	1	2	1	12	21	33
2023	6	3	7	9	0	1	-	-	13	13	26
2022	8	4	9	15	1	-	-	-	18	19	37
2021	4	6	9	5	-	-	-	-	13	11	24
2020	7	6	7	9	-	1	-	-	14	16	30
2019	3	5	4	1	-	-	-	-	7	6	13
2018	8	8	4	6	1	1	-	-	13	15	28

Table 3: Distribution of HPS Part II class marks by gender.

## Examining practice

Examination papers were drafted in Lent term following consultation with lecturers, supervisors and paper managers. The External Examiner Sabina Leonelli, acting in her third year, provided feedback on all of the questions. Efforts were made to ensure that exam questions reflected supervisions and lectures while allowing for independent reflection. Following some confusion last year, particular efforts were made to ensure that we tracked properly the differences between the HPS and BBS courses. This was successful, but did require a very large bank of questions, given the complex number of possible options for students taking the same lecture courses to be examined in separate formats. While there may be good pedagogical reasons to maintain the current structures for differentiating HPS and BBS, these reasons should be balanced against the potential costs in terms of the complexity of exams.

Primary Source essays and Dissertaions were marked shortly after they were received, and examiners were encouraged to agree marks for these elements of the course before the examination period started, to allow the external examiner early access to samples and contentious cases. Marks and comments for Primary Source essays, dissertations and individual papers were entered into pre-circulated spreadsheets. All elements of the examination were blind double-marked with examiners meeting to agree on marks. This process typically involved lengthy discussion, rather than merely taking an average of marks. In all cases where there was substantial disagreement in initial marks, the external examiner was asked to verify that the agreement reached was reasonable. The external examiner was also asked to review high and low performances, and review marks in cases where an agreed mark fell into a lower class (so, for example, if one examiner recommended a 72 for a dissertation and the second, a 67, agreeing on 69). The external examiner was also given access to all scripts to facilitate moderation. The move to online exams has made this entire process far easier.

Overall, open book online examinations worked smoothly again, with no major technical difficulties reported. There were, however, some cases where, despite being online, scripts

went astray, and examiners are to be thanked for their swift and cheerful willingness to mark some scripts at short notice. In one case, a student believed that they had submitted a script when, in fact, they had not. This was rather puzzling, but the student had also emailed a copy of the script, and we were advised by the Exams Office that this should be marked as if it had been submitted through the proper channels.

Workload per examiner was slightly higher than in previous years, reflecting a decision to use the same number of examiners and assessors despite an increase in students. A concerted effort was made to ensure rough parity between examiners, but this proved impossible in some cases, as it conflicted with our policy of assigning only two examiners per paper. Overall, workload was manageable, but, unfortunately, the most popular paper, Paper 6, was scheduled last in the calendar, concurrently with the popular BBS Minor option in Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine. This meant that examiners for these papers had little time to turn around a large number of scripts.

The process of exams administration went very smoothly with no significant problems reported in their conduct. In particular, the new process for handling SSDs was effective, as was the process for use of Turnitin. Communication from and with other departments was good, although there was sometimes difficulty with ensuring that examinations timetables were aligned; while we appreciate, for example, that other faculties will require marks for their own exam board meetings, it would be helpful for these dates to be clarified in advance to allow examiners to plan more effectively.

The examiners and assessors acted with great efficiency and consideration for their colleagues. It was particularly pleasing that, despite not being obliged to do so, our Assessors, Edwin Rose and Helene Scott-Fordsmand, attended the final meeting, where they provided very helpful feedback. We thank Helen Meijer and Niko Ovenden for their excellent administrative support. David Thompson should be singled out for his calm and efficient administrative support, providing helpful advice over a period of significant administrative upheavals. Finally, we were grateful to our external examiner, Sabina Leonelli, acting in her



third (and final) year in this role, who has provided the department with support and constructive criticism.

### Comments on performance

#### Dissertations

As in previous years the majority of students chose to write a dissertation. Overall, students were very successful in this component. Indeed, as discussed above, there was a notable gap between the dissertation performance and other aspects of the course. It is worth stressing here that the high average mark for dissertations was, as the external examiner confirmed, entirely warranted. At the top end of the scale, we saw some truly outstanding work, which could form the basis for publication in top journals. Furthermore, even work which was not outstanding was still, often, of extremely high quality, engaging with difficult material from unusual angles. Examiners were keen to stress that it is truly remarkable what students can achieve in this format. Furthermore, they noted that the Dissertation format has the advantage that, precisely because students are expected to generate original arguments on the basis of novel research, it is resistant to the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT. The only potential issue we noted was that, as in previous years, the very top marks seem disproportionately allocated to historical, rather than philosophical, work. Although there are multiple possible reasons for this discrepancy, including the nature of the subjects or student self-selection, one possible explanation is a difference in “marking culture” between the disciplines; we suggest, then, that, in future years, Philosophy examiners are encouraged to use the full range of marks.

#### Primary Source Essays

As with dissertations, students tended to perform very well on this aspect of the course, with a median mark of 68, and some very high marks indeed. Continuing previous policy, there was a cap on the number of students who could write on each source, ensuring a more even spread of topics, although it was notable that some sources (on AI art, on The Population Bomb, and on Covid-19) were more popular than others. Given the low absolute number of students taking any particular source, it is hard to draw any conclusions about whether students were particularly advantaged by taking specific sources. We note that previous worries about engagement with sources seemed less pronounced this year. Examiners did

note, however, that some weaker performances were marked by a failure to take appropriate critical distance from a source, treating it as an authority, rather than something which should, itself, be open to question.

### Open book examinations

Across all papers, some questions were far more popular than others. Students should be reminded that they can often impress examiners by attempting less popular questions. Across papers, we also noted a continuing tendency to use pre-prepared material which did not always address the question at hand; this was particularly noticeable in response to Section A questions, where students often seemed to contort deliberately broad questions into far narrower niches as a way of discussing certain topics. In no cases was there clear or straightforward evidence of plagiarism or use of software-generated text, although some students were penalised for using very similar material to answer different questions on the same paper. For the following remarks on performance on each individual paper, keep in mind that absolute numbers are low and thus have little statistical significance.

### Paper 1

There was a reasonably good distribution of essays across the twelve questions, although question 12 (on ‘Enlightenment’ natural philosophy) received no answers, and questions 4, 6 and 10 only two each. Q. 9 (on the ‘medical marketplace’) received the most answers (13). Common shortcomings included not answering the question as posed; time management problems, resulting in a brief one-paragraph answer or a list of bullet points; convoluted, fragmented prose; and a lack of critical distance (both on the ‘facts’ of history and the historians cited). Examiners noted that answers to q5 (on “maritime travel”) were often let down by adopting a capacious sense of “maritime travel” to include colonialism or expansion more generally, leading to loosely-argued essays; similarly, in responses to q7, many students extended the time range well beyond the sixteenth-century, as stipulated in the question; and in response to q8, many students did not focus on “prayer” and “religious contemplation” but larger themes of religion. In general, then, students are to be reminded that questions which use precise terms require a tight focus. It was noticeable that the best performances across this paper tended to engage in historiographical debate, rather than adopting a more descriptive approach; this difference explains why, in general, q9, which was framed in a more deliberately conceptual mode elicited some very strong performances.

## Paper 2

There was notable clustering in answers to this paper; in Section A, q2 was, by far, most popular. Unfortunately, many answers to this question focused more on the limits of the lecture course entitled “Sciences and Empires”, rather than the more substantive question of the historiographical framework. In Section B, very few candidates attempted answers to questions 8, 11 and 12. This was a shame, as the few answers to q11, on the history of computing, were excellent, showing great engagement with relevant arguments; examiners might want to note that the phrasing of this question helped students identify relevant debates. Students also tended to do very well on q.7 (modern physics) and 8 (science and social planning), but far less well on q.4 A key failing here was a failure to engage fully with the quotation offered, with many students instead writing more broadly on the general topic of scientific revolution (or lack thereof).

## Paper 3

Performance on this paper was notably weak (see Table 2), with an alarming number of incomplete scripts. In Section A, q1 was very unpopular, with most students writing on 2 and 3; it was notable that answers to 2, tended to be stronger than answers to 3, where students often wrote of the effects of colonialism generally, rather than with specific reference to medicine. In Section B, three questions were very unpopular: q4 (3 candidates), q5 (2 candidates), and q8 (0 candidates); it is notable that all three questions were quite detailed, suggesting students may prefer more “open” questions. Answers to q6 were notably weak, with many students writing more generally on the history of the hospital, rather than their perception. There was a very high degree of variance in answers to q.9, with weaker students tending to produce a few case studies without fully showing how or why these studies related to broader themes. In response to q11, few students were able to define “social medicine” clearly, or state how it was different from other biopolitical visions in the twentieth century; as such, their examples from the history of international health didn’t always connect back to the question of social medicine

## Paper 4

In Section A, only one candidate wrote on q2, with a fairly even spread between 1 and 2; in general, students did badly on this aspect of the exam, too often focusing on specific cases

rather than larger questions of methodology and generalisation. In Section B, apart from q9 (2 candidates), there were no particularly unpopular questions. In general, q11 was answered well, with answers showing genuine engagement with whether the “hard problem” is a problem. A common theme in answers to this paper was that students often failed to engage fully with the philosophical issues at play. For example, many answers to q4 simply set out the theory behind CBA, rather than the politics/science split; answers to q5 tended to focus on listing some models in economics and discussing their (de)merits, rather than the general strategy; and answers to q8 discussed evidential rather than conceptual questions. In response to q7 many students discussed extrapolation from animal models, rather than, as the question asked, clinical trials; this may reflect the balance in lecture material, but students should answer the questions set. Answers to q8 tended to suffer from a failure to discuss different meanings of “subjective”.

#### Paper 5

In Section A, the vast majority of students wrote on q3 (and the few answers on q1 and 2) were very weak; in retrospect, it may be that q3 was too limited for a Section A question, as it could, in principle, be answered using material from a single lecture course (and, notably, there was some overlap with Section B). In Section B, apart from q4, all questions were equally popular. A general issue across the paper was that students often failed to define key concepts. This was especially common in Q10 with students not defining what “epistemic” means in the context and Q11 with students not defining what “subjective” means in the context. Students should be reminded that, often, debates turn heavily on how we define our terms. Q5 (on structural realism) was, in general, well answered, but very few students went beyond explaining the no miracles argument and the pessimistic meta-induction to make original points, leading to a very homogeneous set of answers. Q8 attracted some excellent answers, particularly when students engaged closely with different senses in which science might have “aims”.

#### Paper 6

All three Section A questions were equally popular. There was a noticeable pattern in response to q2 that answers were either very strong or very weak; this turned almost entirely on whether students took time to distinguish different ways in which it might be “wrong” to put scientists in charge. In Section B, a decent number of students attempted each question,

with q6 (inductive risk), q10 (AI) and q12 (psychiatry and compulsion) particularly popular. Answers to q5 often did a good job of outlining issues around racial categories, but often spent too long on the scientific detail at the expense of engaging with the normative aspects of the question. There were some excellent answers to q6, but also very many scripts did little more than summarise the lecture material, even though the question asked was not quite the same as that covered in teaching. Answers to q8 (on science and communism) often seemed to list various case studies, but without much sense of how these related to the broader question asked; they should remember that one or two examples of East-West co-operation do not show that the notion of an Iron Curtain is hopelessly useless. Q11 required students to reach across different lecture sources; it attracted some excellent answers, and students should be aware that tackling these sorts of questions is an excellent way to show original thinking.

### BBS Major and Minor

All three BBS minor papers showed good engagement. Marks were distributed evenly, but in comparison with underlying HPS papers, answers to the History papers tended to do worse, while students taking the Philosophy and Ethics papers tended to do better. Interestingly, this year we saw an increase in minor paper students writing a dissertation in HPS to four students; one of these students scored very well, and another achieved a high 2i, suggesting that this is a viable route for future students.

### Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine BBS Minor:

In general, this paper resembled the performance on the underlying HPS Paper 6. However, some comments may help future students taking this paper. First, too much space was sometimes given to exposition of the science, leaving insufficient room to discuss the relevant philosophical issues. This happened especially with Q1. Second, students often failed to define concepts. This was especially common in Q2 with students not really defining what 'nudges' are. Third, it was notable that in some questions, students were willing to develop their own novel theories (esp q9); they should be less afraid to do the same for other questions. That said, students often failed to cover the key insights from the lectures and

readings before offering their own ideas. Original work should be suitable grounded in course material.

#### Early Medicine BBS minor (Also BBS Major Paper 1)

Performance on this paper was very mixed, although, again with so few students, a few outliers often skewed average marks for specific questions. In general, answers to q4 were strong, with students making some interesting comments on the link to Aristotlean traditions. Examiners noted that there was a clear gap between the weaker answers to this paper, which tended just to regurgitate historical narratives, and stronger answers which engaged more fully in historiographical debates. Students should remember that a good answer is more than a list of received facts.

#### Modern Medicine BBS minor (Also BBS Major Paper 1)

It is hard to comment on general trends, given the small number of scripts. Across the board, the most popular questions were 3 (impacts of bacteriological knowledge on surgery/public health) and 6 (Why did so many physicians in the early twentieth century insist that medicine was an art, and not a science?). It was notable that q1 was in general well-answered, but responses to q3 tended to follow textbook presentations very uncritically. In response to q9, all candidates used the same three movements as case studies. Perhaps because of the clear remit of the question, these responses were particularly well-structured and argued.

#### BBS Major

This offer was only taken up by four students, and, as such, it is hard to note trends in any of the four exam papers. However, it was notable that overall performance by BBS students was at a comparable level to HPS students writing on comparable material. It was particularly notable that performances on the Ethics of Medicine paper tended to be better than HPS students writing on the same material, continuing a trend from last year. Dissertation performances were more mixed, but one student achieved a particularly high mark,

suggesting that worries early on in the introduction of the BBS course about low relative performance by these students may have been a blip. We suggest that students consulting this report for advice on specific questions consult the comments above on the underlying HPS and BBS minor papers.

### Single Paper Options

A notable feature this year was that the performance of Historians and Philosophers taking HPS papers was not markedly different from the performance of HPS students taking the same papers. Notably, some of the key problems we noted in HPS papers – including a preponderance of unfinished papers – also affected students who borrowed our papers. Therefore, the comments on individual papers above also apply to these cohorts. As noted, a very small number of students from other subjects also take HPS scripts. However, as the numbers are so small, it is difficult to draw any inferences from any particular cohort; it was, however, notable that the quality of writing for HSPS students taking Paper 6 was much higher than for HPS students writing on the same material.

### Recommendations

1. College Directors of Studies, Examiners and Administrators need to be clear about the relations between different single papers and core Part II papers. Although this did not affect examining, in the run up to the exams, many students were in contact asking for clarification on what was expected. Furthermore, it would be sensible to ensure greater co-ordination with other triposes far earlier in the examinations process to avoid problems with timetabling.
2. The HPS Board should consider making the dissertation element compulsory, given that this has pedagogical benefits and seems to benefit students in terms of performance.
3. We continue to recommend the continued use of formatted mark books stored on a shared drive to simplify administration. This should include, as far as possible, examiners' notes on individual marking papers. This year, after the exams, there was a notable trend of students requesting access to data, including *via* subject access requests, and this trend is only likely to continue.

4. There should be a discussion of whether we require HPS Part II examiners to agree on each question, as is required by BBS, or only on the overall mark for the paper. Given changes to NST marking more generally, students increasingly demand access to question-level marks and may be confused when they discover that examiners have resolved disagreements at the level of the script, rather than the individual paper.
5. In setting questions, examiners should carefully consider the use of quotations. Specifically, they should clarify to students the extent to which the quote should be discussed in detail, and the extent to which it serves merely as a prompt for a question. In the latter case, it may be preferable to frame questions more directly.
6. Examiners of philosophical work should be encouraged to reflect on their marking culture, and, in particular, their willingness to hand out the very highest marks.
7. Guidelines should clarify more precisely what to do in cases where students submit extremely short or unfinished work; the “Fail” category covers a very wide range of marks between 0 and 40, and examiners noted that they were sometimes uncertain how to differentiate within this range.
8. Supervisors and Directors of Studies should remind students that, faced with an incomplete script, examiners have no option but to award a low overall mark, even if the script contains some excellent answers. Students should be encouraged to prioritise writing four decent essays rather than three very good essays and a stub.
9. There should be serious reflection on the large gap between students’ performance in coursework and in examinations. In the longer term, there are hopes to change modes of assessment in ways which respond to some of these issues. However, in the shorter term, and if these plans are unsuccessful, it is important to consider various possibilities: one is that examiners are marking too harshly. We do not think that this is the case, but, for reasons of equity, examiners should be encouraged, as always, to use the full range of marks. A second possibility is that students are becoming less well-suited to examinations. This may be the result of a disrupted school experience as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – in which case, the issue may resolve over time – or reflect larger changes in schooling and education. Either way, if we are to continue to use 3-hour exams, we should pay serious attention to the fact that students seem to find it difficult to perform under these conditions.
10. Candidates are advised to address the question they have been asked, rather than the question they wished they had been asked; they should be reminded that a decent answer to the question set will score far more highly than a great essay which does not



engage with the question. They should also be encouraged to go beyond lecture material, and reminded that originality can come in many forms; for example, we do not expect students to develop entirely new theories or concepts (indeed, essays which attempt new theories often display a worrying lack of grounding in the literature), but students should be willing to attack received views, suggest changes, propose novel applications and so on. Given the ample evidence from coursework, students are often capable of novel work, and they should remember to display these skills under exam conditions.