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The Vice-Chancellor
University of Cambridge
The Old Schools
Trinity Lane
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Dear Madam,

Moderating External Examiner's Report (Natural Sciences Tripos Part II: History and Philosophy of Science)

This was my third year as external examiner, and as in previous reports I have nothing but praise for the examiners and administrators in the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science. There was a new Senior Examiner (and Chair) this year, Dr Eleanor Robson, but she took over this new role from the excellent Tim Lewens without any problems whatsoever, and my own experience as external examiner was therefore equally stress-free and indeed rewarding. The other members of the examining board were impressive not just in their expertise in their own subjects, but also in their assiduousness with regard to teaching and examining, and their concern for the students (and, as became evident after student anonymity was lifted, their knowledge of their students). It is evident to professional historians of science that Cambridge has one of the very best research departments in the world, but for those in the know, it is also one of the very best teaching departments.

Perhaps I should be a bit more formal and address your main concerns. The standards are entirely appropriate, in both course work and examinations, for the qualification; and entirely comparable with other UK institutions (I have acted as external examiner at the Universities of Aberdeen, Birkbeck, Glasgow, and UCL, and have taught at Edinburgh for over twenty years). The processes for assessment and examination were well conceived and efficiently carried through, and the Exam Board took careful pains to ensure equitable and fair treatment for all candidates. The Cambridge Department is sufficiently large that it can offer a wide range of courses to its candidates—I do not know of any other UK institution which can compete with Cambridge on this score—and this might be said to constitute an aspect of “good practice”: the fact that students can pick courses to suit their strengths (some are more

historically inclined, others more philosophical). Furthermore, whichever courses they choose, they seem to be taught uniformly to the same high standards.

I was consulted throughout the process of setting questions for course work and exams, and was provided with a generous sample of course work materials well in advance of the Examination Board, and then, on my visit to Cambridge, was given ample opportunity to sample all examination work. I was able, therefore, to look at everything which the Senior Examiner particularly wished me to consider, and to look at other material as I freely chose. The student cohort this year seemed as high-performing as usual. Only one student performed below 50 per cent, which would be unusual in any other university, but seems to fairly reflect the higher standard of your students (it is certainly *not* the case that students in Cambridge are marked more leniently). As I've said, standards at Cambridge are entirely comparable with other institutions—but I believe your students are generally better.

Another factor in student performance, however, is the previously mentioned range of courses on offer from your Department of History and Philosophy of Science. There seems to be a course to cater for all periods of history, for different aspects of the philosophy of science, and even one on the sociology of science. Elsewhere students sometimes have to take subjects which they might prefer to avoid, simply because there are no alternatives. The curriculum in Cambridge is wide and diverse and ought to be the envy of any other department in the country—especially given the standards of the faculty teaching these courses.

In short, as I mentioned at the outset, I have nothing but praise for the Cambridge Department and those members of its faculty involved in teaching and examining for the Natural Sciences Tripos Part II.

Yours sincerely,

John Henry
Professor of History of Science
Director of the Science Studies Unit