

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM FOR TAUGHT COURSES 2020-21

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Name(s) of course(s) examined <i>e.g. Tripos Part/ MPhil</i>	Tripos Part III, MPhil			
Level ( <i>Delete as appropriate</i> )	Undergraduate (Part III)		Postgraduate (MPhil by advanced study)	
Year of Appointment	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup> X	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Are the academic standards set for the award appropriate for the qualification, and comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions?	X		
2. Are you satisfied that you received sufficient programme materials (handbooks, regulations, marking and classing criteria) in a timely manner?	X		
3. Are you satisfied that you were consulted adequately on draft examination papers, and that your comments and suggestions were taken into consideration?	X		
4. Are you satisfied that the assessment was pitched at the appropriate level?	X		
5. Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	X		
6. Do the assessment processes measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme?	X		
7. Are you satisfied that issues raised on your previous report form have been properly considered and, where applicable, acted upon?	X		
8. Did you receive a written response from the Department to your previous report form?		X	

If you replied No to any of the questions above, please expand here:

I do not think I received a written response from the Department, but my comments from 2019-20 did not require any major action. I also saw my (minor) suggestion of making more use of the upper mark range effectively implemented this year.

Do you have any concerns about the course, including standards and quality?

Just like last year, I have absolutely no concerns about the courses, their standards and their quality. Both the Part III and the MPhil courses at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science equip students with sophisticated research skills to investigate science and understand its role in society and culture. It has been an absolute pleasure to read the essays and dissertations for Part III and for the MPhil, as well as the examination paper for Part III. This was a challenging year given the disruptions caused by the pandemic, the repeated lockdowns, and the move to online teaching and learning, but I was greatly impressed by the quality of the student's works and the excellent support they received by the Department.

Are you satisfied that the procedures associated with the assessment are efficient (e.g. timeframes, draft papers, questions, design and conduct of exam, meetings, vivas)?

The timing and overall examining procedures were excellent, and again this comment applies to both the Part III and the MPhil course. The Department has very clear internal deadlines, organised around examiners' meetings in February, April, and June/July. Even with this year's disruptions and additional workload caused by them, assessments were sent to me well in advance, and it was easy to organise my workload and meet each deadline.

The conduct of the examination meetings was commendable. The paperwork was extremely clear and easy to follow; meetings were chaired efficiently and decisions were taken transparently. The administrative team's support was invaluable to ensure the smooth running of the examination process and in ensuring that procedures and regulations were followed. The use of Sharepoint greatly facilitated access to samples of coursework, and the material uploaded was organised in a clear and accessible way.

The exam paper for Part III was challenging, but it was also designed according to very clear learning objectives. I had the opportunity to see the paper well in advance and was invited to provide comments. Clear mitigation procedures were put in place, with the number of answers on the paper reduced from 2 to 1, in response to the pandemic. I found this resolution appropriate, and in the interest of guaranteeing the best learning experience to all students.

Do you have any comments on marking and classing (e.g. range of marks, action around borderline marks, penalties, moderation, double marking, reconciliation of marks)?

The assessors' feedback is constructive and useful. It was very helpful to be able to read all the reports, along with a sample of the essays, for comparability of feedback across different areas of research in the Department and to contextualise the marks I received in a separate spreadsheet. I was very impressed by the level of detail and engagement with the students' work in each assessor's report. After I asked some clarification about the resolution of marks on some essays in the December and February batches, the Department took prompt action and subsequent reports conveyed a very clear sense of how assessors arrived at agreed marks. I recommend that the department maintains the same level of clarity on how marks are agreed, especially when there is a wide spread of marks, in future years.

There were some cases in which I was specifically asked to moderate marks. These were accompanied by some documentation of the nature of assessors' disagreements over particular marks. In those cases, my recommendations were followed.

Do you have any comments on the student experience of the course and/or their experience of the assessment process?

My overall impression is that students on both courses produce work of the highest calibre, with some essays and dissertations clearly showing potential for publication and further work at PhD level. This result is especially remarkable given the circumstances and the disruptions of the past academic year. In the case of the dissertations, it was impressive to see how students tackled proactively the practical issues arising from research during a worldwide pandemic in an intellectually honest and competent way. Some dissertations contained very helpful sections on sources that would have been used, if access to archives had not been severely disrupted. There were some exemplary cases of excellent work with online archives and digitised sources. The works demonstrate competence in navigating the literature, locating relevant sources, and making independent decisions, irrespectively of the disruptions during the prolonged periods of lockdown. The mitigation in place for the dissertation, consisting of a one-week extension, was appropriate and in the interest of the students' overall learning experience.

Such outstanding results would be impossible to achieve, unless students were in an environment that genuinely helped them thrive. From the support of the supervisions to the tone and content of each assessor's report, it is clear that they are immersed in an intellectually challenging, academically diverse, and scholarly rigorous environment. It was a pleasure to see that as a result the students developed the confidence and ability to step out of their comfort zone in all their assessments – and that they were indeed trained and encouraged to do so throughout the whole programme.

Do you have any comments on University policies (e.g. the role of the external examiner, policies around plagiarism, script annotation)?

The relevant policies were clearly communicated to me at the beginning of my appointment, and were easy to retrieve. The website is easy to navigate, Sharepoint is used effectively to facilitate access to samples of coursework, and documents are labelled clearly and organised in an accessible order. Administrative support was remarkably prompt and helpful in the rare cases where I struggled to locate the relevant rules.

Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.

I do not have major recommendations, but I would like to highlight two minor points. One is about the negotiation of spread of marks: when this exceeds five marks I would recommend that a clear justification of how the markers arrive at the agreed mark is included in the confidential comments included in the examiners' reports. The Department already begun implementing this recommendation last year. The second point concerns pieces of assessment marked as borderline starred distinctions. These continue to be – in my view – exceptionally strong essays. It is great to see that the Department is taking the recommendation I made last year seriously, and is now making greater use of the upper first class mark range. It is my hope that this good practice will continue in future years.

Please highlight any good practice you encountered.

- Quality of the reports on student essays, Part III exam and dissertations: the feedback is extensive, substantive and constructive. While there is coherence and consistency in the style and format of the reports, it is also a joy to see that the distinctive scholarly voices and diverse approaches of individual members of staff come through in the feedback and guidance to the students.
- Quality of supervisions: This continues to be excellent. While this is work that goes on in the background, it is clear that students are offered substantive and constructive support across both courses, and throughout the academic year. This was especially commendable given the practical difficulties posed by this year's circumstances.
- Implementation of mitigation in response to the pandemic: this was done transparently, in compliance with university-wide regulations, but also with a focus on the students' best interest.

A robust and rigorous examination process overall.

Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?

No.

If this is your final year as external examiner? If so, have you seen improvements over your tenure? Has the Department acted on your advice?

This was my second year as an external examiner, and I look forward to the next academic year.

Do you have any other comments?

I would like to congratulate Salim Al-Gailani (Senior Examiner for 2020-2021) for his superb work during an especially challenging year. I would also like to thank David Thompson, for his invaluable and insightful administrative support.

Thank you for completing the Examiners Report form.

**Please now forward to [vcexternalexaminers@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:vcexternalexaminers@admin.cam.ac.uk) by July 31<sup>st</sup>** for undergraduate examinations, **1<sup>st</sup> October** for Masters Degrees, and **12<sup>th</sup> October** for resits.

Please also forward copies to your Chair of Examiners.