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15 July 2015

The Vice-Chancellor
University of Cambridge
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External Examiner's Report on NST Part II History & Philosophy of Science (HPS) and NST Part II BBS History & Ethics of Medicine (HEM), 2014-15

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

I am pleased to submit my first report as External Examiner for the above examinations.

Part II HPS assessment consists of three unseen examination papers chosen from 11 papers offered, two primary source essays and a dissertation (or fourth unseen examination paper). Part II BBS students are assessed by one unseen examination paper and may choose to write their dissertation in HEM. I saw and commented on all draft examination papers, and am satisfied that all my comments and suggestions were considered and, where appropriate, acted upon.

Internal assessment was by blind double-marking with independent adjudication by a third marker in cases where marks could not be agreed. In advance of attending for the Examiners' Meeting, I was able to review all primary source essays and dissertations, and paid particular attention to the highest, lowest and borderline marks within each element of assessment. I was asked to consider and, where necessary, adjudicate, a number of cases in which the internal markers diverged considerably or could not agree, or in which the performance of a particular student had been uneven. Before the Examiners' Meeting I was able to review all examination scripts within a rather tighter time-frame but with similar desiderata.

In general, examination procedures were robust, and both the processes and the standards of assessment are directly comparable to those at other institutions with which I am familiar. The overall structure of Part II HPS embodies a wide range of topics and methodological and pedagogical approaches; the aims and intended learning outcomes of the programme are clearly stated in the

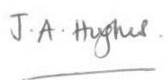
programme handbook and are appropriate for an internationally leading HPS department. The content of the curriculum and the resources made available to students are of high quality and appropriate to the achievement of those aims. The design, structure and marking of the examination are all of an appropriately high standard, and the Examiners' Meeting was conducted efficiently and impartially. The Senior Examiner's Report is exemplary in its detailed contextual analysis of student performance and overall outcomes. All those involved in assessment should be congratulated for their commitment and their professionalism. I thank the HPS Senior Examiner, the other Examiners and HPS administrative staff for their cordial and effective assistance at all stages of the examination process.

Student performance in BBS was generally very good, with a mark distribution similar to that in previous years. Student performance in HPS was impressive, with a substantial proportion of Firsts. Markers made good use of the full mark range, and I am confident that this outcome was a genuine reflection of excellent student performance. Many of the primary source essays and dissertations were of extremely high (and occasionally outstanding) quality, demonstrating independent research, critical insight and intellectual imagination, all in turn reflecting students' motivation and engagement with the course. In reviewing the final distribution of marks, the Examiners' Meeting paid particularly close attention to the cluster of marks on the First/Upper Second boundary; I am confident that the extensive discussion of this issue resulted in a fair and accurate setting of the boundary.

While I am generally very satisfied with procedures and outcomes, I note that the assessment procedures yielded what seemed to me to be a relatively large number of discrepancies between markers involving disagreements across grade boundaries (and, in a number of cases, divergence of 10 marks or more). In the majority of cases discrepancies were resolved by discussion between markers, or, where this did not achieve resolution, by independent adjudication by a third marker. All such cases were referred to me for review, and in most cases the agreed or moderated mark seemed appropriate. That there should be so many cases, however, raises the issue of whether the rather generic marking criteria could be elaborated and made more specific and detailed, particularly with respect to expectations for the primary source essays and dissertation, with the aim of reducing divergences between markers. Absent annotations on scripts, markers' notes were available on request, but these (or a summary of them) should perhaps routinely accompany any request to the external examiner to scrutinise or adjudicate mark disagreements.

In summary, I have been impressed by both quality of student performance and by the robustness of the assessment processes in these examinations. The programme and its procedures seem to be in excellent health, and I look forward to engaging with them still more closely in the coming year.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Hughes". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a short horizontal line.

Dr. Jeff Hughes

Senior Lecturer in History of Science and Technology