

**School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT**

December 2014

**Response to the External Examiners' Reports on the 2013-14 Examinations for undergraduate programmes in Philosophy and History & Philosophy of Science**

The School would like to thank all the External Examiners in Philosophy and HPS for their reports and assistance with the assessment process, and notes with gratification their favourable comments on the education we offer, the extent to which teaching is informed by current research, the transparency of our assessment process, the standard of student work, and the efficiency of our administrative procedures.

The below is our response to specific matters raised by the Examiners.

**General Issues**

1. Lack of a representative at the Exam Board from the School of English.

*This is being discussed at Joint Honours Programme level to endeavor to ensure appropriate representation.*

2. It was requested that more modules be assessed online, in order to reduce the workload of External Examiners immediately prior to the Examination Board.

*The expectation is that the take up of online marking will continue to grow over the coming year. However, it is School policy to not require online marking.*

3. It was suggested that if an examination is to take a significantly different format to previous years, that a specimen paper is circulated to students in advance so they know what sort of exam to expect.

*Assessment officers will make this request to anyone using a substantially different format for examinations.*

4. Industrial year abroad.

Further clarification was requested about the role of performance on industry placements in affecting overall classification.

*This was raised at Faculty level and Industrial Year performance has now been removed from the criteria for academic discretion.*

5. Consideration of mitigating circumstances at the Exam Board.

The Board followed the procedure for consideration of mitigating circumstances as set out in the Code of Practice on Assessment. But concerns were raised by two examiners as to whether the Examination Board is the right place to consider mitigating circumstances. First, mitigating circumstances must be considered with the maximum possible information so as to ensure as fair an outcome as possible. This will likely include identifying information which may compromise anonymity. Second, Examination Boards should consider only those marks that are reliable indicators of the student's achievement on the module. If there have been mitigating circumstances that render some marks unreliable then those marks should not be considered by the Board of Examiners.

*The University requires that mitigating circumstances be considered and so the School may not depart from this requirement. However, we are moving to a new system for coming year when a pre-Exam meeting will consider, discuss and rank requests for mitigation. The Examination Board will be asked to accept the judgement of the pre-Exam meeting as to the severity-ranking of a candidate's mitigating circumstances and apply it to the cases in hand. We hope this will address the problem but also maintain transparency. We will be keen to receive feedback on this change at next years' Exam Board.*

6. Academic discretion.

There was concern on the part of one examiner that the application of academic discretion fails to ensure equity, openness, clarity and consistency.

*The University requires the application of academic discretion. However, the Faculty has recently reviewed its guidance in this matter and we have slightly adapted our processes for applying academic discretion. We hope this will significantly reduce the extent to which individual cases are discussed. We welcome feedback on the reviewed procedure after next year's Exam Board.*

7. Exceeding word limits.

One examiner expressed the view that the School's policy of reading only to the word limit for over-length essays is difficult to implement in practice.

*This is a perennial issue which has been extensively discussed over the past year. We will continue to review practice in this regard and will bear these comments in mind when discussing this at our next review of the Code of Practice on Assessment.*

8. Assessment formats

There was a suggestion by one examiner that we consider alternative forms of assessment as a supplement to the standard essay and exam formats in order to assess a wider range of ILOs and broaden students' skills.

*Our assessment practices are currently being reconsidered as part of a School-wide review of assessment and a Philosophy/HPS wide curriculum review. While we recognise the need to develop and assess generic skills, such as communication, it will remain the case that we want students to think deeply and critically, and a good way of assessing this will remain the essay.*

9. Accommodating dyslexia.

One examiner noted that at least one essay carried the note 'mark for content only – ignore errors of grammar' but expressed concern about the validity of this recommendation as one such essay was as good as, if not better than, many of those by non-dyslexic students. Furthermore, clarity of thought without clarity of expression is meaningless.

*The School is required to follow University practice regarding students with dyslexia. In cases where written work may be better than expected it may be the result of intensive assistance. This is a problematic area and we expect there will be continuing discussion and refinement of practice.*

10. The quantity of written work that is appropriate for assessment.

One examiner expressed the view that while a limit of 4000 words for written work, in the form of essays, is a satisfactory method of assessing a 20-credit module, that we consider requiring additional work in the form of blog posts or class presentations.

*There are University and School norms around assessment and the amount of work it is reasonable to request that students submit. 4000 words is standard for a 20 credit module. If students were to be assessed by blog posts or presentations then we may have to reduce the amount of written work (in the form of essays) that they submit. However, our assessment practices are under School-wide review.*

11. Sampling of student work.

One examiner suggested that External Examiners be offered the option of sampling the first assessment in a module if takes a different format to the end of module assessment.

*Many of our modules are assessed by essay and then by end of module examination, and internal monitoring of the first (essay) assessment takes the form of an analysis of the run of marks. We*

*sample internally only if the run of marks is problematic. Providing the External Examiners with the opportunity to sample the essays would be a departure from current practice. However, the request was prompted in relation to a module where the first assessment was an in-class test and the end of module assessment was of an essay format, and the in-class test accounted for a significant proportion of the overall module mark.*

*The School are happy to accept this as policy in this kind of case. In the coming year it will apply to HPSC2301 and HPSC3312.*

#### 12. Induction for new External Examiners

One examiner suggested that the University consider a policy of providing University-wide induction of External Examiners.

*This request will be passed to QAT.*

### Module-specific issues

#### 13. History of Science modules

The Examiner noted that students' bibliographies for their essays tended to be shorter and more similar amongst the cohort than she would expect from a similar cohort at her institution. She also commented that there is perhaps a small tendency to offer students short reading lists and/or not to encourage them to do their own research for essays. Encouraging independent research could particularly be emphasised for the second essay in any given module, by which time students might be expected to handle more specialist research publications.

*These points are well taken, and will be discussed during the year. However, there is a trade-off between breadth of coverage and depth of engagement, and some of our modules deliberately favour the latter.*

#### 14. HPSC2208 Nature, Knowledge and Power

The examiner commented that the in-class test, worth 45% of the mark, was largely factual in nature. This tested a narrow range of skills, mostly ability to memorise key facts. Whilst this is an important part of learning, 45% seems too high a weighting for it. Other skills, such as interpretation, contextualisation, criticism, and so on need testing too.

*This was the intention but one section of the test was devoted to interpretative skills and another section gave scope for this also. Note that this module is no longer running.*

15. HPSC2301 History of the Body 1 and HPSC3312 History of the Body 2

The examiner commented on the narrow focus of the modules, particularly part 2. Students tend to rely on a very small range of sources for their work, often using the lectures as their major resource (or even being asked to do so). Students should encounter a broader range of scholarship and in particular recent historical methodology indicates the importance of reaching a contextual understanding of medical knowledge. Part 1 does this more explicitly, but some students come into part 2 without doing part 1; and the point about contextualisation of all topics remains. There is a lot of scholarship after Foucault that could be included here.

*HPSC3312 is designed to focus on upon primary sources and requires close engagement with these, which makes for a narrower rather than broader range of reading. Through this narrower focus it aims to develop a contextual understanding of medical knowledge. The module leader has endeavoured to include relevant secondary sources (post-Foucault) but is happy to discuss this further with the External Examiner.*

16. HPSC2307 Science, Culture and Society in the Industrial Age

The examiner's view was that student engagement is disappointing and suggested some support and coaching for the module leader and co-leader to help them get the most out of students on what is a well-planned and potentially excellent module.

*The HPS stream is of the view that this was a weak cohort and that this is reflected in the quality of work submitted.*

17. HPSC3200 Science communication: history and theory

The examiner commented that the break down of feedback to students (in terms of clarity, knowledge etc.) is helpful but care should be taken to ensure that the numbers given here are in line with the final mark. Students tended to get, e.g. 7.5/10 for the individual areas and then 63 for the actual mark. This is confusing.

*The point about confusing scoring will be addressed to ensure that scoring out of 10 is made consistent with the 20-90 scale.*

*Finally, it should be noted that in light of curriculum review, some of the specific modules on which the External Examiners have commented may be dropped or revised in the near future. Given this, and the considerable amount of work that designing and delivering the new curriculum will entail, it is not intended to substantially revise any existing modules prior to the introduction of the new curriculum but we will consider the comments of the External Examiners when designing the modules in the new curriculum.*