

EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM FOR TAUGHT COURSES 2019-20

Name	Chiara Ambrosio			
Home Institution	University College London			
Email Address	c.ambrosio@ucl.ac.uk			
Name(s) of course(s) examined <i>e.g. Tripos Part/ MPhil</i>	Tripos Part III, MPhil			
Level (<i>Delete as appropriate</i>)	Undergraduate (Part III)		Postgraduate (MPhil by advanced study)	
Year of Appointment	1 st X	2 nd	3 rd	4 th

	Yes	No	N/A
1. Are the academic standards set for the award appropriate for the qualification, and comparable with similar programmes in other UK institutions?	X		
2. Are you satisfied that you received sufficient programme materials (handbooks, regulations, marking and classing criteria) in a timely manner?	X		
3. Are you satisfied that you were consulted adequately on draft examination papers, and that your comments and suggestions were taken into consideration?	X		
4. Are you satisfied that the assessment was pitched at the appropriate level?	X		
5. Was the general standard and consistency of marking appropriate?	X		
6. Do the assessment processes measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme?	X		
7. Are you satisfied that issues raised on your previous report form have been properly considered and, where applicable, acted upon?			X
8. Did you receive a written response from the Department to your previous report form?			X

If you replied No to any of the questions above, please expand here:

Do you have any concerns about the course, including standards and quality?

Both the Part III and the MPhil courses at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science equip students with sophisticated research skills to investigate science and understand its role in society and culture. I have absolutely no concerns about the courses, their standards and their quality. It has been an absolute pleasure to read the essays and dissertations for Part III and for the MPhil, as well as the examination paper for Part III. This was an especially challenging year given the disruptions caused first by the industrial action and then by the pandemic, but I was greatly impressed by the quality of the student's works and the excellent support they received by the Department.

Are you satisfied that the procedures associated with the assessment are efficient (e.g. timeframes, draft papers, questions, design and conduct of exam, meetings, vivas)?

The timing and overall examining procedures were excellent, and again this comment applies to both the Part III and the MPhil course. The Department has very clear internal deadlines, organised around examiners' meetings in February, April, and June/July. Even with this year's disruptions and additional workload caused by them, assessments were sent to me well in advance, and it was easy to organise my workload and meet each deadline.

The conduct of the examination meetings was commendable. The paperwork was extremely clear and easy to follow; meetings were chaired efficiently and decisions were taken transparently. The administrative team's support was invaluable in the smooth running of the examination process and in ensuring that procedures and regulations were followed.

The exam paper for Part III was challenging, but it was also designed according to very clear learning objectives. My comments on the draft exam paper for Part III were taken extremely seriously, and one exam question was slightly rephrased for additional clarity, following my suggestion.

One MPhil dissertation was a marginal fail, and the case was dealt with in a commendable manner, in full respect of the regulations and with a clear concern for the student's best interests. The student was offered the possibility of a *viva voce* examination (as per regulations), which was conducted within a sensible timeframe and following procedures. The administrative support I received in moderating this difficult case with clear references to the rules was remarkably prompt and helpful, especially given the circumstances caused by the pandemic.

Do you have any comments on marking and classing (e.g. range of marks, action around borderline marks, penalties, moderation, double marking, reconciliation of marks)?

The assessors' feedback is constructive and useful. It was very helpful to be able to read all the reports, along with a sample of the essays, for comparability of feedback across different areas of research in the Department and to contextualise the marks I received in a separate spreadsheet. I was very impressed by the level of detail and engagement with the students' work in each assessor's report. The reports also conveyed a clear sense of how assessors arrived at agreed marks, and I found them especially helpful to understand the overall programme's assessment criteria, particularly as this was the first time I examined for the Department.

There were some cases in which I was specifically asked to moderate marks. These were accompanied by clear and extensive documentation of the nature of assessors' disagreements over particular marks. In those cases (two in total), my recommendations were followed.

Do you have any comments on the student experience of the course and/or their experience of the assessment process?

My overall impression is that students on both courses produce work of the highest calibre, with some essays and dissertations clearly showing potential for publication and further work at PhD level. This result is especially remarkable given the circumstances and the disruptions of the past academic year. In the case of the dissertations, it was impressive to see how students tackled proactively the practical issues arising from research during a worldwide pandemic in an intellectually honest and competent way. Several dissertations contained very helpful sections on sources that would have been used, if access to the libraries had not been severely disrupted. The works demonstrate competence in navigating the literature, locating relevant sources, and making independent decisions, irrespectively of the disruptions during the lockdown.

Such outstanding results would be impossible to achieve, unless students were in an environment that genuinely helped them thrive. From the support of the supervisions to the tone and content of each assessor's report, it is clear that they are immersed in an intellectually challenging, academically diverse, and scholarly rigorous environment. It was a pleasure to see that as a result the students developed the confidence and ability to step out of their comfort zone in all their assessments – and that they were indeed trained and encouraged to do so throughout the whole programme.

Do you have any comments on University policies (e.g. the role of the external examiner, policies around plagiarism, script annotation)?

The relevant policies were clearly communicated to me at the beginning of my appointment, and were easy to retrieve. The website is easy to navigate, and documents are labelled clearly and in organised in an accessible order. Administrative support was remarkably prompt and helpful in the rare cases where I struggled to locate the relevant rules.

Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.

I only have a minor comment, on works (particularly essays) that were marked as borderline starred distinctions. These were all – in my view – exceptionally strong essays. I noticed that in most of those cases the feedback mainly consisted of suggestions for further development toward a possible journal submission. This makes sense, especially considering that these essays are roughly half the length of an average journal article. But if that is the only fault of an otherwise exceptional piece, why not awarding it an 80? It would be helpful, especially when one of the two examiners does mark an essay at 80, to have a one-line justification in the confidential comments on why the agreed final mark is 78 or 79 instead.

Please highlight any good practice you encountered.

- Quality of the reports on student essays, Part III exam and dissertations: the feedback is extensive, substantive and constructive. While there is coherence and consistency in the style and format of the reports, it is also a joy to see that the distinctive scholarly voices and diverse approaches of individual members of staff come through in the feedback and guidance to the students.
- Quality of supervisions: while this is work that goes on in the background, it is clear that students are offered substantive and constructive support across both courses, and throughout

the academic year. This was especially commendable given the practical difficulties posed first by the strikes, then by a worldwide pandemic.

- Implementation of mitigation, first in response to the strikes, then in response to the pandemic: this was done transparently, in compliance with university-wide regulations, but also with a focus on the students' best interest.

A robust and rigorous examination process overall.

Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?

No – instead, please see my recommendations for improvement here: some cases in the borderline starred distinction range could go higher.

If this is your final year as external examiner? If so, have you seen improvements over your tenure? Has the Department acted on your advice?

This was my first year as an external examiner, and I look forward to the next academic year.

Do you have any other comments?

I would like to congratulate Mary Brazelton (Senior Examiner for 2019-2020) for her superb work during an especially challenging year. I would also like to thank Tamara Hug and David Thompson, for their invaluable and remarkably insightful administrative support.

Thank you for completing the Examiners Report form.

Please now forward to vcexternalexaminers@admin.cam.ac.uk by July 31st for undergraduate examinations, 1st October for Masters Degrees, and 12th October for resits.

Please also forward copies to your Chair of Examiners.