

NST Part II HPS 2008

Senior Examiner's Report

Twenty-four NST candidates took the examination. Eight achieved First Class marks overall, while fifteen achieved Upper Second Class marks, and one a Lower Second Class marks. The corresponding marks for the previous years were: 5 (13.9%), 30 (83%), and 1 in 2006–07 and 5 (13.5%) and 30 (81%) in 2005-6.

Four candidates from NST Part II BBS took Paper 7 and three candidates from NST Part II BBS took Paper 8.

Class and mark distributions

Fourteen candidates achieved First Class marks on the dissertation; some of these performances were of impressively high calibre (five candidates were awarded marks over 75, and of these one was an 80, one a 90). There was no Lower Second Class Mark on this part of the Tripos examination.

Six candidates were awarded First Class marks and four Lower Second Class marks for their Primary Source Essays. One candidate submitted only one Primary Source Essay; the Examiners awarded a zero corresponding to the absent Primary Source Essay and the student's overall mark for this portion of the Examination was a Fail.

In the written Examinations the Examiners awarded twenty-three First Class marks and six Lower Second Class marks (in papers 3, 6, 7, and 9).

Examining Practices

Unseen papers were set by the examiners at a meeting during the Lent Term, then sent to the External Examiner, who provided considerable input.

At this preliminary meeting there was also wide-ranging discussion concerning the appropriateness of the practice of adjusting marks at the upper end of the scale. The examiners considered the rules applied in other Faculties and Departments (Philosophy, History, Classics and SPS). This early discussion and agreement on how to proceed made the final meeting considerably easier and faster. The Examiners agreed to keep the long-established practice of making final adjustments to overall marks for those candidates who had achieved First Class marks. The number of overall First Class marks achieved by individual candidates was considered for this purpose at the final meeting, as was a particularly fine performance in the Dissertation.

A final thank you to all Examiners, and a particularly warm acknowledgement to our External Examiner, who yet again went through a phenomenal amount of written materials in a relatively short time, and offered detailed and balanced advice whenever his judgment was appealed to.

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Senior Examiner, NST Part II HPS

Appendix: Reports by Examiners on Individual Papers

Paper 1

Many of the primary source essays were excellent — well structured and imaginative in their handling of the sources.

Of the eight candidate who took the written examination, three achieved First Class marks. Quite a few of the answers were purely factual, unsurprisingly given how many straight factual questions there were. In the general section, two candidates answer Question 1, while no-one attempted Question 3; Question 2, about the social context of science and mathematics before 1600, was answered by six candidates with very uneven results. Given the vast range of the question, some candidates chose to answer by exploring a couple of case-studies, while others tried to cram in everything they knew. Even for a general question, this one was perhaps too general. The distribution of answers in Section B was also somewhat uneven (seven candidates answered question 11, four answered questions 4 and 5, three or fewer answered questions 6, 7, 8, 9a, 10, or 12, and no-one attempted question 9b).

Paper 2

The Fontenelle Primary Source was chosen by five candidates, who produced interesting, imaginative work. Two of them were awarded a First Class Mark.

The exam paper was taken by 6 candidates; two were awarded First Class marks. All of them answered the same question from Section A (the scientific revolution). In Section B, questions 5, 6, 7b were answered by 3 candidates each; questions 7a, 8b and 11 by 2; 4a, 4b, and 12 a by 1; and questions 6b, 9, 10 and 12b by no-one.

The quality of the answers was relatively even and, on the whole, good; there were neither spectacular successes nor disasters. Answers were historiographically informed and analytic rather than merely factual and descriptive; at the lower end of the scale, the analysis tended to be rather crude. This was particularly evident in the answers to the general question, where most candidates, with one notable exception, chose to rehearse standard and rather simplified answers. The examiners also noted that the exam paper had 5 either-or questions – perhaps too many.

Paper 3

The Paper 3 primary source essays were of an overall high standard. Two in particular were excellent, in the range and command of material presented, and in the sophistication of the arguments developed. Both examiners agreed that each of these essays was clearly first class. Of the other three essays, both examiners agreed that one was clearly a high 2.i, displaying, as it did, a solid and broad-based engagement with the relevant material and clear conceptual sophistication. The examiners agreed that the remaining two essays were in the 2.i range. One was a comfortable mid-2.i: well organized and regularly, but not consistently, sophisticated in analysis. The other was awarded a low 2.i given its original focus but overly repetitive argument which often lacked critical analysis.

This paper was taken by 6 candidates. The answers were unevenly distributed in section A, where 5 candidates answered question 1 (on science as an imperial enterprise), 1 answered the question on the role of new instruments in the development of 19th-c science, and no-one answered the question on quantification. In section B the distribution was, however, very even, with two questions attracting 3 answers each (teaching laboratories and roles of maps in geology), 4 question being answered by 2 candidates each, and 4 by 1. Only question 10a failed to attract any answers.

The quality of the scripts was good, with a couple of firsts, two very solid 2i performances, and only one relatively poor script (which received a Third). Several of the scripts seemed a bit uneven in quality, even when the overall result was very good. Some seemed well rehearsed supervision performances. Most tried to answer the section A question by means of case-study essays, a strategy which does not always pay off.

Paper 4

4 primary source essays were submitted. The examiners were closely consistent in their marking and ranking of these essays. There was no outstanding or memorable performance. The topics chosen were interestingly variable. There was a general tendency to insufficient organization of the argument. All candidates showed close engagement with the primary source.

11 students sat this paper. With the exception of #6, all questions were tackled by at least one student.

The general quality of the answers was solid, but not impressive. Most answers contained (too) much exposition and (too) little critical examination. The examiners awarded 2 First Class marks.

Paper 5

There were 7 primary source essays written on Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*. The examiners had no difficulty at all in agreeing marks. The general level of philosophical analysis was quite impressive. There was one outstanding essay which earned a mark of 80+ and another essay which was clearly First Class. There were no essays below the level of II.i. The bulk of the essays approached the source with a view to examining arguments concerning normative relativism. Two essays examined in further detail the key example of the Azande, but somewhat disappointingly.

8 students sat this paper. The distribution of answers was very uneven: #1 and #2 received no answers, #8, #10, and #12 received one each.

The answers were by and large solid, but not memorable (with two First Class scripts). Students struggled to come to grips with the bioethical material.

Paper 6

Seven students chose to write a primary source essay on Freud. The average performance was very solid: students were clearly intrigued by the material. The top

performances were very impressive. The very best essay engaged both with the primary source and with philosophical material well beyond it. Two further essays were also intellectually ambitious and very good. The remaining ones were on the whole solid to very solid, showing a good command of the materials and the ability to discuss it insightfully, even though they tended to stick a bit too closely to standard lines of discussion.

There were 10 candidates for Paper 6. The Examiners awarded 2 First Class marks, 6 II.i.s and 2 II.ii.s. Questions 3 & 11a were not answered. The distribution of answers was gratifyingly even.

The Examiners had no difficulty agreeing marks. They singled out one Section A answer as elegantly integrating historical and philosophical elements into an independent argument that directly addressed the question. The Examiners viewed it as a model answer and recommended that a method be found for using it as such for future students.

Paper 7

Only two candidates chose to write primary source essays on this source, The examiners had therefore no general remarks to offer.

Eight candidates took this paper as part of HPS Part II and four candidates took it as part of BBS. In Section A (not part of the BBS exam), five candidates chose question 2, two chose question 1, and one chose question 3. In Section B the distribution was also uneven. No one attempted question 5, three or fewer candidates answered questions 6a, 6b, 7, 8a, 8b, 11 and 12. Five candidates answered question 4, 7 answered question 10, and eight answered question 9. The scripts were generally very strong. Most candidates showed some basic knowledge of the full scope of the paper. Some of the questions prompted descriptive answers, and few candidates succeeded in blending detailed historical description with analytic flair.

Because this paper covers such a broad chronological and geographical range, future examiners are urged to ensure that questions are not too general (e.g. question 11).

Paper 8

Six students wrote on the Paper 8 primary source. The overall standard was fairly uniformly within the 2.i range. No firsts were awarded. Both examiners agreed that one essay fell into the 2.ii band, and another of a relatively low quality was referred to the external examiner. The candidates generally engaged well with the primary source, although the role and make-up of the "witnesses" whose statements were frequently drawn upon, were inadequately explained. Analysis could have generally been pushed further in a number of essays, where much of the prose was overly-descriptive (also reflected in purely descriptive essay titles or sub-headings).

Eight students took this paper; the Examiners awarded one First and 7 II.i.s. No candidate attempted Question 3 (woman's point of view), 6a (State medical services), 8 (organic physicists). The most answered questions were 4 (healthy athletes) and 7 (surgery's status). There was a general high level of performance, but with only one outstanding performance, which was a clear class above the other candidates.

BBS Paper 8 Single-Paper Option:

3 BBS candidates took this paper; the Examiners awarded 2 II.i's and 1 II.ii. All 3 candidates answered Q7 on surgery's status.

Paper 9

Five students wrote essays on the primary sources for Paper 9. The quality of these works was ranged from excellent to weak. The two best ones were very satisfactory indeed, providing rich context and close analysis of the sources.

This paper was taken by 7 candidates. The distribution of answers in Section A was uneven, with no and 2 takers respectively for questions 1 and 2, and 5 for question 3 (disinterestedness of science). In Section B no candidate answered questions 4a, 4b and 5. The most popular questions were 7 (politics and science) and 8 (logical positivism), answered by 6 candidates each; questions 6 (presentism) and 9 (Locke and Berkeley) were answered by 3 each; while questions 10, 11 and 12 were answered by one candidate each.

The quality of the scripts was very good, with one memorable performance and another 3 first-class answers.