

Dr. Staffan Müller-Wille
College of Humanities
University of Exeter
Amory Building, Rennes Drive
Exeter, Devon EX4 4RJ

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To the Vice Chancellor

University of Cambridge

**External Examiner Report, NST Part II History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) and NST Part II (BBS)
History and Ethics of Medicine (HEM), 2012/2013**

This was my second year as External Examiner for the two courses mentioned above. Examinations consisted in three (four) unseen examination papers, two primary source essays, and a dissertation (optional) for HPS, and one examination paper and a dissertation (optional) in HEM. Internal assessment was carried out by two independent examiners for each element. I double-marked lowest, highest, and borderline 2.i/1 coursework for calibration purposes, and adjudicated two scripts where examiners had not reached agreement over the marks. I was also given the opportunity at the Final Examiner's Meeting to scrutinize and comment upon marks in detail and their statistical distribution.

In the following, I will first make some general comments on student achievement and the examination and assessment procedure as a whole, and then add some comments and observations on individual elements of the examination. I do not see any major problems with teaching and assessment in both courses, and my remarks below are solely made for the purpose of enhancing future teaching, assessment, and student experience.

Student achievement in NST Part II HPS was impressive, as reported last year. In HEM, students achievement fell within a much narrower band of high, but usually not excellent performance. From the scripts I have seen it transpires that this is so because students from the biomedical sciences have a tendency to prepare well, but rather narrowly for coursework, avoiding independent thinking or experiments.

Statistically, and compared with last year, there has been a slight expansion of marks to high Firsts, which I had recommended. One dissertation received an 83. I double-marked this and found it clearly outstanding. It could serve as the basis for a publication, and this is the usual criterion for assigning marks above 80. Also in comparison with last year, marks have expanded to the lower 2.i range a little, but there still seems to be a reluctance to use the 2.ii range. For the samples I double marked for calibration it has to be said, however, that I found the marks spot on. Only in one case – where a student had received a 74, although deciding in the last minute only to drop his dissertation project, and sit an additional exam paper instead – did I agree significantly. The paper was clearly the work of an intelligent student, questioning the questions, but rather sloppily executed, resulting in a lot of imprecise or unfounded statements.

In contrast to last year, when there were many disagreements between markers, sometimes spanning 20 or more points on the grade scale, there were very few disagreed. I think this is mainly due to the way in which marking was organized in this year. The assessment procedure in place, with two internal examiners marking papers in a “double-blind” manner, is very labour intensive, but guarantees a maximum of fairness. Instead of involving a large group of departmental staff, a small

team of five was formed, with a larger group of “external assessors” affiliated with the department, most of them early career scholars, second marking. This seems to have taken a lot of pressure out of the process, led to the development of a team spirit among the core group of markers, and fed fresh views from the group of assessors into process, as well as creating a space for reasoned agreement. I highly recommend to stick to this system in the future, the advantages of which is well reflected in the high statistical consistency of marks across papers, primary source essays and dissertations. A point of good practice I would like to repeat from last years report were the often detailed and substantial comments that examiners provided on primary source essays and dissertations with their marks.

I would like to add some further comments on individual elements of the examination. As last year, I noticed that there was less evidence for students applying critical techniques in reading sources than one could perhaps wish for. Most essays just went ahead and interpreted sources for content. This was discussed in detail at the Final Examiner’s meeting, resulting in recommendations for future lecturers. Dissertations were generally of an outstanding quality. It was noticeable that those students that did a dissertation also tended to receive the highest overall marks, even though the distribution of marks for the dissertation did not deviate from that of other course –work. I would therefore like to repeat my recommendation from last year to make dissertations obligatory. It seems clear that preparing for a larger piece of work enhances learning significantly which is then reflected in better achievements in the exam papers.

With respect to exam papers, differences between average marks for each paper are insignificant now, which probably has to do with the new marking procedures discussed above already. Having a meeting once a year to discuss the papers and harmonize scope and nature of questions, will additionally help to guarantee consistency among papers. A question that was discussed at length at the Final Examiner’s Meeting was whether supervisors should be informed about exam questions. I would stringly recommend not to do so. We have a similar discussion here in Exeter regarding seen

exams. From our experience with this it clearly emerges that students will just reproduce course content, with minimal engagement of own thought, once they know which kind of questions to expect in an exam.