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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), 2013/2014**

This was my third and final 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, with an additional colleague brought in for moderation in cases where marks could not be agreed. I double-marked lowest, highest, and borderline 2.i/1 coursework for calibration purposes, and adjudicated scripts where disagreements exceeded 10 points between examiners and/or where achievements of a particular student had been very uneven. 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, and overall better results were achieved than with last year's cohort. From the coursework I have seen it appears that this is due to the fact that this year's cohort was particularly motivated; there were many dissertations and primary source essays that endorsed an original and quite independent approach to the subject that had been chosen. 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.

Compared with previous years, high Firsts are consistently, even if occasionally, given for coursework now, which had been recommended in previous reports. In line with this, I adjusted the mark of one dissertation from an 80 to receive an 85, since it clearly was of publishable quality. There were more Firsts this year, but otherwise distribution of marks has not changed: the lower 2.1 and 2.2 range is used sparingly. From the samples I double marked for calibration it emerges, however, that this is a fair reflection of the quality of coursework. Changes to marks I made stayed within the range of up to three points only.

Cases of disagreements between examiners remain few, which speaks again for sticking with the system of forming a small team of examiners (see last year's report for details). Since the department is interdisciplinary, and the programme accordingly draws a students with a very broad range of different talents and skills, it is natural that marking will yield discordant results, depending on which aspects of coursework catch the examiner's attention. The marking criteria that are

published online are very generic and "holistic". I would recommend to split them up in categories like "Argument", "Engagement with Sources", "Knowledge and Understanding", "Presentation" and define class criteria for each of these separately. This could serve as a constant reminder of different aspects to be attended to during marking, make marking criteria more transparent to students, and also help reconciliation where examiners reach divergent conclusions.

I would like to add some further comments on individual elements of the examination. Dissertations were generally of an outstanding quality (with one exception). As in previous years, 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. There was a significant number of students who had not done a dissertation among those receiving a First in their final mark as well, however, so the data does not warrant the conclusion that not doing a dissertation disadvantages students.

It was noticeable, moreover, that students performed quite unevenly in their primary source essays. The category of what constitutes a "primary source" essay, is actually not very well-defined, especially since it builds on a historians' category, but is also expected from students with more philosophical leanings. Neither students, nor examiners, seem very clear of what exactly is expected from a primary source essay, e.g. what counts as "primary", how secondary sources are supposed to be integrated, and what exactly constitutes "engagement" with sources. I recommend to rethink this element.