



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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

Tel: +44 (0)113 <<>>

E-mail: <<>>

17 February 2017

Dear External Examiners,

Thank you all for your diligent work as external examiners for programmes run by the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science. This letter is in response to the reports that each of you kindly submitted on our BA programmes for the academic year 2015–16. The main reason for the delay in our providing this response has been the need initially to await the submission of all the reports and then to circulate the reports to the necessary colleagues, including <<>> (our Director of Student Education) and <<>> (our Admissions Officer). We apologise for this delay.

As has become our practice, I shall here endeavour to respond to key points from all the reports rather than providing separate letters to each of you. As ever, if you feel that any issues you raised in your report have not been given sufficient consideration below, please do let us know at your earliest convenience. For ease of digestion, the response below will be set out in tabular form.

Issues raised in examiners' reports	School response
The range of marks received by the best students should be expanded upwards.	There are perhaps two issues here. <i>One</i> is the issue of using the full range of marks when marking individual assignments. We are aware that this remains an issue and will try harder to encourage markers to be sufficiently generous where credit is due (though we are pleased to note that one of the external examiners highlighted improvements in this regard). There are plans within the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures as a whole to switch from the 20–90 to a 0–100 marking scale from September 2017. A consequence of this is that the highest grade range will expand from 70–90 to 70–100. Although we cannot guarantee that this will immediately change marking habits, it ought to have some effect, and we shall continue to monitor marking practices in this area. The <i>other</i> issue is a certain flattening out of a student's overall grade average that can happen when the final classification is arrived at. For example, if a student has not consistently achieved marks in the First category, the student's lower marks will inevitably drag down the overall average. The best we can do in this regard is to ensure that students receive appropriate marks for individual modules,

	thereby ensuring that those students who consistently produce the best work do indeed achieve appropriately high classification averages.
Access to coursework assignments via the VLE is an improvement on previous hard-copy methods of sampling, but can be complex and time-consuming. Guidelines on expectations for external examining should be developed, taking a risk-based approach with a more selective focus.	These are excellent points. At present we standardly ask external examiners merely to look at a sample of the assignments along with the marks and markers' feedback for a given set of modules. In the case of coursework available via the VLE, considerable leeway is given to external examiners to choose which pieces of coursework to look at, and we do not typically specify issues for the examiner to watch out for or comment upon. Regrettably, we do not currently have in place a system whereby someone with sufficient oversight of the full range of modules is able to collate information about issues – either general or specific to particular modules – of which external examiners should be notified. There is, however, a possibility that something along these lines could be devised, drawing upon the module and programme review processes that normally take place in July and September respectively. This is certainly something to be discussed through our School Taught Student Education Committee (STSEC). In the meantime, we apologise for any complexity in the sampling process and request that you do not go to excessive lengths in an effort to overcome technological difficulties. Please do feel free to put questions to our administrative colleagues with whom you have correspondence; they in turn will pass on queries to relevant academic staff whenever necessary.
Introduce some procedure prior to the Exam Board to check for anomalies in the distribution of marks <i>between</i> (rather than merely within) modules.	This is an interesting suggestion. At present, we rely on our monitoring procedure to detect discrepancies not only within a module but also between modules. The fact that most monitors view the marks of several modules rather than only one, combined with the fact that, over time, markers and monitors develop familiarity with the sort of spread of marks to expect, provides some degree of assurance against significant anomalies going undetected. Adding a further level of monitoring may be difficult for reasons of workload, especially given that the need does not currently appear to be urgent. But this is certainly an idea that we would revisit if the need does become more obvious.
Some exams have very high weighting, e.g. 90% in one case.	Traditionally within the School we have considered exams to be one important method of assessment at Levels 1 and 2 (i.e. first and second year), largely because they are an effective means of testing a student's <i>breadth</i> of knowledge and understanding, which is one of the key strengths we are aiming to develop at those levels. Exams feature far less prominently at Level 3, where <i>depth</i> of knowledge and understanding are more strongly emphasized. Of course, we recognise that the distinction between 'breadth' and 'depth' is far from hard and fast: in many instances we will be aiming to develop both of these in combination with each other. At present, as part of an overall curriculum review, our assessment methods are also being reviewed, one of the chief considerations being the need for adequate formative assessment and feedback. Consideration of whether exam-based

	assessments should be modified will be factored into that review process.
A tendency for oral presentations to be marked higher than other work.	In some modules, presentations are a relatively new method of assessment, and this may encourage leniency on the part of some markers. We are aware of this as a possibility and will prompt internal monitors to watch out for it so that undue leniency can be guarded against.
Parity of contact hours and of the amount of assessed work across modules.	We are aware of some discrepancies in both these areas. In response to the relevant external examiners' comments, we have compiled a spread sheet for easy comparison of contact hours and assessment methods across modules. Consideration of discrepancies and of possible means of rectifying them will be included in our current curriculum review.
Our practice of referring to Years 1, 2 and 3 as Levels 1, 2 and 3, rather than as Levels 4, 5 and 6 (as is normal in HE institutions).	This is a University-wide practice that we have no power to influence at the School level.
Increasing the variety of methods of assessment.	We are pleased that THEO2300 Studying Religion in Context was highlighted as exemplary in this regard. We will continue to develop and implement a greater variety of assessment methods across the programmes. Such methods currently include (in modules taught across the School) coursework essays of various lengths; written examinations; reflective logs and journals; oral presentations, and participation in online discussion fora (in the VLE).
Dealing with mitigating circumstances. It was suggested that these be dealt with at module level, thereby obviating the need for a pre-Exam Board Special Cases Meeting.	Our present practice is in line with University policy. We do consider mitigating circumstances at module level, granting coursework deadline extensions and additional time in exams, or resit opportunities, wherever warranted. But students are also entitled to request that mitigating circumstances be taken into account in connection with their final degree classification. We are aware, however, of the increasing prevalence of mitigating circumstances applications among students, and of the implications this is having for the amount of time spent in processing those applications and arriving at an appropriate decision. We shall persevere with the current practice this year, with a view to seriously reviewing it in time for the 2018 Exam Board.
Making the procedure for dealing with word count over-runs more precise.	One external examiner kindly shared with us the procedure followed in his own department. This was useful as a point of comparison. Our own practice in the case of coursework that exceeds the word limit is to mark the work as though it finished at the point where the word limit is exceeded (with the consequence that some work is marked as though it lacked a conclusion). This rule is clearly stated both in the School Undergraduate Handbook and in module handbooks, and we are not aware of any rationale for changing it. We shall, however, encourage internal examiners and monitors to ensure that it continues to be applied consistently.
Diversifying the philosophy curriculum.	We very much welcome the suggestion to incorporate more modules engaging with Kantian/post-Kantian/Continental philosophy into our philosophy programmes. The merging of the Department of Philosophy

	and Department of Theology and Religious Studies to form the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science back in 2012 has opened up additional opportunities in this connection, since there are members of theology/religious studies staff whose expertise ranges over various areas of continental European philosophy. For example, we have plans afoot to introduce an upper-level module on existentialism and phenomenology, and possibly to reinstate a module primarily on Kantian epistemology at Level 3. Discussions are ongoing. Students also have the opportunity to pursue work outside the analytic tradition in their 40-credit Final Year Project, an opportunity that has been taken up by some students in the current year.
--	---

The above points, along with your very favourable comments on many aspects of our programmes, have given us much to think about. We shall continue to reflect upon them through our ongoing review processes – including the module and programme review meetings and the current School-wide curriculum review, as well as our regular School Taught Student Education Committee (STSEC) meetings.

On behalf of myself and colleagues in the School, may I thank you again for your efforts in supporting student education in PRHS at the University of Leeds. We place enormous importance upon the quality of the education we provide, and value extremely highly the benefit we receive from your expertise and advice.

Yours sincerely,

<<>>

<<>> (Head of School)