



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

**FACULTY OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

**EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2018**

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# 1. PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2017-18

## PART 1: Overview

### A. Statistics

This year there were 223 candidates for the Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature.

Joint Schools candidates took optional English papers in the following numbers:

Paper 2: 2 HENG & 1 EML  
Paper 3: 5 HENG & 11 EML  
Paper 4: 7 HENG & 6 EML

Numbers and Percentages in each category:

2017-18	Total no. candidates: 223	%
Distinction	43	19.3
Pass	177	79.4
Partial Pass	0	0.0
Incomplete	2	0.9
Fail	1	0.4

Percentage of scripts awarded marks of 70+ for each paper:

Paper	2017-18	%
1 Introduction to English Language and Literature: Combined	38	17.04
1 Section A	49	21.97
1 Section B	47	21.08
2 Literature in English 650-1350	40	17.94
3 Literature in English 1830-1910	36	16.14
4 Literature in English 1910-Present	46	20.63

### PAST STATISTICS

#### i) English Prelims

Category	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	% 2016-17	% 2015-16
Dist.	55	57	57	59	23.6	25.4
Pass	174	163	171	175	74.7	72.8
Fail/Part Pass	4	4	0	0	1.7	1.8
Inc.	0	0	0	1	0.0	0.0

#### ii) Percentage of scripts awarded marks of 70+ for selected papers:

Paper	2017	2016	2015
1	19.7	22.4	20.1

2	21.9	25.6	17.9
3	22.3	22.9	24.5
4	23.8	23.8	24.1
Overall	23.6	23.7	23.7

## B. General Remarks

The percentage of distinctions this year (19.3%) was slightly lower than it has been in recent years (23.6% in 2016-17 and 25.4% in 2015-16). The Board of Examiners is confident that this is not due to punitive or inconsistent marking. Rather, it seems that although the examiners saw some genuinely outstanding and original work at the very top of the range this year, there were a few persistent issues across all of the papers which had an impact on the proportion of distinction level marks awarded. Such issues included candidates paying scant attention to the terms of the questions asked, candidates presenting work poorly, and candidates exhibiting limited range and/or a poor grasp of context. Those candidates who did achieve distinctions, however, were often producing sophisticated and erudite work which exceeded the level and quality of work that might be expected at this stage of the course.

## C. Conventions and Classification Criteria

As in previous years, the conventions and classification criteria were communicated to candidates in two email circulars from the Chair of Examiners. Circulars were issued in Hilary and Trinity Term. The circular for Paper 1 also explained how to access the Paper and how and when to submit the completed portfolio.

## PART II: Administration

The Mark-It database was used for the processing of marks, and E-Vision for the recording of class lists and related data. Paper 1 was posted on Weblearn as a downloadable file at noon on Monday of week 4 of Trinity Term and the link was sent to candidates by email. Candidates were also given the option of collecting a hard copy from the Examinations Secretary on the same day if they were unable to access the paper electronically. In addition to submitting paper copies of their completed portfolios to the examinations school, candidates were also required to send an electronic version of their portfolio to an email address accessible by the Examinations Secretary, inserting their candidate numbers in the subject-line. It was the second year in which marks were recorded separately for Section A and Section B of Paper 1, to be automatically communicated to candidates.

The Board would like to thank Angie Johnson, the Examinations Secretary, for her remarkable efficiency and good humour in dealing with countless queries and in navigating the various databases. In a few cases, the process of inputting results was unusually complex, but Ms Johnson was assiduous in ensuring that all details were correct and all records accurate. Thanks are also due to Andy Davice for his assistance in dealing with the many FAP applications. As the Board is now required to record all of its FAP rulings on the same day as the final examiners meeting, this administrative support is absolutely invaluable.

The timed examinations took place in Examination Schools this year, rather than in Ewert House. The Examinations Secretary emailed college tutors to remind them of the location two weeks prior to the examinations. After last year's issues with the misdelivery of several scripts by Exam Schools, this year there were very few problems. Again, it was noticeable that several students did not know their candidate numbers; this always creates an element of disturbance in the exam room as the invigilators have to provide the numbers individually to candidates who raise their hands. The Chair had to respond to significant number of Paper 1 portfolio queries; as was the case last year, the vast majority of these could have been answered by the candidate's own tutor without breaking any rules.

### **PART III: Reports on Individual Papers**

#### **Paper 1: An Introduction to English Language and Literature**

##### **Section A**

There was some really excellent work on this paper which was a genuine pleasure to assess: commentaries where candidates chose imaginative passages whose language yielded fruitful analysis to engage in argument with the question. The sophistication of some of the close language work was well above the level that might be expected at this stage of the course. In choosing passages, it is worth remembering that less is often more. Candidates who submitted passages that hit the maximum word length sometimes lost focus on the linguistic patterns. There were also some candidates who chose passages rich in linguistic interest, but didn't explore them. A few scripts presented non-continuous extracts rather than sequential passages – this is not the same as permitting a brief ellipsis in a passage, and commentaries based on this kind of selection of text were penalised.

All the questions were answered: the most popular were the question on media or register and the relationship between language and society. There was a wide range of approaches, including: diachronic study; language, gender and sexuality; political or advertising discourse; examination of literary language; speech act theory; figurative language, sociolinguistics, semantics and lexicography, critical discourse analysis. Most candidates showed a sensible range of reading from relevant materials which informed their discussion. The best commentaries did not use secondary criticism simply to illustrate a point, or an approach; they challenged in cases where the commentary text put pressure on a critical point of view, or methodology. Some of the less adroit commentaries had insubstantial bibliographies or bibliographies that were so cripplingly long their relevance to the textual analysis was not always obvious. There can, of course, be no prescriptive view of how many works need to be consulted; it depends on the kind of approach that is followed. That said, fewer than four secondary sources are likely to be too few. More than eight is probably too much. Secondary criticism should be appropriate for the work expected on this part of the paper. Some candidates listed only literary studies, for instance.

There was some excellent use of electronic databases; corpora, concordances and collocation sites, though sometimes the data was simply quoted rather than fully scrutinised and interpreted. There was some good use of dictionaries such as the OED, but less accomplished commentaries tended simply to quote definitions as if they were absolute authorities. There is so much more to the OED than definitions: the illustrative

quotations for instance; timelines, date of entries; thesaurus, usage labels. We would want to encourage students to attend Library training sessions for this paper, and also make use of the exercises that have been devised and which can be found under the resources for this paper on Weblearn to maximise the help that is available to them digitally in exploring language.

The majority of commentaries showed a very sound grasp of how to discuss and to analyse language. There were a few which offered up a discussion that was literary without sufficient focus on language. There were also a few that described the content of the passages. Where candidates pick a question with multiple options, it is helpful to indicate which option has been chosen.

Presentation varied. There were many clean, professionally referenced, and carefully checked commentaries. There were also, unfortunately, scripts which had chaotic referencing, bibliographies that were not alphabetised, and where typos had not been picked up. Candidates who did not number the lines in their commentary extracts not only made their analysis difficult to follow: they gave themselves a much harder task in cueing their discussion directly to the text. Poorly presented scripts incurred penalties.

Overall, however, it is clear that there is interesting, thought-provoking, and scholarly work being produced for this paper.

## Section B

Generally the quality of the essays for Section B was high. At the top end they were original, fluent, and highly scholarly, but a number of essays awarded lower marks also showed evidence of thoughtful analysis and originality of focus and/or approach. The best candidates produced pieces of incisive and insightful analysis that engaged with the terms of the prompt quotation and interrogated them using a focused approach or set of approaches. These showed excellent knowledge and understanding of critical approaches to literature and/or literary theory within coherent and well-supported arguments. However, excellent work of many different kinds was rewarded with high marks, from essays that offered a detailed assessment of a single theorist to more comparative work that measured the uses (and abuses) of alternative approaches against each other and also against chosen literary works.

A few essays suggested that there was little solid reading behind them. These tended to generalise about poorly defined or wholly undefined concepts, or to slot in passages of close reading that were only tenuously connected to the prompt. However, elsewhere there was evidence of close reading being performed with wit and skill, not least in a handful of cases where candidates paused to consider how far pieces of literature might reveal the assumptions and rhetorical gambits of the critics/theorists who had written about them, as well as the other way round.

While all questions were attempted, one of the most popular tended to produce the least satisfying responses: Q8 ('A play is play') was typically answered with less than optimal critical rigour, or very generic theoretical contextualisation. Many essays either raced through the history of theatre from Aristotle to the present, or featured rather anecdotal discussion of plays the candidates had seen, rather than displaying evidence that they had read widely and thought carefully about how theatre actually works.

One noticeable feature this year was that the work of very few candidates was impeccably organised and presented. Many essays contained multiple typographical errors, several contained (sometimes multiple) misspellings of the names of major theorists, and more than might have been expected contained referencing errors ranging from the minor

to the very serious. The overall impression received was one of a lack of attention to detail and/or care in proofreading, and candidates are again reminded of the importance of leaving enough time to polish their work into a state suitable for submission.

## Paper 2: Early Medieval Literature, c. 650–1350

There was a lot of very good work on Paper 2 this year. Candidates wrote on an impressive range of primary texts, considering material from both pre- and post-Conquest periods. The questions on gender (2), monstrosity (6) and the cross (13) were, perhaps predictably, very popular. There were also some thoughtful responses to the quotation from *The Seafarer* (16), the question about saints as superheroes (17), and the quotation about genre or type (4). While some excellent essays engaged in the detailed consideration of a few primary texts, other strong work covered a wider range of material. Candidates should remember that neither approach is necessarily privileged over the other; as long as the rubric specifying substantial engagement with at least three texts across the two essays is observed, it is the *quality* of analysis in which examiners are most interested.

There were a lot of essays which productively combined exploration of the set texts with other material; *Judith* and *Beowulf* proved a popular combination, as did *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Other essays ventured beyond the set texts to explore a selection which included elegiac literature, hagiographies, riddles and metrical charms, debate poetry, homilies, romances and lyrics. It is clear that candidates are reading widely and thoughtfully in the literature of the early medieval period and that many are also engaging in lively debate with critics and theorists of this literature.

Candidates would do well to remember the value of demonstrating some knowledge of the cultural and historical contexts of early medieval literature. Some of the weaker essays compared pre- and post-Conquest material as though it were produced in a historical vacuum. While it is of course important to recognise literary continuities as well as ruptures, it is also vital to pay attention to shifting cultural landscapes when working on a paper which covers such a lengthy historical period. Another point worth emphasising is the importance of engaging fully with the actual meaning of quotations and questions; again, many of the weakest essays were those in which candidates latched onto a single word or phrase in the question/quotation. Even when a prompt asks a candidate to write on 'any aspect/part' of the title quotation rather than on the quotation in full, the best essays are those in which the candidate positions (however briefly) their chosen aspect within an awareness of the quotation's overall meaning.

As in previous years, a minority of candidates disregarded the rubric requiring substantial coverage of at least three texts across the two essays and were duly penalised. A minority also failed to heed the requirement 'to show close knowledge of texts in English, in the original language, in both parts of the paper'. Essays which quoted substantially from translated material were therefore penalised; it is impossible for the few candidates who take this route through the paper to do well.

Only a handful of candidates chose to write on the Middle English texts for the commentary section of the paper. The majority wrote on *The Dream of the Rood*, with some opting for the *Beowulf* passage. Most demonstrated a reasonable comprehension of their chosen passage, and were broadly attentive to content, themes and imagery. A number, however, came close to replicating the notes and observations in the English Faculty's online coursepack of early medieval texts, and demonstrated little evidence of independent engagement with the primary material. Candidates would do well to remember that commentary is not an exercise in factual recall.



Unfortunately, the vast majority of commentaries paid almost no attention to style; as a result, very few candidates scored high marks in this part of the paper. It is unsatisfactory to write a commentary on a piece of early medieval English poetry without considering what makes it (a) a poem, and (b) distinct from others of its type, that is its style. Candidates are to be reminded that the rubric asks them to comment on content AND style, not solely on content. Those who did pay attention to this rubric, however, were able to balance discussion of content (e.g. themes and imagery) with careful and intelligent analysis of style (e.g., in Old English verse, the presence of structural, and sometimes ornamental, alliteration; regular versus hypermetric lines in *The Dream of Rood* extract; variation, apposition, compound diction, kennings; the 5-types).

### **Paper 3: Literature in English, 1830–1910**

All of the questions were attempted, and there were a number of outstanding responses that demonstrated ambition, imagination and enterprise. Without exception, these essays paid careful and sustained attention to the primary texts and, as a result, were able to say something fresh about the material. Nineteenth-century literature is extremely rich, and there is plenty of it – it offers many opportunities for incisive, inventive readings. The best scripts used local observations and close readings of language to illustrate an overarching argument, and made intelligent points about literary form. They offered a persuasive and well-illustrated critical position and showed evidence of both depth and breadth of research. It is important to note that ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ can be achieved in multiple ways: whether by considering a single author’s oeuvre (say, by reading *Bleak House* alongside Dickens’s journalism and letters), or by offering a more comparative approach across authors and genres.

The best work was sensitive and focused in its engagement with the set quotations. Successful candidates were patient in their interpretation of the prompts: they teased out the implications, noted the complexities and allowed this to shape their essays, displaying a willingness to do some active thinking in the examination hall. These answers were original and provocative. The less impressive essays were peppered with one or two terms from the prompt (e.g. ‘abnormal’, ‘grotesque’, ‘failure’, ‘little world’, ‘tell the truth’, ‘slant’). Others lost track of the prompt as they progressed, offering a cursory gesture rather than a sense of a continued, developing dialogue with its author. Unfortunately, there was plenty of work that ignored the set quotations entirely, leading the examiners to wonder why they had taken the trouble to find any in the first place. These essays were not rewarded for relevance or for suppleness of thought. Although this year’s paper allowed an unusually wide variety of authors and topics to be discussed, some candidates seemed determined to use their pens like crow-bars, levering open questions and inserting a prepared essay on something that was only tangentially related to what had actually been asked. For example, it happened that there were no questions on this year’s paper that explicitly addressed aestheticism or realism (although many other questions invited responses that could have incorporated this material), but that did not deter those candidates who instead decided to set their own question and then happily answered it.

It was very heartening to see a broad range of authors represented. Many candidates were prepared to venture beyond predictable definitions of ‘nineteenth-century literature’ and discuss, for example, American and less canonical writers. This produced some of the most exciting and animated work. However, candidates should remember that engaging with unusual or lesser-known material does not automatically guarantee a good performance, and

that expanding the canon takes a degree of critical reflexiveness; readings of the text(s) still need to demonstrate sensitivity, alertness and rigour.

In other cases, questions emerged about breadth or independence of reading: a few essays, for example, only addressed a couple of predictable examples from Hopkins. This does not constitute 'substantial knowledge' of an author's work. Where Darwin or other science writers were mentioned, they were not always discussed as authors in their own right; instead, some essays made vague statements about 'evolution' and 'natural selection' that showed no evidence of engagement with the texts themselves. Some essays verged on offering descriptive plot summaries or character portraits. Candidates who adopted the same approach to all three essays – for example, a comparison of two canonical novels – were not penalised, but nor were they likely to be rewarded for their ambition or creativity. Candidates who decided to take a comparative approach were most successful where they justified their choice of authors, and showed an awareness that these authors might be writing across genres, forms and geographical and historical contexts. It may be serendipitous that two authors share an interest in, for example, religious faith, but it is helpful to move beyond simply identifying common themes or, indeed, assuming agreement: some of the most interesting comparative answers explored the ways in which their chosen texts either complicated or directly contradicted each other.

The most insightful work offered a sense of considered engagement with, and interrogation of, published scholarship. Although a good variety of critical perspectives were offered, it was striking how many candidates stuck by much-anthologised approaches, such as *The Madwoman in the Attic*, without pausing to consider any more recent (or indeed older) alternatives. Nineteenth Century studies is an ever-growing field, with a long and fascinating lineage; exploring these avenues can only ever make candidates better readers.

The understanding of context was uneven. The most successful candidates used contextual detail to illuminate, or push forward, their broader arguments – not simply to tick a context 'box'. A disappointingly small number of candidates attempted to contextualise their literary examples with reference to specific nineteenth-century sources, such as essays, contemporary reviews, or letters. Some essays about American literature showed little or no contextual knowledge of nineteenth-century America, or built comparisons between works produced in Britain and America without paying attention to significant historical and cultural differences between the two nations.

Much of the time, essays offered generalisations about the 'Victorian period' and the 'Victorians', which were (and always will be) impossible to substantiate. People thought many things in the nineteenth century, often in contradictory or puzzled ways; candidates who did not appreciate this complexity could only ever offer uncritical and rather reductive responses to the literature of the period. This year, there were particularly broad generalisations when it came to cultural debates over questions involving race, sexuality and gender: for example, some essays about Conrad were limited to discussions of his complicity in the colonial enterprise. Though such readings are important, candidates were too often concerned with using their work as a platform for evaluative judgements about authors or texts, not analytic assessments; in many of these cases, there was a notable lack of engagement with the text itself and an ultimately predictable or curtailed line of argument.

In some cases, it was discouraging to see titles misremembered and authors' names frequently and consistently misspelled. However, the most impressive essays combined flair and clarity in written style, and were an absolute pleasure to read.

#### **Paper 4: Literature in English, 1910–Present**

236 candidates took the paper. Authors commonly written about included: Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Ted Hughes, W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, Sylvia Plath, Vladimir Nabokov, and Ezra Pound. What such a list does not capture is the geographical and chronological range of the authors who appeared less frequently: although Britain, Ireland, and the USA dominated the essays, candidates took the opportunity to include literatures in English from a wide range of countries. Moreover, whereas in the past essays for this paper have gravitated towards the earlier part of the period, there is now serious interest in a wide range of recent publications and living authors. Several candidates wrote about Zadie Smith, J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, and Alice Oswald; there were also essays wholly or partly on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Patience Agbabi, Mark Doty, Bob Dylan, Hanif Kureishi, Tony Kushner, Ben Okri, Tom Pickard, Arundhati Roy, Colin Simms, Patti Smith, and Ocean Vuong.

The best essays were characterised by engagement with both the quotation and the question: not only addressing them, or paying lip-service to their terms, but thinking critically about their implications and their relation to the candidate's material. They also nearly always took a good range of work into account (at least two substantial works), and had a rationale (usually implicit) for their choice of texts; comparison and contrast between the works contributed to the development of the argument. They demonstrated depth of analysis, offering genuine insights into language, style, structure, and/or context. Many referenced a range of critical works with which they engaged and sometimes disagreed. The best essays on lyric poets demonstrated awareness of the fine detail of several poems, but also demonstrated an awareness of the poet's wider oeuvre and how those poems relate to it; similar strengths were seen in the best essays on short story writers.

The weakest essays were characterised by haziness about facts and at worst by full-blooded factual errors: the attribution of works to the wrong author, or the mistitling of works in ways that seemed to misattribute them; and by misspellings of the names of authors and works. References to T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* [sic] appeared even in stronger essays. Some scripts in this range had a worrying tendency to present long and very loose passages of paraphrase as direct quotation. Given how easy it now is for examiners to check the accuracy of quotations online, candidates should be careful with their use of quotation marks. There were in some cases significant problems with organisation and writing style, including extreme repetitiveness, lack of appropriate paragraphing, sentence fragments, and very long sentences with insufficient punctuation. The weakest essays were characterised by a lack of engagement with the question, and by clear signs that the candidate wished to write on an entirely distinct theme. One form of non-engagement was to begin by asserting that, for author X, the theme of the question was not a concern. A subtler form of non-engagement was whole-hearted and indiscriminating agreement: *everything* in the works of author X is concerned with the present theme. The weakest essays were characterised by a limited range of coverage: all other things being equal, an essay that deals with only one novel is difficult to reward as strongly as an essay that deals with two or three. In many cases they were also characterised by limited attention to literariness of the literary texts: instead, texts became the transparent bearers of thematic ideas, and issues concerning style, genre, and form were ignored.

Essays in the middle range typically presented some of the strengths and some of the weaknesses indicated above. They typically discussed two or more texts from the period, but did not offer a justification or context for the comparison, which was then apt to feel forced in answering the specific question; or, more weakly, discussed each text in isolation without any substantial comparison.

In some cases, candidates writing on recent fiction (e.g. Foster Wallace or several answers on the Zimbabwean writers Bulawayo and Dangaremba) felt, understandably, that they needed to do a lot of plot summary of texts the examiner may not know. In other cases (e.g. *Ulysses*, *To the Lighthouse*) there were almost no attempts to give a narrative account of the book, with very partial focus on a few scenes. It may be useful for future candidates to think about how to find a balance between exegesis and analysis.

Across all scripts, there seemed to be little knowledge of the conventions for differentiating a book from an item in a book: candidates should be careful to denote titles of books by underlining, and to use quotation marks for titles of poems, essays, and shorter pieces.

Questions 1, 6, 13, 15, 19, 21, and 22 invited candidates to discuss 'any aspect of' the quotation, and while in general this invitation was treated sensibly, a small number of essays isolated words entirely from the context of the sentences in which they appeared, and proceeded to use them as themes for the essay. This approach invariably produced weak essays without a strong connecting argument.

Q.3 was chosen by many candidates, and generally led to solid work, but only the strongest essays engaged with Morrison's words about self-naming and self-defining; too many offered less focused essays on power and identity.

Q.5 was popular, but elicited some essays in which the 'personal experience' in question was the experience of an already fictional character.

An unforeseen problem with Q.6 was that, shorn of its title, the Bunting quotation was treated as if it presented were Bunting's own opinions, and not those of 'The Chairman'; candidates were not penalised for approaching the quotation in this way.

Q.12 attracted many candidates, but many chose a playwright in isolation (often Beckett) to exemplify revolution, but had only the sketchiest context against which to place him. Some circumvented this problem to an extent by identifying a creeping conservatism or resistance to formal change in the chosen playwright.

Q14 ("Masculinity [...] is not found in a reading unless you go looking for it") was treated by the majority of candidates as an all-purpose question about masculinity, and in some cases about gender more widely; only the very best essays engaged with the more self-reflexive point about the dangers of critically projecting on to a text.

A small number of candidates answering Q.20 did not seem to understand what a 'portmanteau' concept is, with inevitably confused results. A larger number understood the term, but answered the question with materials relating to the disputed dividing line between modernism and postmodernism; that problem, interesting though it is, does not in itself imply that there are 'mutually incompatible trajectories' within either movement. Some candidates employed such a small range of primary materials that they could not make any convincing claims about an entire movement.

A small number of candidates wrote substantial parts of their essays on works published before 1910. The Faculty Handbook permits candidates 'to discuss the work of a cross-period author within either of the periods their work straddles', but the emphasis of the answer should be on literature from 1910-present. *Heart of Darkness*, for example, may be discussed in support of an argument about other texts within the period range (whether by Conrad or other authors), but should not be used substantially (or exclusively) to form the central topic of the essay. In grading the essays the examiners rewarded the discussions of pre-1910 works where those discussions supported a more general argument focused on 1910-present, but not in their own right. A similar procedure was adopted for candidates who violated the rubric about not writing on the same author in more than one question: the violating material in the second of the essays was read, and

given credit insofar as it developed the general argument, but not given credit for its contribution to the range of coverage in the essay.

## 2. FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

### FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL IN CLASSICS AND ENGLISH, ENGLISH AND MODERN LANGUAGES AND HISTORY AND ENGLISH

I begin with strong thanks to the FHS Board, who were all remarkably helpful as colleagues. Particular thanks are due to Peter McDonald, not simply for his role as Deputy Chair but also for his advice at key moments based on his experience as a Chair of Examiners in the past. Helen Moore, as a previous Chair, was also very generous with her help. I should also thank Jane Griffiths, the Chair for FHS 2016-17. Beyond this the Faculty as a whole was willing and efficient when it came to assessing and agreeing marks. All of this, of course, is coordinated by Angie Johnson, whose experience and dedication does so much to make the job of Chair a manageable one. I thank her warmly. Andy Davice was also very helpful, especially when it came to the Medical and Late Submissions Sub-Committee. My thanks go out to the staff of the Examination Schools and the Proctors' office. The Board congratulates the FHS cohort of 2018 on an exceptional performance in Finals. Members of the Board (including the External Examiners, who were able to compare this cohort to last year's) were especially struck by the strength in depth of the First Class grade profiles this year, with just under 40 candidates achieving averages above 70. The overall standard of work was genuinely exceptional this year.

There were very few penalties for late submissions of papers examined by submitted work; in the cases where these were applied, however, the effect on the marks received by the candidates, and on their overall ranking, was severe. (The Humanities framework for penalties for late submission is laid out in the Circular to Tutors and Candidates each year). A very significant number of candidates submitted work late with Proctorial permission. That number and the number of candidates submitting Factors Affecting Performance statements is a matter of some concern.

Last year's report noted that, following discussion on the Board, it was decided that quotation themes for timed examination papers should include more explicit rubrics so as to discourage candidates from merely reproducing pre-prepared essays. This year's Board confirmed that general principle. In practice most questions still took the form of quotations without rubric. Care was taken, however, to choose quotations that were relevant to specific topics. Where necessary, rubric was added to help candidates focus their answers (e.g. on FHS Course I Paper 3 'How does any ONE or MORE works from this period 'decipher' the world?'). In the vast majority of cases the Board was satisfied that candidates were responding well to specific themes.

### 2.1 Statistics

There were 219 candidates, of whom 16 took Course II.

The breakdown of results is as follows:

Outcome	1st	2.1	2.2	3	Pass
Numbers	87	127	2	1	2

87 Standard route Firsts and 2 Alternative route Firsts were awarded this year.

Percentages including recent years:

	1 <sup>st</sup>	2.1	2.2	3	Pass
2014	26%	72%	1%	0%	0.5%
2015	27.8%	71%	0.8%	0%	0%
2016	31.4%	67.2%	1.3%	0%	0%
2017	31.1%	67.5%	1.3%	0%	0%
2018	39.7	58.0	0.9%	0.5%	0.9%

The number of Firsts awarded was significantly higher than last year (in 2017 there were 71 Firsts, this year there were 87). As is clear from the above table, the percentage of Firsts awarded has risen fairly steadily in the last half decade. Nevertheless, the 2018 percentage may prove to be an outlier. The External Examiners (who were all in place in 2017) certainly felt that there was a notable improvement in the average standard. They expressed no concerns about grade inflation. It is worth noting that no candidates were raised to a First following 3<sup>rd</sup> marking after the First Marks Meeting. All candidates on a borderline had their scripts read in their entirety by one of the External Examiners. In all cases the Externals were satisfied that the correct classification had been given.

## 2.2 Training

The Chair held a training session in Michaelmas term for those new to Oxford marking. He also met one-to-one with individual markers at various points to provide advice.

## 2.3 Prizes

The following prizes were awarded this year:

- Gibbs Prize for Best Overall Performance in Course I of the Honour School.
- Gibbs Prize for Best Overall Performance in Course II.
- Charles Oldham Shakespeare Prize.
- Gibbs Prize for Best performance in a 3-hour timed examination.
- Gibbs Prize for Best Extended Essay.
- Gibbs Prize for the Best Dissertation.

Eight further Gibbs prizes were awarded for distinguished performance.

## 2.4 Reports on Individual Papers

Examiners Reports are not submitted for papers with 3 candidates or fewer.

## Course I

### Paper 1 Shakespeare Portfolio

237 candidates took this paper. The standard of work was again high, with candidates taking a wide variety of approaches, bringing an impressive range of literary, dramatic, theological, philosophical and historical concerns to bear on Shakespeare's works, and thinking intelligently about the distinctive qualities of his language and dramaturgy. Despite only having 2000 words to work with, some candidates managed to produce work of something like publishable quality. Many of the best essays engaged intelligently with theory—sometimes recent theoretical thinking (variously poststructuralist, ecological, posthuman), sometimes classical or early modern theory (literary, rhetorical, political) which may well have informed or framed Shakespeare's own work. Although these discourses were sometimes used in facile or opportunistic ways, they more often helped students to ask new questions of the plays or poems at issue, or discover surprising angles on them. There was some good work engaging dialectically with sister arts such as painting, music, fiction. Also there were many essays that displayed real passion for their subject, and were *interested* in critically galvanising ways. It was evident that Shakespeare remains a vector for political critique and intellectual adventure. It was also interesting how wide-ranging the choice of texts was; there were as many essays on *Cymbeline* or *King John* as *Hamlet* or *Lear* (perhaps more), and probing use of curiosities such as *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. Some candidates, however, took very cautious critical positions, beginning with lengthy and rather heavy-weathered announcement of uncontroversial views. Weaker essays also took predictable or overly narrow approaches, or reverted to A-Level-style analysis of character and theme. Some candidates strained too hard in their claims for originality, claiming that their topic (often quite a familiar one) had never been addressed before; real originality was, rather, to be found in sharp and tenacious close reading of language, imagery and dramatic technique, and in noticing linguistic and structural patterns in the works. Superficial readings were sometimes in evidence: the use of search engines/concordances is helpful as a pointer to a properly engaged reading of the text, but should not substitute for it. There has also been a trend towards portfolios that are rather limited in range, with many addressing the bare minimum (5) of Shakespeare's works; while a main *focus* on five plays may be acceptable, more successful candidates tended also to give a sense of their awareness of the wider canon of the plays and poems.

Essays on later appropriations and adaptations of Shakespeare were often less successful than those which dealt directly with his works. Candidates writing such essays frequently struggled to develop a telling argument, descending into descriptive approaches. Very few candidates attempted to write essays situating Shakespeare in relation to his contemporaries, but those who chose to do so often found fresh, scholarly and incisive angles for their work. Discussions of performance practices sometimes allowed for telling insights into the plays, but were sometimes offered too uncritically as evidence for an interpretation. While the best essays were a real pleasure to read, some were marred by poor grammar and unnecessarily convoluted expression: given the amount of time that candidates have to polish and proof-read their work for the portfolio, they should expect to be penalized for such lapses.



## Paper 2 (CII Paper 3) Literature in English, 1350–1550

219 candidates took this examination. The overall impression was that there was a generally high standard among the scripts this year, and a notable consistency of standard across the School, with comparatively little work that could be described as very weak. The examiners were pleased to see candidates addressing this paper with commitment, seriousness and evident enjoyment of the material. Commentaries were fairly evenly distributed between the two extracts, and all of the essay questions were answered: particularly popular were questions 2 (on allegory), 4 (Julian of Norwich prompt), 11 (Lawton on the vernacular) and 13 (Cohen on literal and metaphorical).

Commentaries were, on the whole, well done, with candidates paying attention to both the form and the content of extracts and bringing judiciously-deployed contextual knowledge (e.g. regarding Chaucer's use, or disregard, of source-material) to bear on their analyses of the texts. Understanding of the language was generally sound, with fewer egregious misunderstandings of the kind that were reported on last year. There were very few scripts in which attention to prosodic minutiae overwhelmed any other consideration; rather, rhetorical and other kinds of stylistic information tended to be skilfully integrated into overall consideration of the way in which form was mediating content. Some particularly good examples of this were provided by candidates who addressed Troilus's anaphoric lament in 1b: some wrote skilfully about the immediate psychological force of its repetitive language, for example listening to the element of self-reproach in it; others made good sense of it in the broader context of the poem's overall engagement with Boethian themes. As ever, some of the most accomplished commentaries were produced from some very adept *listening* to the passages, such as when candidates took into account, where necessary, the weight of unspoken elements (e.g. the possible implications of Pandarus's lingering, silent presence in 1a). Last year's report on this paper noted that candidates who organised their commentaries thematically tended to do better than those who worked through the material stanza by stanza. This year, by contrast, both approaches proved capable of working well, with candidates who took the latter approach generally making clear the benefits, for their overall approach, of doing things this way.

In their essays, candidates wrote on a wide range of texts, from *Pearl*, *Gawain*, Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, the *Boke* of Margery Kempe, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Chaucer's dream visions to the works of Robert Henryson, Gavin Douglas, Wyatt and Surrey. A wide range of romances were considered, including not only *The King of Tars* (from which one prompt was taken) but also the *The Sege of Melayne*, *Sir Launfal*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, other *Gawain* romances and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. Marian and other lyrics were also discussed, for example in relation to the Alice Cooper prompt, which several candidates energetically called into question with reference to Christ's Passion. Religious drama (usually *York* and/or *N-Town*) featured strongly. Candidates also drew on a broad range of morality plays and interludes (*Mankind*, *Everyman*, *Fulgens and Luces*, *The Play of the Weather*, *Mundus et Infans*) for their answers, and not only in response to question 3 (Post-Reformation Banns prompt). The overall impression given by these scripts was that students now encounter a wider range of texts for this paper than they might typically have done several years ago, whether via tutorials, lectures, wider reading or a combination of all three. It is also clear that their work for this paper is being widely supported by excellent teaching. Some candidates included in their answers some consideration of medieval artworks, and this worked well when such

discussions were successfully integrated into the overall discussion, with a clear rationale for their inclusion.

The problem of candidates writing pre-cooked essays that bore only the most tangential of relationships to the prompt under discussion was far less noticeable this year, although this had the result of making those who resorted to such an approach even more conspicuous. Candidates responded well, in general, to the challenge of adapting their material to their chosen prompts without unduly wrangling either. More problematic were cases in which candidates did not have a sufficiently clear understanding of key terms and issues: for example (1) allegory, with a few candidates wanting to treat any dream vision, for example, as an allegory; (2) the extent to which the terms 'literal' and 'metaphorical' could be usefully related to certain literary materials; and (3) the meaning of 'contemplation' and its distinctiveness from other modes of religious experience.

### **Paper 3 (CII Paper 6a) 1550–1660**

201 Candidates took this paper. The overall standard on this paper was good, with some excellent work: it was a pleasure to read these scripts. Previous observations about a narrow time-frame within the dates set for the paper still hold, although there was some interesting work on civil war poetry and Caroline drama, and candidates showed flexibility in handling relevant materials from before the start of the paper (e.g. Ralph Robinson's translation of *Utopia*) and those that straddled paper 4. The most common authors continue to be Spenser, Donne, Herbert, Webster, Marvell and Jonson. Beyond this canon, there was some adventurous exploration, particularly on women writers and on prose fictions. Candidates are reminded that obscurer material is not in itself recommended, but that some sense that they have selected their material from a position of familiarity across the period is helpful. We also encourage wider range within as well as across authors: there is more to Marvell, for instance, than 'Upon Appleton House' and 'An Horatian Ode', for example. 'Imitation' was treated varyingly. There was some excellent work on the significance of the concept within humanist culture, often in relation to Jonson and Sidney, but also some crude approaches that failed to display much depth of understanding.

Only the very strongest performances engaged much with critics or showed an awareness of modern critical editions. Some interpretations – especially of *The Faerie Queene* and of sonnet sequences – seemed distinctly old-fashioned. The most sustained contemporary methodologies were drawn from bibliography, publishing history and other forms of materiality (embroidered quotation or poesy ring): much of this work was excellent, but other approaches, from formalism to feminism might also be considered. Some candidates engaged effectively with print paratext, but perhaps it's worth a reminder that attention to the text proper, in dialogue with its prefatory material, is what brings this analysis to life. Work on drama tended to be conventional, even moralistic, and to focus on a limited number of primary texts by Kyd, Webster and Ford. There is little sense of performance cultures, past or present, in this analysis. The other thing that's lacking overall is an informed sense of the theological contexts for literature in this period.

Examiners rewarded answers that engaged closely and in a sustained manner with the terms of the question, working with the form and implication of the quotation rather than simply picking out a single word. Overall, it was great to see the range of work being undertaken for paper 3.

## **Paper 4 1660–1760**

202 candidates took this paper. The examiners were impressed by the overall standard achieved by the candidates taking this paper. All questions were attempted with attention spread evenly across the paper.

Generally, answers were lucid, strongly structured, with sustained, well-illustrated arguments. Presentation, even under examination conditions, was often exemplary. There was an impressive level of consistency in scripts, with third answers often showing the same levels of intellectual engagement and energy as the first ones. The questions were mostly treated with sensitivity, depth of understanding, and, in the strongest work, with considerable creativity and curiosity. Direct quotation from texts showed detailed knowledge and close reading demonstrated analytical skill which was then used to further the argument, not just illustrate it. Relevant contexts were generally integrated well and those candidates who wished to link texts and history/politics as a major feature of their work did so with care. Some of the strongest work chose topics/authors that spanned the whole period of the paper and differentiated context accordingly. Strong work also showed thoughtful engagement with the questions which resulted in direct and relevant answers. Almost all candidates supported their work with critical and/or theoretical material, most of which was used purposefully to help shape arguments. The most impressive work summarised complex critical/theoretical arguments concisely and often provided better counter-arguments. There was also a willingness to engage with political theorists as a means of formulating and supporting arguments.

Weaker work was often irrelevant, lacked a clearly established argument, or focused too narrowly on single words or short phrases from the question, without giving a sense of understanding the question's wider implications. There was often a lack of awareness about the distinctiveness of this literary period and how that might affect forms and genres as well as individual works. Other weaknesses included a lack of direct quotation and wider narrative awareness. When quotations were used candidates often missed the opportunity to demonstrate close reading, unless the quotation was being used to make a point about metre/syntax. There were also instances when the evidence quoted did not fit the analysis.

The examiners were particularly concerned to note a lack of range, even in some of the strongest work. There were a few candidates who used a single text for two answers and then two texts for the third. Although this fulfils the terms of the rubric, unless narrowness is balanced with patience, thoroughness, analytical depth and detail, and/or a wider sense of period or an author's work, overall it demonstrates limitation rather than potential. The examiners also noted a tendency to cluster attention within a few decades of the period, for example the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the examiners were pleased to see a full range of topics and texts being addressed across candidates' answers, these included issues related to race, gender and social class.

## **Paper 5 1760–1830**

224 candidates took this paper. All the questions were answered. The most popular questions were 5, 7, 9, 11 and 14, each of which produced some excellent responses. The paper elicited work at the very highest level – sophisticated, profound and beautifully written responses which showed evidence of wide reading and intelligent analysis. Weaker or more pedestrian responses tended to summarise rather than tease out the implications

of the question, with the weakest simply offloading what were clearly pre-written essays onto a convenient 'hook' in the quotation, often with no regard to the sense of what the quotation was about. This tendency was particularly transparent for 'niche' essays clearly written earlier for a tutorial on a very narrow or specialist topic on one particular author which had to be wrenched into place in the opening paragraph to answer one of the given quotations. Students should be reminded that essays which are genuinely shaped by the quotation will not only gain marks for relevance, but are likely also to have stronger arguments and more rhetorical force.

The period covered by the dates of this paper (1760–1830) offers the opportunity to address a very wide range of authors, texts and topics. Although the 'big six' male Romantic poets attracted a large number of answers, particularly in relation to Question 3, essays addressed topics as diverse as Samuel Foote's *The Nabob*, Richard Cumberland's *The West Indian*, Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* and Piece Egan's *London Life*, to name but a few. Some of the best answers drew on both familiar canonical material and combined it less familiar and less well-known texts to enrich and deepen their evidence basis. Essays which focused only on one single text, especially a poetic text such as 'Christabel' or 'Kubla Kahn', proved very narrow and did not receive the highest marks. Wordsworth remained one of the most popular authors on the paper, though it would have been good to see a wider range of his work discussed (rather than simply one or two well-known passages from *The Prelude*). There was some particularly confident and impressive work on John Clare as a nature poet, rather than as an obscure 'peasant poet'. Work on the essayists was also strong, with some very lively discussion of Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey, which engaged in a sophisticated way with the relationship between the essays and their authors' personality and personae. In general, there was far less work on the novel this year, especially fewer essays on the Gothic. Although there was some excellent discussion of Austen's early novels, most candidates did not tackle more than two texts, suggesting an anxiety about tackling the Austen canon as a whole. The question on fragments (Q9) provoked some genuinely wide-ranging and impressively knowledgeable work, though there was too much use of the term 'ekphrasis' without a proper understanding of its meaning. Essays on Dr Johnson were conspicuous by their absence despite the fact that one of the quotations came from Dr Johnson. There was also a disappointing absence of discussion of literary sociability, friendships and coteries (a very critically fashionable subject in the long eighteenth century) even though Q4 invited such responses. Answers on 'friendship' often warped into discussion of sibling love, husband and wife affection or literary influence (the 'friendship' between two authors who had never met or conversed). Also surprisingly absent was the transatlantic context. Although Phyllis Wheatley appeared in some of the discussions of slavery in response to Q6, and James Fennimore Cooper was compared to Walter Scott, others key American authors in the period, such as Charles Brockden Brown, were rarely discussed or brought into conjunction with English authors of the same period. Although one of the questions specifically invited a discussion of the relationship between literature and government, few candidates answered it. Political debate tended to be confined to either the French Revolution or the abolition of slavery (though there was disappointingly little discussion in the latter of the role evangelicalism played in the abolition movement). Women authors did not feature as widely or in such variety as the examiners might have expected from recent scholarly studies. Although there was interesting discussion of a range of women writers (including Barbauld and Edgeworth in relation to education) the number of women poets discussed and addressed was small. Hemans proved one of the more popular, but there was very little discussion of other Romantic

women poets including Charlotte Smith and Ann Yearsley. There were a few lively essays on drama, but mainly confined to Sheridan and Goldsmith.

Candidates often quoted with surprising care and accuracy, but sometimes whole sequences of block quotations were offered in place of critical analysis. Quotation is nearly always effective if used sparingly and judiciously. Stronger essays showed familiarity with recent critical debates on their chosen texts and topics.

Quite a few students chose question 1, but answers to this were mostly quite weak, with very little sense of what “diction” or even “versification” mean. Instead, many answers depended on a very vague idea of “correctness” or “elegance” in imagery or prose style. It was surprising how many essays answered questions 13 and 17 without any reference to race or the slave trade. There were a few answers on the theatre, some very successful. Although most papers covered more than one genre, there were a few which over three essays only discussed poetry – in some cases only ‘Big Six’ Romantic poetry, and only in terms of issues of Romantic poetics. This does seem to demonstrate a lack of range.

## **Paper 6: Special Options**

### **American Fiction Post 1945**

14 candidates took this option (13 ELL). The essays were, across the board, very strong and showed a wide range of different interests in the period, from contemporary “internet” novels on one end to novels by earlier writers (i.e. James Baldwin) on the other. One or two of the essays explored novels on both ends of the spectrum, though the most successful essays tended to pick a writer or writers from the same era and to look at several texts alongside one another, interrogating how they worked through a particular critical framework. The strongest examples demonstrated very wide reading in the critical literature and were not afraid to engage in broader theoretical concerns related to the subject matter of the novels on which they focused. A few essays used theory in inconsistent or incoherent ways, and a very few had clumsy presentation. In general, the best work showed deep engagement with both the subject matter and the style of the prose and combined close reading of passages with provocative and original treatment of theoretical concerns.

### **Comparative Literature**

8 candidates took this option (1 ELL, 3 EML, 4 Mod Langs as Paper XII). Candidates wrote comparatively between literature in English and other languages in a range of European, North and South American, and Caribbean contexts, and on the whole managed to combine attentive close reading with cogent argument and a clear methodological frame. Good work.

### **Early Modern Criminality**

9 candidates took this paper (all ELL). All showed strong understanding of core themes, and close engagement with a range of primary materials. There was clear enthusiasm for the opportunity offered by this option to discuss print culture and to read non-canonical texts. Topics ranged quite widely, with a recurrent interest in questions of gender. Methodological interests – e.g., legal, narratological, social, and theoretical – supported the submitted work intelligently, and close readings were thorough and insightful. Scrutiny both of the ‘criminal’ body and of the internal rhetorical strategies within pamphlets, ballads,

novels, etc was undertaken, and in the main the essays were well structured and clearly argued.

### **Fairytales**

There were 14 essays on fairy tale (all ELL), and the standard of work was generally high. The majority of candidates dealt with Victorian fairy tale and rewritings, but there were also successful essays focussed solely on modern fairy tale, broadly construed. Most candidates wrote on prose but poetry, drama and film were also covered. Candidates generally fulfilled very well the criteria that awareness of literary history, literary theory and critical traditions. Feminist and eco-critical readings were the most popular theoretical starting points. The examiners enjoyed reading a set of essays which showed energetic engagement and ambitious range.

### **Film Criticism**

12 candidates took this course (10 ELL). It was another pleasing year for the option. This year's set of essays, as a set, was one of the strongest received for this option. Examiners were impressed with the high standard of the work across the board, but noted the absence of high first class marks. As has been noted in the past, students taking this option are generally excellent at close reading and interpretation but less confident at including an evaluative, critical dimension. This year there was some more daring evaluative writing, but the level of intellectual ambition shown remains relatively modest.

### **Hit and Myth: Reinventing the Medieval for the Modern Age**

There were 11 candidates on this paper (10 ELL), and they produced a pleasing range of work covering modern responses to medieval Welsh and Irish myths, Icelandic sagas, Anglo-Saxon heroic traditions and Arthurian romance; in a range of media including video games, television series, films, children's books, novels and poetry. Most showed a good understanding of translation theory and how this might apply to adaptations of the medieval. The weaker essays tended to build the analysis on rather slight or isolated similarities between particular motifs and scenes, while the best essays located translation and adaptation within a literary tradition which goes back to the medieval period itself. The standard of presentation was mixed: candidates are reminded that part of the exercise of writing an extended essay is the correct use of scholarly apparatus and that it is important to take care over formatting. Candidates who achieved high marks combined nuanced and lucid analysis of medieval texts and traditions and their modern counterparts with meticulous presentation.

### **In Defence of Poetry**

12 candidates took this paper (all ELL). A pleasingly wide range of periods came under scrutiny, even though candidates were reluctant to stray from canonical authors. Discussion of how poetic theory intersected with poetic practice resulted in genuinely illuminating insights: this paper obviously stimulates critical creativity. The best essays were well informed, imaginative, and willing to think critically about theoretical prose texts alongside poems; the least successful were characterized by weak arguments, careless interpretation and untidy presentation.

### **LGBTQIA: Wilde to the Present**

There were 12 essays (11 ELL). Most were very strong, showing an alert and sceptical engagement with theory and also sensitive and scholarly readings of literary texts. The

strongest were wide-ranging and critical of simplistic categorisations. Presentation and writing were also excellent overall, though a few candidates confused obscure language with deep thought. None of the essays interested themselves in camp or comedy, but in general responses ranged widely through material discussed in seminars and beyond.

### **Literature and Science**

14 candidates took this paper (12 ELL). The paper was notable for an extraordinary and imaginative range of topics. 'Science' covered physics, biology, cosmology, ecology, informatics and medicine (to give an inexhaustive list) and 'Literature' comprised texts from the late eighteenth century to the present, in a variety of genres. Valiant effort was made to keep in view the links between the two disciplines, with the best work demonstrating attention to intellectual and cultural contexts and the affinities between scientific and literary thinking. The less successful essays peddled predictable theories and/or discussed science in the most superficial terms. The paper is clearly stimulating thoughtful research and there was a clear sense in the best essays that the authors had actually enjoyed writing them.

### **Literature, Culture and Politics in the 1930s**

13 (all ELL) candidates took this option. The quality of the work was generally high and there were several, intelligent responses on figures such as Auden, Bowen, Gibbons, Green, Waugh, and Woolf as well as lesser-known figures such as Pamela Hinkson. Topics treated included: birth-control, childhood, publishing, documentary film, radio, shell shock, train travel, and contemporary theories of historiography. The critical approach tended to be broadly historicist: at its best this yielded a number of well-informed essays where ostensibly familiar metaphors were given fresh life by the invocation of a broader context. But in weaker responses the structure and formal features of the text were too quickly passed over with literature serving as a rather two-dimensional illustration of wider historical trends. More successful work managed to complicate the trends by providing a highly nuanced form of literary analysis.

### **Modern American Drama**

11 students (all ELL) took this option and the final essays encompassed an impressive breadth of interests. Many of the essays focused on contemporary drama; playwrights included Anna Deavere Smith, Moises Kaufman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Edward Albee, Karen Finley, and Tony Kushner. Much interest was also shown in earlier playwrights, such as Susan Glaspell, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Gertrude Stein, Thornton Wilder, and Lorraine Hansberry. Most of the essays developed around a topic, however, and were not playwright-driven; this was welcome, and allowed for interesting comparisons and theoretical frameworks. Topics included pain and disease, time, verbatim theatre, absent characters, sexuality, silence, realism, the construct of home, and the idea of theatrical ecologies. The strongest candidates showed a sophisticated awareness of performance, knew how to write effectively about it, and understood the difference between filmed and live performance. Stronger essays also offered a developed and nuanced argument, informed by critical debate, where weaker essays tended to be purely thematic, moving between texts without the trajectory of a central thesis. More attention could have been paid to contextual matters; often there was little or no awareness of the specifically American issues at stake in the plays. There was no mention of "the American Dream." Whether this was because students wanted to avoid what might seem like a tired cliché, or because they were unsure how to write about it effectively, it was sometimes a missed opportunity given the subject matter of some of the essays and the new

critical discourse on this concept. The essays ranged from competent to very good to exceptional and outstanding.

### **Poetics of Evidence**

There were 11 candidates (10 ELL) for this option. The essays covered a very wide range of texts, going far beyond the range covered in the course. This wasn't always to good effect; the approaches and theoretical problems raised in the course weren't always applicable to the texts chosen by the students, so that the course occasionally felt redundant with respect to the essay in question. On the whole, however, most students did manage effectively to explore questions of doubt, knowledge, proof and experience in relation to the rhetorics of textual and visual representation. There were excellent essays on Joyce's interest in forensic and journalistic rhetoric; on law, representation and the eighteenth century epistolary novel (Richardson's *Clarissa*), on the challenges of representing experience in E. M. Forster and W. G. Sebald and on newspapers as props in Dorothy L. Sayers. Even the weaker essays made an attempt to grapple with the concepts introduced in the course and if they were a little off-track, this could partly be accounted for by a less than amenable choice of text.

### **Postcolonial Literature**

There were 15 candidates for this option (14 ELL). The work was of a high standard with marks ranging from mid-2.1 to high 1<sup>st</sup>. The best candidates demonstrated a wide knowledge of both primary and secondary materials, a capacity to put together a convincing argument with reference to relevant critical debates, and an ability to balance various forms of contextual framing with close attention to linguistic and literary detail. Those in the 2.1 range showed some of these qualities, but tended to apply established paradigms rather than engage with them critically. Authors included Abel, Achebe, Adichie, Darwish, Fugard, Howe, Guo, Kolatkar, Li, Nagra, Naipaul, P'Bitek, Caryl Phillips, Rose-Innes, and Suleri.

### **Post-War British Drama**

14 candidates took this option (all ELL). The overall quality of papers was impressive, ranging from mid-2:1 to high first-class. All the papers responded thoughtfully and perceptively to a range of plays, offering astute readings informed by a clear understanding of the dynamics of performance and reception. Effective use was made of contemporary reviews, set designs, and actors' and directors' memoirs. The strongest essays offered a clear overarching argument, engaging with recent critical debates, and supported by precise and attentive close readings of both performances and texts. Less ambitious essays were structured around themes, offering a range of more discrete readings without an overall progressive thesis. Together candidates' work covered an impressively broad range of texts and topics, founded in a strong understanding of theatrical context and performance issues, and producing some genuinely original thinking and challenging ideas.

### **Texts in Motion**

There were 11 candidates for this option (10 ELL). Overall, the essays were of a high quality. Together they demonstrated a resourceful and imaginative engagement with a range of books and objects. Topics covered ranged from taxonomy in botanical collections, to the editorial history of Jonson's works, to verse inscribed on window panes. The strongest essays succeeded in marrying coherent conceptual argument to detailed analysis of text. Some pieces which were otherwise excellent were weakened by a lack of



signposting of the argument. In general, though, this was fine work, and showed candidates responding to archival resources with ingenuity and intelligence.

### **The Avant-Garde: 1908 – 1936**

15 candidates took this option (all ELL). A wide range of material was covered in these papers, from Dada and surrealism to Alexander Trocchi. It was noticeable that, across the board, candidates sought to undertake original research, using the required reading as a springboard for independent exploration across periods, languages and media. As a result, around two-thirds of candidates worked with primary texts not discussed in seminars, and the standard of work was generally impressive. The best papers offered a thoroughgoing engagement with conceptual material, offering not simply accurate exposition of theoretical paradigms about the avant-garde but rather an active and curious dialogue with them. Thus the highest marks went to those essays demonstrating conceptual ambition, as well as literary and historical sensitivity.

### **Tragedy**

11 candidates took the Tragedy option (all ELL).

The standard was generally excellent, with a high proportion of first class marks. This paper encourages comparative work across a great variety of periods and genres, from ancient to contemporary, and the best essays used this freedom to construct commanding arguments which moved with high sophistication between texts.

A nice range of topics was chosen, both by focusing on particular authors and by taking particular topics through a variety of texts. Excellent cross period, cross-European explorations, taking full advantage of the scope of the paper, saw Greek tragedy compared with Brecht, and elsewhere with Racine; novels, drama, and narrative poetry all received analysis. Problems arose when candidates choose too ill-defined a topic to trace with any precision through multiple texts, or found themselves making arbitrary connections and comparisons without a strong theoretical basis. All comparative work needs a clear rationale for the choice of texts, and when this was missing the essays risked losing their way. That said, there is no inherent need for candidates to offer broad, comparative sweeps, as long as their theoretical basis is sound: some astonishingly good work was done on the novels of a single author.

### **Writers and the Cinema**

15 candidates took this option (all ELL). Candidates' essay submissions can be loosely grouped into three: those that closely followed the material and ideas explored in the course; those that dug deeper into a particular element of the course, developing sometimes highly original research projects in the process; and those that took the broad theme of the course – the interface between writing and the cinema, the verbal and the visual – and pursued particular personal interests. All three approaches achieved equal levels of success.

Stronger essays displayed a confidence with the subject, and an ability to pose challenging questions about the interrelation of literature, theory and the cinematic. Some weaker essays took for granted the usefulness of writing about the cinematic within the literary, and *vice versa*, rather than considering the benefits and limitations of such an approach. Other weaker pieces showed evidence of rushing and little time for re-drafting; this was particularly in evidence in some rather glib conclusions. However as a whole, the cohort

performed well and the stronger dissertations combined creativity with critical flair and panache.

### **Writing Feminisms/Women's Writing**

There were 7 candidates who took this option (5 ELL), and the essays were particularly strong across the board (and addressed texts spanning several hundred years). They explored a range of materials and authors, from songs to poems to novels to other less conventional feminist "texts" and interventions. The strongest essays demonstrated wide critical reading and combined close readings with attentive exploration of relevant feminist theory. A few of the essays made up for a lack of style or clumsy presentation with innovative research into their topics; the best essays exhibited beautifully-crafted and lucid prose with original claims backed up by examples from the text and engagement with relevant criticism. Weaker essays tended to let their arguments run away with them or did not demonstrate enough knowledge of their subject matter. Overall, the essays contributed in fascinating ways to current debates in feminist thinking

## **Paper 7: Dissertation**

### **Pre 1500**

#### **Early Medieval**

There were 7 dissertations in the early medieval period, and the standard was extremely high. The best candidates engaged in original research and offered either new interpretations of Old English poems and manuscripts, or close comparative work on Old English and related traditions (including Anglo-Latin and Old Norse). There was some impressive knowledge of historical and material contexts, and familiarity with new directions in literary scholarship. In contrast, the few dissertations that did not fare so well either engaged in close reading with no real sense of context or showed serious gaps in secondary reading. Overall, it was an impressive set of essays, showing a continued interest and expertise in the early Middle Ages.

#### **Late Medieval**

There were 11 dissertations in this category. Candidates discussed a range of topics in both English and Scottish literature of the period, making well-informed and judicious use of both manuscript and printed materials and sometimes drawing, where appropriate, on modern theoretical resources, e.g. postcolonial theory. The best dissertations in this category were on a par with good first-year postgraduate work: extremely well-designed and deeply-researched pieces of work, with authoritative handling of both materials and argumentation. Candidates in this category had familiarised themselves with existing scholarship in the field and used this confidently as a point of departure for their own explorations. They had also taken time and advice in order to identify topics that could be handled within the stated word limit, but that nevertheless made original interventions in ongoing scholarly conversations. In less successful dissertations, rather as in comparable examination essays, some of the elements (e.g. close reading, critical overview) were less well integrated with one another, making for less fluent and convincing argumentation overall. Alternatively, in such cases, candidates had not fully got to grips with the understanding of e.g. key religious concepts or important historical events that were

fundamental to the dissertation in question. In some cases, too, the candidate's own prose was less clear and fluent than it might have been, weakening the overall impact.

### **1500-1600**

8 candidates submitted dissertations in this period, and in most cases the work was of a very high standard. Candidates wrote on a range of authors and texts. Topics explored included theatre history; issues of genre; relations between literature and music; and the reception of classical texts. Some especially good work was submitted on single canonical authors, where candidates were able to demonstrate a command of the scholarship and a sense of the full range of an author's writing. Cross-period projects, in contrast, sometimes suffered from a lack of clear methodological focus, but where the focus was on demonstrable reception the writing was often strong. At the top end, work was genuinely remarkable: characterized by striking breadth of reading; precise contextualisation; originality; and pungent challenge to the critical orthodoxies in a field. The standards of scholarly presentation were in general very good, though some work would have benefitted from careful proofreading. Some bibliographies, for example, were erratic, and occasionally a footnote was evidently unfinished.

### **1600-1700**

There were 17 dissertations within this strand. The standard of work in this period was generally high, with a lot of candidates producing high 2.1 and low First-class dissertations, but few that were really outstanding. Some impressively scholarly work was marred by narrowness of focus and a consequent inability to demonstrate why the material addressed was important or interesting, and some dissertations wasted far too many words on laboured and repetitious introductions. That said, a pleasing range of material was addressed across the board, with candidates showing interest in a variety out-of-the-way topics, while a few candidates produced strong work on major canonical authors such as Dryden.

### **1700-1800**

There were 12 dissertations in this period, covering a range of topics, authors and methodological approaches.

The standard was high across all of the dissertations. Candidates were creative in their use of canonical and non-canonical primary texts, and were often able to identify unexplored aspects in them. There was much originality on display, and impressive research skills too. On occasion, this included the use of unpublished materials (from the archives) to elucidate the argument.

The strongest work was based on an impressive range of reading, both primary and secondary. This range was then distilled into focused argument that moved confidently between close analysis and a broader synthesis of theme and relevant contexts, both critical and historical. The best dissertations were extremely well-organised, with the rationale for the argument being clearly and authoritatively established by the opening section. Many candidates introduced sub-sections to good effect, using these to help sustain an incisive argument across the longer word count. But in weaker essays the link between different sections tended to be ad hoc or forced. In general, weaker work relied too heavily on description, paid insufficient attention to relevant scholarship, and lacked a secure sense of literary period. Weaker essays also tended to be marked by typos,

grammatical errors and uneven presentation, suggesting limited opportunity for proof-reading.

Illustrations and appendices proved popular, but tended to be used too tentatively, in even the strongest dissertations. Candidates should ensure that they clearly identify any appended materials, and refer to these directly in their essays.

### **1800-1900**

25 candidates submitted dissertations in this period. Dissertations addressed a very wide range of nineteenth-century topics and authors, and overall the quality of the work was very good. The best were ambitious and scholarly, able to combine a breadth of historical context with close attention to literary language in order to propose original thematic propositions. Rather than resting on critical commonplaces and familiar critical reading, they interrogated texts themselves with a degree of rigour. There was also some very productive work on the relationship between the written text and visual/material culture. Many dissertations focused on unusual, non-canonical, or forgotten texts and archives: some of these were excellent. However, the weaker of these were primarily descriptive accounts rather than analytical examinations. Several other dissertations were founded in very interesting conceptual claims indeed; but with arguments at times vitiated by a loose and associative structure instead of a focused developing thesis.

### **1900-1950**

34 candidates wrote on this period of British Literature (American and World Literature dissertations are the subject of separate reports). The canonical Modernists were well represented and attention was also paid to relatively neglected authors, though there was not quite the breadth of approach and topic of previous years. The best work was bold, imaginative and genuinely illuminating, dealing with complex critical concepts with ease. But the examiners did have a number of concerns.

A number of dissertations, even quite strong ones, suffered from inadequate delineation of their topic. It felt a little as if the initial idea proposed had not been reappraised and refined once some of the research had been undertaken. In some cases, the work was complacently derivative: some students still seemed to be modelling their essays around what might be expected for a tutorial and didn't seem fully to appreciate that this paper demands a more specialised form of research. Dissertation research should be driven by genuine enquiry, resulting in an argument that proceeds step by step through the piece. Dissertations are not surveys of topics, nor a series of close readings. Candidates should consider the implications of their research at some point in the dissertation (at least in the conclusion): how has their research adjusted our knowledge or understanding of a period, an oeuvre, a style, a genre, etc. Key terms should be defined and interrogated.

The choice of authors and texts sometimes seemed rather arbitrary: candidates should ask whether the selected authors and texts are the most relevant ones via which to explore the topic. There was a lack of breadth in some dissertations: given that this represents a whole term's work, it is to be expected that a single-author dissertation should represent knowledge of a whole oeuvre. Some dissertations paid inadequate attention to the chronology of an oeuvre, or the different pressures on texts written in different historical periods. We might want to ask different questions of a work written at the beginning of a writer's career from those we'd ask of one at the end, and we might also want to think about

what changes have taken place, and what's driven those changes. Finally, students should give careful consideration as to which editions of texts to use (first, critical, etc.), rather than simply turning to the paperback that comes most easily to hand.

### **American Literature**

21 students wrote on "American" topics (though there may be other dissertations that touch on American authors in various ways). The work was generally excellent in quality, and much of it addressed writers from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Authors of fiction—David Foster Wallace, Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, James Baldwin—proved especially popular, and the best essays on these writers covered a range of novels or stories, sometimes comparing work by multiple authors and demonstrating a real sense of influence, stylistic difference, and theoretical underpinnings. There were many fewer dissertations focusing on 20<sup>th</sup> century American poets (little or nothing on Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, Frank O'Hara, and many others)—and similarly few dissertations covering 19<sup>th</sup> century American authors (Emerson, Poe, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Whitman, Twain, Melville). The essays that did venture into this territory tended to be particularly fine—historically inflected and well-framed theoretically. In general, the very best essays overall were stylishly written and deeply researched. Weaker essays were limited in scope, did not engage with the secondary criticism, and/or suffered from careless prose in terms of both style and argumentation.

### **Children's Literature**

There were 7 essays which came under the heading of Children's writing. The standard was high and essays covered a wide and diverse range of texts from Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century children's writing to graphic novels and contemporary children's/ YA fiction. Excellent use of primary text and apposite use of theory characterised many of the essays, and the examiners read them with pleasure.

### **Contemporary and Postcolonial Literature**

This continues to be a popular area with over 50 students (a quarter of this year's cohort) choosing topics falling under these broad categories. The best essays were distinguished by an ability to locate their argument within a significant debate about literature, a wide range of knowledge, whether of primary or secondary sources, and an ability to explore why the particular qualities of the writing mattered. There was also some excellent use of understudied archival material and openness to developing methodologies tailored to the dissertation's argument. In addition, the strongest work had a very impressive conceptual reach, an excellent grasp of literary and historical contexts, moving across different idioms (including visual art and philosophy), and a real command of appropriate methodologies. In these cases, the candidates had clearly asked themselves the hard questions about their chosen topic: 'So what and who cares?' There was some interesting, often single-author work on less canonical writers, which explored questions about how and why particular kinds of writing are canonised and/or contributed significantly to contemporary critical debates about them.

The weaker essays seemed to be unfamiliar with more recent critical debates (e.g. since the 1980s), struggled to move beyond a relatively banal description of literary examples, or alternatively, to convert an interesting comparison or claim into a meaningful reading. They also tended to use literary texts to make relatively simplistic moral or political arguments or

to see the texts themselves as instances of 'issues' as if they are all reducible to the same (fairly unsurprising) ideological 'message'. The latter was especially evident in dissertations on contemporary drama. Dissertations on post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction, another popular area, were also often less impressive, frequently falling back into A-level style analysis. In more general terms, the weaker essays displayed a lack of methodological acuity particularly when candidates chose to work on less traditionally literary material (e.g. popular or genre fiction, film or media studies).

## Language

4 candidates wrote on this subject.

## Course II

### Paper 1 650-1100

There were 18 candidates for this paper, covering a very impressive range of literature from the Anglo-Saxon period. While many of the period's greatest hits (e.g. *Beowulf*, Alfred, Exeter Book elegies and riddles) were covered as per usual, sometimes in fascinating and sophisticated ways, it was pleasing to see some candidates tackling some of the lesser studied works of this period, including saints' lives, wisdom poems, biblical poems, charms, maxims, Cynewulf, Ælfric, Wulfstan, travel narratives and post-Conquest texts such as *Durham*, as well as demonstrating awareness of Latin and other literary sources and contexts. Stronger scripts combined incisive analysis of primary texts in Old English well beyond the parameters of the set texts studied for Prelims 2, deep and sophisticated knowledge of relevant criticism and sustained engagement with the terms of the question. Weaker scripts fell down in one or more of these areas.

### Paper 2 Medieval English and Related Literatures 1066-1550

16 Course II candidates took this paper. Only questions 6, 9 and 13 were not attempted; the most popular were questions 1 and 7, on romance as an 'evasion ... [or] head-on encounter with history', and on 'what I feel ... is what I know myself to be'.

In general the standard was very high, and the examiners were favourably impressed by the range of knowledge and depth of analysis on show. It is pleasing to see the variety of languages and literatures now being studied for this paper – alongside lots of work on Middle English, insular and continental French, Old Norse, and Welsh, there appeared this year some excellent work on Iberian and Italian romance literature. This paper does not require that non-English language works be encountered in their original language (and there is no penalty for working only with translations), but nevertheless it was pleasing and impressive to see good use of brief quotations in French, Welsh, and Old Norse. Particularly striking this year was some candidates' highly effective use of literary theory. There was some genuinely excellent, focused and imaginative work on gender (and transgender) theory, and on representations of the female body and female desire. Several candidates took the opportunity to compare central Middle English texts – *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* and Malory – with their sources and analogues, and done well, this worked brilliantly. Others produced careful comparative studies of French romances with their Old Norse

translations, to good effect. The paper's requirement of only two, 90 minute essays occasionally produced meandering arguments, but the best candidates used this scope to produce compelling, wide-ranging, and occasionally thoroughly commanding responses to the questions.

### **Paper 3 [see CI paper 2]**

### **Paper 4 History of the English Language to c. 1800 (Year 2 Portfolio)**

Performance on this paper was very encouraging, with a good range of topics and approaches in evidence. Most questions were attempted, and were used in interesting and occasionally innovative ways. The best answers combined detailed primary engagement with strong theoretical awareness, while also paying close attention to the demands of the question. There was some very promising evidence of independent work, on both Section A and B, with some excellent comparative work in the latter. Weaker candidates could draw extensively on secondary rather than primary sources, and some would clearly benefit from proof-reading their work before submission.

### **Paper 5a The Material Text Portfolio**

There were 4 candidates for this paper. Commentaries were evenly divided between the Nowell (*Beowulf*) and Auchinleck manuscripts, while essays tackled a range of questions; there was a general tendency for those candidates who opted to write a Commentary on the earlier manuscript to select an essay-topic on the later period, and vice versa. It was gratifying to see that even within the Commentaries and essays (even when responding to the same prompts) covered a useful and diverse range of topics, so underlining the extent to which this paper offers candidates an opportunity to focus on their own skills and interests. The strongest scripts combined careful attention to technical details, including scribal and editorial performance and lay-out, with meticulous scholarly apparatus, elegant presentation and sensitivity to critical issues. Weaker scripts were lacking in one or more of these areas.

### **CII Paper 6 Options**

#### **Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD**

ONLY 3 CANDIDATES TOOK THIS PAPER

#### **Old Norse**

ONLY 4 CANDIDATES TOOK THIS PAPER (including 1 English and Modern Languages and 1 Classics and English)

#### **Old and Early Middle Irish Language and Literature**

ONLY 1 CANDIDATE TOOK THIS PAPER

#### **6c Medieval Welsh Language and Literature I**

ONLY 1 CANDIDATE TOOK THIS PAPER

#### **6c Medieval Welsh Language and Literature II**

ONLY 1 CANDIDATE TOOK THIS PAPER (English and Modern Languages)

### 3. EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS (UG)

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Professor Simon J. James	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	Durham University	
<b>Course examined:</b>	English & EML FHS	
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )	Undergraduate	

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>					
		<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?		yes		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>		yes		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?		yes		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?		yes	If not the QAA's ...	
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?		yes		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?		yes		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		yes		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>					



## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

- a. ***How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?***

Oxford English students are as strong as any English undergraduates in the UK, if not the world. They are worked hard, but they rise to the challenges set them; they read, and think, independently, creatively and spiritedly. Even the weakest work I saw was weak for shortage of time or other impediment to effort (or, in one case, very poor exam technique), not for lack of intelligence or subtlety in the candidate. The very strongest piece of work I saw, a dissertation, could clearly be published with minimal alteration; this candidate also performed with exceptional ability writing on texts from a variety of genres and periods of literary history.

- b. ***Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).***

This year I was asked to read the equal highest 2:1 performances, thus those closest to the Upper Second/First-class borderline. Oxford has an unusually generous general regulation for rounding-up, at 68.5 (and, equivalently, at 58.5), allowing candidates with predominantly 2:1 performances in individual papers and a 2:1 average to be awarded a first-class degree. I can confirm that every one of these 'borderline' cases was what it appeared to be: an overall 2:1 performance with some first-class performances. Marking here was rigorous, accurate and transparent; my notes reiterate comments such as 'spot-on', 'quite right' 'certainly no more than this'.

I have no concerns at all, however, about the relatively high proportion of Firsts awarded this year. Given the quality of the intake, the high standards of teaching and the exceptional resources available to Oxford students, one would expect high levels of performance, and for such performances to be rewarded accordingly in assessment.

### **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

***Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.***

Last year I felt at times that double marking with the Board seeing both sets of initial marks as well as the agreed one was a practice designed to compensate for the likelihood of a small number of rogue markers failing to adhere to agreed academic standards. This year, no such suspicion occurred – standards appeared to be very consistently applied, and marking across pairs and, in a small number of cases, trios, was accurate, consistent, and considered, as evidenced by the comments.

I would like to commend all Oxford staff, academic and administrative, on the rigour, discipline and fairness with which the process was conducted this year. I was also pleased to see some consideration being given to succession planning for these roles and the consistency of institutional memory.

### **B3. Issues**

***Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?***

I was also the English external on the Board for the joint degree with Modern Languages. This Board was also conducted absolutely scrupulously, with the one candidate for whom judgement needing to be exercised receiving the right degree of attention and the right result. There was a much smaller number of candidates (17) but, if required next year, I would be happy to read work from this programme as well (for consistency, for purposes of quality assurance, rather than to look to resolve internal disputes between markers).

This next issue, I recognise, is more controversial, but I would appreciate a reply, from central administration if not from the Faculty. The student handbook I was sent at the beginning of my term of office indicates that the amount of teaching time provided for every paper to each student 'may vary between colleges'. This is surely, by the standards of the rest of the sector, a highly irregular practice. As external examiners, we are being asked to adjudicate the results of a league whose playing fields are thus explicitly advertised as not level. While I recognise that terms of employment for staff who teach in Oxford are unique, surely it is in the interests of all Faculties to regularise the teaching received by each student on a programme, regardless of their College affiliation? I would question how such differential treatment is consistent with the requirement for 'parity in the quality of learning opportunities' required by B3 of QAA Learning and Teaching benchmark.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

***Please comment/provide recommendations on any good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment, and any opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.***

#### **Good Practice**

The programme at Oxford is very unusual. I wonder if there is any other English degree in the world assessed by four-sevenths unseen final-year-exam, and on at least five sevenths, if not more, pre-1830 literature. Within these constraints, students clearly have tremendous scope and freedom to develop their own interests, a development for which they have tremendous support from their teaching and their environment.

I continue to admire the Shakespeare assessment. Some really, really good things come in these small packages – wonderful student performance in a relatively small number of words.

I wondered last year whether students were being over-rewarded for the choice of outré over more canonical authors in the period papers, and others marked down for more canonical options. The work I saw this year saw more independence shown in texts that were clearly new to the student, and more standard narratives being reproduced than when writing on 'big names'.

The reports on each individual paper must be time-consuming to assemble, but they are very informative and should help year-on-year development of each course.

#### **Enhancement**

If examiners' comments are to be written as if students can see them, some attention might be given to choice of language. 'No discernible argument' or 'takes the line of least resistance' at least communicate something by way of feedback; 'poor', 'workmanlike' or 'passionate in a quiet way' do not offer a student much more than a (chastening) value judgement. If I'm to be really nitpicky, I was concerned when a student was reproved for not introducing critics in an answer in a three-hour exam – if this is an expectation, surely this incentivises students to reproduce prepared material, rather than spontaneously and properly answering the question that's in front of them? (Opinions on this issue may differ within the discipline.)

Different examiners could be more lenient or more stringent on responses that didn't answer the question. When the 'question' is simply a quotation without an actual question or accompanying rubric, it is not always clear what standard should be applied. I understand that further guidance to setters will be offered next year, which I welcome.

### B5. Any other comments

***Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.***

I note, as across the sector, rising reporting of mental health issues from the student body. Does the method of assessment in Oxford exacerbate or alleviate poor mental health? Would the opportunity to 'bank' some marks at the end of the second year, rather than so much of the assessment falling towards the end of three years, reduce stress?

<b>Signed:</b>	<i>Simon J. James</i>
<b>Date:</b>	11.7.18

### EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Professor Ad Putter		
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	University of Bristol		
<b>Course examined:</b>	English & C&E FHS		
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )	Undergraduate		

***Please complete both Parts A and B.***

<b>Part A</b>			
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
			<b>N/A /</b>

				Other
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?	yes		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	yes		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?	yes		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?	yes		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?	yes		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?	yes		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?	yes		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>				

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. ***How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?***

The standards of Oxford University English students are high. The top end is especially impressive. I have this year seen the best student work I have encountered in many years of external examining. If any of the top students continue into academia, the future of the profession looks very bright. At the lower first, 2.1 and 2.2 levels, student work compares with that in my own institution and other English Departments of which I have experience as external examiner.

- b. ***Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).***

Student performance this year was unusually high; there was a higher number of first-class degrees than last year. As internal marking was extremely accurate, I would not attribute this to grade inflation: the simple explanation may be that this was a very strong and highly motivated cohort. The joint school (Classics and English) has a smaller number of students: student performance and achievement were comparable, judging by the degree classes awarded.

## **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

***Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.***

I am pleased to report that the assessment process was handled with the greatest care and professionalism, and in full accordance with the guidance issued by the English Faculty and the University.

There were various issues which troubled me last year and which I reported on, in particular (1) the raising of marks in borderline cases without reading of the scripts; (2) the failure to give externals access to draft examination papers. This year nothing of the sort occurred. The Chair of Exams, Professor Bart van Es, deserves high praise for ensuring that there were no irregularities in the process and for implementing changes that I think have been wholly beneficial.

## **B3. Issues**

***Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?***

The fact that the assessment process and the conduct of the meetings were so impeccable this year prompted me to raise the issue of succession planning at the examiners' meeting. As the current chair, Dr Bart van Es, will serve again next year, this is not an issue for next year, but the Faculty might wish to formalise a form of succession planning that ensures there is continuity of good practice, and parity of treatment between successive student cohorts. An arrangement whereby the incoming chair serves as deputy (or 'note-taker' in your system) to the outgoing chair is one way of achieving this, but of course there are others. The fact that the current three externals were appointed at the same time (and leave at the same time) is not ideal in that regard, and again the Faculty might again consider a measure (e.g. prolonging the tenure of an external by one year) to break the cycle of complete 'external' discontinuity'.

My fellow external, Professor Simon James, raised in the examiners' meeting the issue that, as the student handbook openly admits, the amount of teaching may vary from college to college. I have since then talked about this with various Oxford English graduates and have become aware that this a thorny and long-standing issue, connected with inevitable differences in the personnel and in the resources of the colleges responsible for providing teaching. As such, it is probably beyond the powers of the Faculty of English to fix, but this does not mean it should be allowed to continue unabated. Students should be able to expect a level playing field (and can feel very aggrieved when they discover they have chosen the 'wrong' college for their course of study). Colleges should be able to agree on the amount of teaching they offer, or at least they should be able to agree on acceptable margins of variation if the collegiate system militates against uniformity of practice.

#### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

***Please comment/provide recommendations on any good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment, and any opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.***

##### **Good Practice**

As last year, I would single out for praise the practice of double marking. This is an onerous system but students can have every confidence that the mark they are awarded is just. The system of internal third marking in cases of large disagreement (or 'joint agreement to disagree') works exceptionally well in Oxford. The third marking I have seen shows that there really is an independent, third view, not just a splitting of differences between first and second markers.

##### **Enhancement**


We had a number of late 'Factors-Affecting-Performance cases' this year, which had to be dealt with by email (since they apparently came in after the special circumstances meeting). Fortunately the students concerned were not borderline cases; if they had been, it would have been difficult to arrive at recommendations by email (where, e.g. confidential medical evidence cannot be shared). If unforeseen 'late FAPS' become the norm (next year will show this), a short meeting might be scheduled to ensure that they receive the same level of consideration.

Since the FAP committee makes recommendations to the full board, I think it makes sense to share with the board the committee's conclusions about the impact of these factors (mild, moderate, severe). This would allow the board to judge whether the recommended adjustments are fair and equitable, without compromising the confidentiality of medical/personal information.

#### **B5. Any other comments**

***Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.***

I would like to thank the Chair of Exams, Prof. Bart van Es, his deputy, Prof. Peter McDonald, the Faculty administrator Angie Johnson, and all members of the Board, for making this year of examining and the stays in Oxford an enjoyable experience.

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	19.7.18

**Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.**

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018**

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Judith HAWLEY	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	Royal Holloway, University of London	
<b>Course examined:</b>	English, English and History	
<b>Level:</b> <i>(please delete as appropriate)</i>	Undergraduate	

***Please complete both Parts A and B.***

<b>Part A</b>					
		<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?		X		
A2	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>		X		
A3	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?		X		
A4	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?		X		
A5	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?		X		
A6	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?		X		
A7	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		X		

**\* If you answer “No” to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer “Yes” or “N/A / Other”.**

## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

All but two students in English were awarded a 2.1 or above. The numbers of 1sts awarded was substantially higher than last year. This probably reflects the dedication and professionalism of both the teaching staff and the students rather than being a sign of grade inflation. The first class scripts I read were really exceptionally good. One candidate rightly received a first from both examiners for each element of the assessment. The work was exemplary in its combination of scholarly and critical expertise. A couple of candidates I read were less ‘stellar’ in their attainment but still demonstrated both a broad range of knowledge and considerable critical acumen. In the middle and lower ranges of the scripts I read, markers were using 2.2 marks appropriately and more frequently than last year. These students demonstrated less critical sophistication than others in their cohort, but still displayed an impressive range of knowledge. Students at Oxford are attaining very high academic standards compared to those at other institutions with which I am familiar. The standard of the student intake, and the quality of teaching and learning produce a very impressive body of finalists.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

There were only six candidates and English and History this year, which is disappointing as this programme attracts students from a more diverse range of backgrounds. (I gather that numbers are higher in the year below.) It is difficult to generalise from such a small sample, but the proportion of 1sts is roughly the same. The standard of work is better than last year, especially on the interdisciplinary project which raised some concern last year.

### **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University’s regulations and guidance.*

I was very satisfied with the conduct of the examination process this year. The Faculty has acted on recommendations made by the externals. We were sent exam scripts in advance, as we requested. The conduct of both the FAP and the FHS Board meetings was highly professional. At the FAP board, due consideration was given to the students’ circumstances and appropriate adjustments were made so that both the individuals and the cohort as a whole were treated fairly. We were struck by how many students have completed their degrees while carrying very heavy burdens of mental and/or physical distress. In the FHS board, the Chair conducted the classification process with due attention to the regulations. Matters of policy were discussed rigorously and I am confident that candidates were treated fairly. Candidates on the borderline were re-read; marks were not ‘found’ in the raw marks to carry them over the border.



As for the marking of individual scripts, I still think it would be helpful if markers were to record their reasons for agreeing a mark on the comments sheets. I appreciate that very divergent scripts are third-marked, but when markers disagree by about 10 marks and the agreed mark is fixed at one end of that scale, it would be useful if markers could explain their thinking (e.g. 'we agreed the breadth of material compensated for the lack of sophistication in the argument (or vice versa)'). This might require additional paperwork but should not take up too much time.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

Again the fact that Proctors use student numbers while the Faculty uses candidate numbers cause difficulties and delays in the meetings.

### **B4 Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

The range of statistical evidence presented is to be applauded. It was especially useful to compare marking practices by individual and to see the Borderline Monitoring information that the Chair provided on the day of the first meeting. Information about the breakdown of marks by gender was discussed with due care and attention.

### **B5 Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

<b>Signed:</b>	<i>Judith Hawday</i>
<b>Date:</b>	5 July 2018

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.

### 3. M.ST AND M.PHIL (MEDIEVAL STUDIES) IN ENGLISH (INCLUDING M.ST IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES)

#### Part I

#### A. STATISTICS

##### (1) Numbers and percentages in each class/category

There were 111 candidates

Outcome	Distinction	Pass	Fail	Incomplete
Numbers	39	60	6*	6**

Percentages including recent years

	Distinction	Pass	Fail	Incomplete
2014	30.6%	68.1%	1.3%	N/A
2015	37.9%	56.5%	2.8%	N/A
2016	36.3%	52%	4.9%	5.9%
2017	43.2%	45.7%	6.2%	5%
2018	35.2%	54%	5.4%	5.4%

\* 6 students (5.4%) have yet to complete due to the need to resubmit 'failed' work; each piece of 'failed' work can be re-submitted once (by Monday of 0<sup>th</sup> week of Michaelmas term); should re-submitted work not pass (60 or above), this will convert to a 'Fail'.

\*\* 6 students (5.4%) have yet to submit/complete due to being granted extensions for the Dissertation, or HT B and C essays. 3 have yet to complete due to submitting their Dissertation after long extensions meaning their work was not marked in time to be ratified at the exam Board meeting.

##### (2) Vivas

Vivas were not used.

##### (3) Marking of Scripts

All essays and Dissertations were double-marked. In cases where the first and second marker had been unable to agree a mark, essays were sent to the appropriate External Examiners who acted as third markers.

#### B. EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

There were no changes to the criteria for awarding the degree. Tick boxes were removed from the comment sheets.

The calendar for marking and meetings remained largely the same as in 2016–2017, with the Final Board, and preceding Special Cases meeting, on 3rd July, four weeks after the deadline for submission of the Dissertations.

For the first time this year, all written work was submitted only in electronic form. After representations from the EGO, it had been agreed by Graduate Studies Committee that work would be submitted as PDFs, to preserve formatting. This proved to be very problematic as it was impossible to check word counts accurately in PDF format. It was necessary to ask for Word files of essays suspected to be over-length. Most, but not all, candidates complied with these requests. The decision to allow only PDF submission has been revisited, and all course handbooks for the coming year will specify and require submission of assessed work in Word.

The penalties for late submission and word-length infringements were reviewed and revised, in the light of recommendations and comments from last year's Board. The newly agreed minimum word length of 6,000 words for B and C strand essays was meant to be implemented at the start of the year. In the event it became clear that, while all documents under the direct control of the Exam Board had been accurately updated, not all the materials relating to the course on the faculty and

university websites and in the course handbook had been adjusted to reflect this change. To avoid any possible disadvantage to candidates, therefore, the new minimum word limit was not enforced in Michaelmas Term C essays, and all candidates and assessors were immediately advised of this as soon as it was drawn to our attention. All candidates were contacted as soon as the problem had been resolved, and were advised that the new minimum would be in force for all other elements of the course. In the event, there were no issues relating to this minimum word limit in the assessment process.

The practice of blind double marking, with each marker submitting marks and comment sheets to the Graduate Studies Committee prior to discussion with the other marker, was retained. Much of the marking for the B and C essays was undertaken by the internal Examiners, with course tutors acting as first markers for the C essays. In cases where internal markers were unable to reach agreement, the essays were sent, along with the internal markers marks and comments, to the appropriate External Examiner for third marking. In addition, samples of essays and Dissertations with high and low marks were sent to the Externals, along with any pieces of work for which the internal Examiners' raw marks had fallen on either side of a border (60, 70, 80) and, in the final weeks, full runs of selected candidates from each strand, to give a proper sense of the marking parameters and to ensure that internal marking was appropriate and consistent.

### **C. CHANGES FOR THE FACULTY TO CONSIDER**

See Chair's Report below

### **D. PUBLICATION OF EXAMINATION CONVENTIONS**

The document, 'Marking and Distinction Criteria', was sent to all candidates early in Michaelmas term and circulated to all markers at appropriate points in the year. Another document covering the specific criteria for the MPhil was sent to MPhil candidates separately.

## **Part II**

### **A. GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE EXAMINATION**

See attached report.

### **B. DETAILED NUMBERS**

n/a for MSt.

### **C. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS**

n/a for MSt.

### **D. COMMENTS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF INDIVIDUALS**

This part is physically separate.

### **E. THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

Professor Vincent Gillespie (Chair)  
Professor Adam Smyth (*ex officio*)  
Professor Elleke Boehmer  
Dr David Dwan  
Dr Sos Eltis  
Professor Nick Halmi

Ms Jeri Johnson  
Dr Philip West  
**External**  
Dr Gavin Alexander (Cambridge)  
Dr Paul Davis (UCL)  
Professor Ruth Livesey (Royal Holloway)  
Dr Ian Johnson (St Andrews)  
Professor Adam Piette (Sheffield)

## **M.St. and M.Phil. in English, Chair of Examiners' Report for 2017-18**

### **A. Process**

There were five new internal Examiners this year (Elleke Boehmer, David Dwan, Nick Halmi, Jeri Johnson, Adam Smyth) and three continuing from last (Sos Eltis, Vincent Gillespie, Phil West). At its first meeting in November, the Board identified a need for an additional Examiner in the Modern and American areas, and was pleased and grateful to have Jeri Johnson join them. The External Examiners remained the same as in 2016-17.

At the first meeting of the internal Examiners in November, the timetable was approved and Michaelmas C options were allocated to markers. The Board discussed all the points raised in last year's reports and the recommendations of the Graduate Studies Committee. After the first meeting, the Chair wrote to the Externals informing them of the actions taken with regard to their recommendations.

1. The Board added a new section to the Guidance for Examiners encouraging them to use the higher marks in the Distinction range: "External Examiners have consistently encouraged us to use a wider range of marks in the Distinction category. They feel that we are out of line with other institutions in our tendency to prefer marks in the 70-75 range for such work, and that this may disadvantage our candidates. In particular, Excellent and Outstanding work ought more regularly to be rewarded with marks over 75 and even over 80."

2. The Board promised to clarify to convenors and to candidates that word counts will include epigraphs and picture captions.

3. The Board promised to clarify to convenors and to candidates the need for consistency and accuracy in the use of short-form referencing. They wished to stress the need for accuracy and consistency in scholarly presentation.

4. The Board promised to clarify and emphasise to Examiners and assessors the importance of explicitly addressing the criteria in writing comments and in drafting feedback. This is now in the Guidance for Examiners, and will be repeated in the covering letter that goes out with the scripts. If possible we will also incorporate it more visibly into the feedback sheets themselves.

5. The Board removed the otiose references to rubric violations in the Exam Conventions.

6. The Board asked for the appointment of an additional internal Examiner for this year to cover in particular modern American literature.

Two of the recommendations of the Externals last year were not acted on, after careful deliberation:

1. The Board decided not to use internal Examiners as third markers where agreement is not found between the first two. The Board felt that it was invaluable to have the view of the Externals in such matters, and that this constituted an important way for us to calibrate our marking against national standards of excellence. In addition, given the large number of examining functions already required in the faculty, we were not confident that we could find sufficiently experienced third markers able to meet the very tight deadlines imposed by the programme. Using early career or inexperienced third markers, who had not had sight of the complete run of scripts, might risk distortion in the marks profile. We were not convinced that internal third marking could do much to improve the expertise and examining culture of the faculty, when compared to the quality control aspects of having experienced outside colleagues adjudicating.

2. We considered very carefully the recommendation from several Externals to re-introduce a zone of reassessment on the borderline between high pass and Distinction. But the Board felt that the absence of discretionary powers to round up averages had produced no obvious injustices last year, and that the greater clarity had been an advantage. In the light of the wholesale changes to the marking scale next year, and in view of our sense that the two existing routes to a Distinction produce a good number of Distinctions across the strands, we decided to continue last year's rules for this year. Given that there will always be some candidates who emerge numerically as the very top candidate in a given classification, the Board felt that a clear publicly advertised threshold was less susceptible to special pleading and advocacy that could lead to inconsistency, and voted to continue to deny itself the discretionary power to round up in the coming process.

In advance of each of the Marks meetings, the Special Cases committee comprising Professors Boehmer and Gillespie and Dr West, considered the submission of Factors Affecting Performance relating to essays and made recommendations to the Examination Board, which met shortly afterwards, with the External Examiners in attendance by phone. Marks for the Michaelmas C essays were confirmed at the first meeting in Hilary and the External Examiners were invited to make comments. At the second meeting of Hilary, the internal Examiners agreed the allocation of markers for the Hilary B and C essays and for the Dissertations. At the first meeting in Trinity, marks for the B and C essays were confirmed. On the day of the Final Board, the Special Cases Committee met to consider any new submissions and to review earlier cases prior to the Board meeting, with Professor Livesey in attendance as External. At the Final Examination Board, the Examiners confirmed the marks awarded to Dissertations, agreed the imposition of penalties for late, over- or under-length work, accepted the recommendations from the Special Cases Committee, and then classified the candidates. In accordance with the new guidelines agreed the previous year, no borderline candidates were automatically rounded up, nor considered under the discretion of the Board. The Charles Oldham Shakespeare Prize is normally awarded to the candidate whose Dissertation on a relevant topic achieved the highest marks, but after carefully reviewing the eligible cases, the Board decided not to award the prize this year. The Marilyn Butler Prize was awarded to the candidate whose Dissertation achieved the highest mark overall. The high number of extensions this year meant that some students had not submitted their Dissertations in time for the Final Board, so their work has to be marked during the long vacation. There were also some B and C essays from earlier terms that had not been submitted by the time of the Final Board. Where an extension had been granted, the Special Cases committee took into account that an adjustment to the examining process had already been made. Two retrospective applications under the Factors Affecting Performance mechanism were received after the Final Board, and they will be decided on when the Board agrees by confidential circulation the marks for the rather numerous submissions granted extensions beyond the date of the Final Board. The number of extensions awarded (out of 111 candidates) is worth noting and perhaps reflecting on:

**MT C Essay:** 6 extensions, 2 of which received further extensions.

**HT B Essay:** 14 extensions, 7 of which had further extensions.

**HT C Essay:** 10 extensions (including 1 retrospective extension), of which 4 had further extensions.

**Dissertations:** 17 extensions, of which 4 had further extensions.

The issue of cautious marking by internals was once more raised. There was continued general support for encouraging internal markers to use higher grades, especially given the competition for Doctoral funding. If this suggestion is still approved, it will be important to ensure that it is embraced by all markers, to avoid uneven practice, with serious consequences for candidates and their overall averages. Some of the Externals commented on this.

The format of the comment sheets had been adjusted to remove the tick boxes. Guidance was given that the marking criteria should be explicitly addressed in the markers' comments. This was not universally the case. The Chair reviewed every feedback sheet for every candidate and for every piece of submitted work, and requested modifications where necessary. This is a significant amount of work, and assessors could simplify the task by following the guidance more carefully. The External Examiners made very helpful contributions to the various discussions and were, throughout the process, exemplary in their responses to every request and in their scrutiny of the process. Comparison with practice at other institutions is often very illuminating.

#### **Further thoughts on the overall examination:**

For the Dissertations, most internal Examiners marked several, but many additional assessors had to be appointed. This proved problematic, because the request to mark a Dissertation comes relatively late in the year, and, in cases where those asked initially have declined to act, such requests can come very late indeed. This is an undesirable situation. A huge amount of time has been spent this year by Examiners and administrators in trying to identify suitable, willing, and competent markers for the Dissertations. Last year's Chair's report recommended that it would be desirable to alert the entire Faculty at the start of the academic year to the probability of members being required to mark one or more Masters Dissertations, unless they have Externally-funded research leave with a Departmental Lecturer in place. This is in line with University guidelines on Academic leave, though those already holding onerous positions such as Chair of FHS or Prelims should also be exempt. The Chair of the Faculty Board did communicate this to the faculty in a message dated 24<sup>th</sup> October 2017 in these terms:

"Faculty Board and Graduate Studies Committee have been considering the Examiners' reports from this year and were concerned that, once again, there were reported difficulties in securing Dissertation markers for our postgraduate taught courses. Can I please remind postholders that you will normally and usually be expected to mark MSt Dissertations unless you have very compelling reasons to say no. Our obligations normally to mark summative papers every year are not confined to the undergraduate examinations. As you will know Dissertation topics are confirmed in sixth week of Hilary term and letters asking people to examine will be sent out after 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2018. The MSt exam committee tries to ensure that no single marker is overburdened. There is a tight turn around for marking Dissertations of one week with all agreed marks due in by Thursday of week 9 of Trinity term so you may wish to make a note in your diaries in anticipation of being asked to mark."

Nevertheless it was again a serious and protracted struggle to find sufficient competent assessors for the Dissertations. If every faculty postholder accepted that they would be expected to mark a minimum of two Dissertations, this problem would largely resolve itself. Equally if every postholder accepted that assessing a Masters Dissertation does not require the same advanced research competency as PGR Dissertations, that would ease matters. Significant numbers of colleagues declined to assess Dissertations on the grounds of competency in areas where they would have no problems assessing work in the Final Honour School. Given the very tight timetable for marking, if all colleagues accepted some Dissertations the number assigned to each individual would be notably reduced and the process greatly simplified. This would significantly spread the load on ECR colleagues, and serve as a positive reinforcement of quality control in marking this important piece of work. Nevertheless, the general view of the Board was that Dissertation supervisors should not be first markers.

The Board discussed the idea of weighting the Dissertation more heavily in the overall marks profile, but was not in favour of so doing. The views of the Externals at the Final Board on this matter are reported below.

In discussion on the frequent changes of Dissertation topics and titles, some of which were changing as late as the morning of submission, the Board felt that a Dissertation topic should only be approved by the Examining Board if it fits with available faculty marking. The Board felt that the

issue of Dissertation topics and titles needed further work by the Faculty. Next year's Board would need to reflect on this at their first meeting, and the Board recommends that it should also be discussed at Graduate Studies Committee.

When allocating Dissertation markers, the Examiners once again noted that a few students had two supervisors, which made the difficulty of finding markers even greater. The task would be simpler if, once again next year, convenors could avoid allocating more than one supervisor for each student. The Examiners were also concerned by the extremely specialised nature of some Dissertation topics and, although reluctant to refuse any so late in the year, would urge convenors to consider the question of finding suitable markers when discussing potential Dissertation topics. An issue arose in Michaelmas Term about the admissibility of a candidate writing a C essay entirely and exclusively on a non-Anglophone author. The Board had significant concerns about finding adequate assessment for such work, and about the possible quality control implications of such a permissive posture, and the matter was referred to the Graduate Studies Committee. GSC has ruled that it is acceptable to submit such work. Future Exam Boards will need to be aware of this precedent, and the guidance in the course handbooks needs updating to reflect this decision. This year, the timetable for the entire year's meetings was established well before the beginning of the academic year. I am very grateful to my colleagues on the Exam Board for their exemplary willingness to attend all scheduled meetings, and for their thoughtful, cheerful, and professional engagement with the various issues we faced.

## **B. Administration**

The numbers of candidates and options means that the entire examination is an administrative challenge. Administration for the examination was undertaken by Emily Richards, and Sue Clark, with Andy Davice providing crucial assistance at various points. Thanks are due to all those involved. At all stages, the process was reliant on Emily Richards's experience of administering the MSt over a number of years and the hard work of all involved. Sue Clark's very welcome return to the Graduate Studies team has been of great benefit to the examining process. As already noted, the difficulty of recruiting appropriate markers for the Dissertations was again a problem, putting additional pressure on the administration of the examination. The numbers of markers and the need to send work to External Examiners in time for them to read and comment before the various Marks meetings, as well as the process of providing feedback and queries from candidates can put strains on a very small team. This is further complicated by the sharply increasing numbers of extensions and associated correspondence with the Proctors' Office (which is not always as swift as would be desirable in dealing with urgent matters relating to the examination). Keeping track of the numerous extensions and late submissions is a major logistical challenge, but the team handled it very smoothly this year. The timetable for the examination is such that any delays and omissions increase the pressure, and although the administrative team generally coped extremely well in the circumstances, they were put under undue pressure at various stages in the year.

## **C. Criteria**

The criteria for classification were the same as in 2016-17. The two routes to a Distinction were retained: a candidate must gain 70 or over on the Dissertation and an average of 70 across all four elements (three essays and a Dissertation); or the candidate needs 68 or over on the Dissertation and an average of 72. These criteria will be comprehensively revised for 2018-9, with the new pass mark of 50 and the introduction of the Merit grade.

## **D. External Examiners' Comments**

The detailed written reports of the External Examiners are attached. At the two Marks meetings in Hilary and Trinity and at the Final Board, the External Examiners were encouraged to comment orally on the examination process. Their comments from the Final Board are summarised below, in reverse period order:

**Professor Adam Piette** said the complete runs he had received demonstrated a high quality of work and reflected inspirational teaching, giving a good sense of the health of the programme. He had enjoyed seeing the development of the personal trajectory of the students. He had seen vibrant work that was publishable in some cases. However, he felt that some Dissertations had been slightly disappointing and wondered if this might be addressed by weighting it more heavily. He commended the B course and said it provides a scholarly angle that spreads good practice throughout all aspects of the MSt degree. He believes that it is a very important element of the course that underpins it, and helps keep focus and give concrete strength to the work. Professor Piette welcomed the addition of a merit grade to the mark scheme next year.

**Professor Ruth Livesey** said the complete runs she had received were welcome and provided a clearer overview of development and also a sense of individual candidate range. She asked how students were guided to ensure no overlap or repetition of work. She also commented that she had seen some students whose work seemed on a downward trajectory over the year, and on some evidence that students who began adventurously then seemed to develop a more 'safe' way of working. She questioned who pushes the students and encourages risk taking? In discussion it was agreed by the whole Board that the Course Convenors had an important role in avoiding duplication, and, with the Dissertation supervisors, in encouraging appropriate ambition. Professor Livesey also praised the B course, though in some cases marks profiles had been lower here and the course in this area perhaps needed to better 'spark up' the work of the students. In general she said the work she had seen was of great quality and a pleasure to read.

**Dr Paul Davis** said he had really enjoyed reading the Dissertations we had sent to him. He had seen wonderful work. He too applauded the B course and said the manuscript knowledge feeds other areas of the course. However, he too had seen some examples of students 'playing safe'. Dr Davis said he was perplexed by the formation of Dissertation titles, some of which he found inelegant and more like prospectuses for the work to be undertaken. He thinks that firm titles would be better and helpful to the students. The Dissertation is the most important piece of work and yet he observed vagueness in the titles. He also questioned the weighting of the Dissertation feeling that due to time constraints it became compressed. He was not in favour of weighting the Dissertation mark, however, given the current structure of the course. Seeing complete runs had been interesting but had also revealed some narrowness, but he did not feel qualified to comment on overall intellectual development from the limited sample he had been sent. He felt that there was a recurrent weakness in some C course essays in failing to reflect and put pressure on the nature of the historicisations and contextualisations that were being undertaken, and perhaps a reluctance to challenge the weaknesses and limitations in this dominant methodological approach. He sometimes detected untested assumptions, assertions, and a lack of literary proof.

**Dr Gavin Alexander** said the complete runs he had seen had shown high quality B and C course essays, but a Dissertation weakness. He too had been disappointed in the Dissertation titles – some had changed a lot from the draft topic and others were poorly constructed. In some cases the Dissertation showed less grasp of the research field than the C course essays. He referred to the compressed timetable as a possible reason for the Dissertation weakness and asked how we could give students more support in Trinity Term. He felt that able students were sometimes becoming the prisoners of poorly chosen or badly defined Dissertation topics, which had perhaps been predetermined almost from their arrival on course, and so failed to reflect the development of the candidates as scholars and thinkers. For these reasons, he would not be in favour of giving the Dissertation greater weighting in the marks profile until these issues have been addressed. Dr Alexander said he had seen poor footnotes and referencing from good candidates and feels this important area is being neglected in both teaching and marking. Referencing he had seen was inconsistent and messy. He would like to see more focus on this and made the point that unclear short-form references impacted favourably on words counts. Those who presented longer clear footnotes were using more of their word count to do so. He would like to see much more consistency and clearer guidance. Dr Alexander felt that with such a high number of markers, some



of whom were new or maybe hadn't marked for a while, that an agreed standard was hard to achieve and maintain. He felt that this sometimes led to distortions in agreed marks. He detected a tension between the assessment and reward of innovative research considered to be of high value, which was well rewarded in marking, and the quality of careful scholarly argumentation and presentation. He felt that, on occasion, research originality was looked for and rewarded more highly than scholarly cogency. Finally Professor Alexander urged more scrutiny over borderline marks. At present Externals do not change marks on runs sent for review but only when asked to adjudicate ANF papers. He felt a more robust system should be in place here.

**Dr Ian Johnson** said that from the work he had seen there was evidence of more consistent marking this year. The complete runs he had seen were interesting; one was for a clearly talented student who had performed outstandingly, the other was less even with a lower Dissertation mark due to disorganisation. Dr Johnson felt that if there were more time for the Dissertation this would have been addressed. Generally Dr Johnson said he had seen tremendous work that was scholarly and inventive with a vivacious range of approaches. He believed that even the lower grades showed good teaching and he found that historical context evidenced in his strand had worked well. He made particular mention of the B course essays which he said were extraordinarily impressive. He also commented on marker comments which he thought were helpful and suitably targeted to students. Dr Johnson said he thought an abstract at the beginning of the Dissertation might help students organise and focus their work.

In general, the External Examiners were positive about the degree, the examining process, the quality of the candidates and the teaching, and praised the hard work of the administrative team.

Vincent Gillespie  
Chair of M.St. Examiners  
September 2018

## EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS (PGT)

**EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018**

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Professor ADAM PIETTE		
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD		
<b>Course examined:</b>	M.St English		
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )		Postgraduate	

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>					
		<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?		X		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>		X		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?		X		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?		X		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?		X		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?		X		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		X		
<b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b>					

## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

The standard was comparable to the work by Masters level students whom I have taught and examined and read as external examiner at Sheffield, York, Glasgow, Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin, UEA, Liverpool, Keele.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

In the Spring, read over 30 essays across modern and contemporary range – again clear sense of high quality of B-work which makes MSt so distinctive – real range in work I read from Pym and Nazis through Trilling and book clubs, 17th century bible written in native American language, Coetzee in Chinese – so incredibly varied but all essays distinguished by care of scholarship, archival fever in Bodleian and its holdings etc. Painstaking though sometimes argument gets lost on way (burden of detail such that temptation to history x descriptive essay) – and maybe rubric could be clearer about book history and methodology. But cohort to be praised collectively for their combination of thorough archival research with detail of analysis. Also read before summer Board, six complete runs – two from each of the MA programmes, 1900-present, American, World Literature: and took the view that dissertation should be weighted – all students working towards dissertation as culmination but also concentration of skills and analytic focus into final ‘statement’. Heartening to see all students in samples using four assessment pieces to develop personal trajectory and research interest between and across modules. Read five ANF dissertations as well as five sample dissertations (highest, lowest, three borderlines). The quality was excellent, with a professionalizing of the cohort through the excellent B-course. Reading the runs makes clear the specific nature and quality of the set of modules, and some more general points about the MPhil as a whole.

### **B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process**

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University’s regulations and guidance.*

As in previous years, I read work from across the board and was given samples from high to low range, borderlines, and complete runs. The module marking and dissertation marking was accurate, clearly worked out between markers, pedagogically useful to the students, and with a proper dedication to standards as set out by the discipline and University.

### **B3. Issues**

***Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?***

It was a strain reading so much material, as I was asked to cover so many topics from modernism to contemporary writing and world literature – Oxford should really split my role into two and ask two externals to cover the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; maybe a modernist and mi-century specialist and a contemporary and world lit specialist. It should also consider paying the external a little more as there is such a lot of work over quite a few boards, and Oxford compares unfavourably with other institutions in terms of rates of pay for this work: I feel as this is my last year that I can say this without being accused of self-interest!

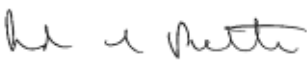
**B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

***Please comment/provide recommendations on any good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment, and any opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.***

**B5. Any other comments**

***Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.***

I'd like to thank Oxford for the opportunity to read the work, and would like to thank the administrative staff who worked so hard to ensure a really professional service for external examiners throughout my three years.

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	12 July 2018

**Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.**

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Prof. Ruth Livesey	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	Royal Holloway, University of London	
<b>Course examined:</b>	MSt English Literature (1830-1914)	
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )		Postgraduate

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>				
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?	Yes		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	Yes		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?	Yes		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?	Yes		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?	Yes		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?	Yes		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?	Yes		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>				

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

In my third year as examiner for this programme I can confirm once again that the standards achieved by the students position them as one of the strongest cohorts on taught graduate programmes in this field in the UK. I regularly read potentially publishable work for this programme. The quality of writing, in particular, is very strong. The standard students have to attain merely to pass this course have seemed to me very high indeed and I am very glad to hear that the School of Humanities is introducing a new pass mark of 50. That decision will bring the MSt programme in to line with other programmes at this level nationally. The requirement for originality at distinction level ensures only exceptional work is rewarded in this way. The narrow time constraints of this programme, however, do lead to tremendous pressure on research. As a result strong performance in some programme elements - particularly the dissertation – depends less on original archival/primary source research than in 12 month MA programmes.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

c.

The MSt 1830-1914 component has shown vigorous life and achievement in my period as external examiner. The introduction of new research-led courses focused on the fin de siècle, for example, has produced some outstanding essays, replete with up to date scholarship in conversation with the current state of the field. The B course essays – particularly in 15/16 and 16/17 were notable for generating the independent, risk taking, primary research one might expect to see in the longer dissertations of other programmes. In 17/18, by contrast, the cohort seemed rather more risk-averse, with a particular tendency to play it rather safe in the dissertation. The reasons and potential modes of addressing this via Directors of Study and dissertation support were discussed in detail at the Board of Examiners' Meeting as can be seen in the minutes of our July gathering. It seems of particular importance that no extra credit weight is given to the dissertation given the relatively short length – and dramatically shorter time – MSt students have to complete the work in comparison to 12 month MA programmes. At present in two out of my three years as an examiner I have seen achievement profiles tail off towards the dissertation.

### B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

The conduct of assessment has become more thoroughly professionalised in several ways over the last few years. The introduction of a new route to distinction level work has removed the potentially hazardous practices of individual judgement at the borderline. All students are treated with equity, anonymity, and due consideration. This is particularly true of the Factors Affecting Performance meeting, which I have attended as the delegated External for the last three years. The system of classifying seriousness of impact ensures details are contained in that small setting. The proctorial system of issuing extensions, however, has clearly had quite an impact on staff workload into the summer and beyond. Staff are more consistent in their use of the marking criteria and in providing an account for externals when disparate marks have been agreed.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

The status of the dissertation should not be enhanced in the assessment weighting whilst this remains a nine month programme.

I would encourage a greater sense of oversight for the assessments and achievements of individual students on the programme from a director of studies equivalent. I noted one case in which a student had written two essays on the same text in this course, which seemed very narrow and one might have expected to have been picked up at some point. There are also clearly cases where an overview of achievement and feedback with individual students prior to embarking on the dissertation could have helped to lift some falling profiles.

I welcome the new range of passing marks for the programme for the coming academic year and would yet again encourage colleagues at Oxford to make full use of this range, especially rewarding the truly exceptional work that is submitted here marks into the 80s where appropriate. Oxford will be entering into a new competitive DTP for scant funded PhD studentships: Oxford Mst graduates may be disadvantaged in comparison to applicants from other graduate programmes where such work is graded 80+.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

There has been a real improvement in attempting to tailor comments and feedback to students. This is moving towards good practice at other institutions. Students are encouraged to believe in themselves as independent thinkers and writers by the broader climate of the institution. The B course still remains remarkable in the research students manage to produce in a very short space of time. The contents of this course it could well be disseminated nationally to enhance an area of skills (in book history) rather in decline elsewhere.

### **B5. Any other comments**

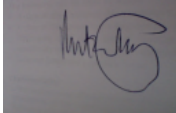
*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

At the end of my term of office I remain impressed by the outstanding quality of work produced by the students. As this is a programme students compete internationally to gain a place on this should be little surprise. In some cases it is clear that some very rigorous teaching and supervision underpins the work I see. This is particularly the case in the B course and in Dr Evangelista's new course on the fin de siècle. In all cases I have a strong sense of students confident of their potential to develop a compelling critical voice.

The examination process has become more consistent over the past three years, with the change in routes to distinction, less frequent recourse to the use of externals to adjudicate ANF marks, and a stronger sense that students require written feedback in relation to the criteria.

One increasing strain on the orderly management of examination procedures is the marked increase in the issuing of extensions by the Proctors. In part this reflects national patterns and the rise in mental health issues experienced by our current generation of students. The desire to support students in completing their course is commendable. However an irregular pattern of submissions over the summer and early autumn puts new pressure on academics unused to being responsive to teaching demands in this period. It increases the likelihood of oversight and error and will have an undue effect on the workloads of those staff members known to be reliable and around in this period (to the detriment of their own research). I urge the relevant Division of the University of Oxford to consider regularising the pattern of extended deadlines

issued to a standard number of weeks in relation to the criteria used in the FAP meetings. It is also worth considering an equalities and diversity audit of those staff members asked to then mark work over the summer.

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	23 July 2018

**Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.**



## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Dr Paul Davis	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	University College London	
<b>Course examined:</b>	MSt in English (1700-1830)	
<b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)		Postgraduate

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>				
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?	✓		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	✓		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?	✓		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?	✓		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?	✓		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?	✓		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?	✓		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>				

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

The academic standards achieved by students on the MSt in English at Oxford compare very favourably with those at the other higher education institutions where I have served as either an internal or external examiner. Even the weaker students enrolled on the programme have acquired broad literary experience, some facility across a range of research methodologies, and a reliable understanding of the protocols of literary scholarship. And the strongest students among this year's intake have produced work which clearly marks them out as ideal future PhD candidates in the short term, and in the longer term likely leading academics of their generation.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

Student performance across the various strands of the programme has been impressively consistent, with very few anomalous marks among the profiles I sampled or reviewed. In this regard, I would particularly single out the standards achieved in the 'B' course essay, which requires students to demonstrate expertise in the sharply technical fields of bibliography, book history and book production. In my (bitter) experience of Masters teaching at my own institution, it can be a challenge to bring even quite confident and resourceful students up to an acceptable level in this kinds of exercise; but this is a challenge the teachers on the Oxford MSt in English continue to surmount. In light of the ongoing review of the MSt programme, I would also add that the Dissertation seems to me fairly weighted within the present scheme of award. In the majority of cases, students are making good use of the extra scope and autonomy this longer format permits, often submitting work which draws effectively on the diverse scholarly materials and research methods they have encountered across the year, and in that sense culminates their programme of study. However, I would add that the present arrangement of the programme, with students researching their dissertations concurrently with their Hilary 'C' essays, and submitting them in June, means that any additional weighting of the dissertation (i.e. by 'scaling' up the individual marks) would not be appropriate.

### B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

In this as in previous years, the assessment process has been conducted with appropriate rigour, but also proper sensitivity where the special circumstances of particular students have required it. Penalties for exam infringements (e.g. late submission of work, over-length work) have now been suitably regularized; in particular, the paragraph added to the guidance for students, further clarifying the rules regarding appendices in 'B' essays, has removed the possibility of misunderstanding over their proper use. The practice of full 'double blind' marking (as opposed to quicker but less scrupulous methods such as 'sampling') continues in general to ensure equity of treatment for the students. Most of the cases of unresolved disagreement which I was asked to settle involved scripts with obviously challenging features. But I say 'most', and not all (see further below). The final meeting of the Board was conducted with exemplary efficiency, patience and good humour, by the Chair, Professor Vincent Gillespie, aided by the administrative staff, Emily Richards and Sue Clark.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

This year, it seems to me (but I should stress this is only an impression, and relates only to the 1700-1830 strand of the MSt) that there has been a higher incidence than previously of large splits between 'raw' marks. By large, I mean more than ten marks. Generally, these involved one mark in the 'High Pass' range (65-69) and one in the 'Very High Distinction' range (80-84), and this phenomenon appears to be an unintended consequence of the advice given to examiners to mark higher (or 'use the full range of marks'). That advice is now explicitly specified in the 'marking criteria' document sent to all internal examiners, where it is said that it reflects university policy more widely as well as the recommendations of external examiners. Speaking personally, I am not yet convinced of the merits of a blanket injunction to examiners to award higher marks - unless and until robust evidence can be produced that students taking the Oxford MSt are disadvantaged by not receiving marks of 80 or more (e.g. in competition for doctoral funding). I would therefore urge that further inquiries be made into this question, so that the Board can reach a judgement based on concrete evidence. But in any event, whatever the Board ultimately decides, it is vital that the cogency of the marking ethos within the MSt programme not be put at risk. If the feeling is that markers should mark higher, this change must be implemented uniformly, across the cadre of members of staff involved in assessment within the programme (and that includes those who mark just a handful of essays or dissertations, on an *ad hoc* basis, and so may well be unfamiliar with the standards of assessment in the MSt). At present, it seems, a minority of individual markers have begun regularly awarding marks of 80 or above, while most continue to stay below 75. While this state of affairs persists, there will be a danger of marks profiles being seriously distorted by the 'luck of the draw' as to which candidates have their scripts assessed by the most generous markers.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**


*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

Following on from what I have said under B3 above, in cases where the two examiners 'raw' marks are divided across a class boundary (i.e. between pass and fail, or between pass and distinction) but they then resolve that disagreement in discussion, I would urge examiners to make fuller use of the section of their 'comments sheet' which calls for them to provide an account of that discussion. It is perfectly appropriate for examiners to resolve such disagreements, but keeping a written record of how they were resolved is an important means of consolidating the ethos of assessment within which individual markers on the programme reach their judgments. More generally, I would urge the Board to try to find ways of enhancing the opportunities for face-to-face dialogue between examiners, both about individual scripts and about the expected standards and marking criteria for the programme as a whole (at present, marks seem mostly to be arrived at by rather more remote forms of interaction).

### **B5. Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

None

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	6 July 2018

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Dr Gavin Alexander	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	University of Cambridge	
<b>Course examined:</b>	MSt/MPhil in English Studies	
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )	Undergraduate	Postgraduate

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>				
	<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?	✓		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>	✓		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?	✓		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?	✓		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?	✓		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?	✓		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?			✓
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>				

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

Standards are very high. This course has a large number of outstanding students, and yet I continue to think that more distinction marks might be given on the early modern strand of the course, and not fewer. There is also a tail of weaker students, inevitable without a much smaller quota of student numbers. Those in the middle derive clear benefit from the taught components of the course.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

I oversaw work in the early modern period. Much of this was excellent. I continue to be struck by the disappointing performance of a significant number of candidates in the dissertation after outstanding coursework essays. This may be about workload, and/or supervisory support. I return to this below.

Work for the B course is one of the highlights, much of it hugely impressive in its skill, depth, and range. It is testament to the expertise and commitment of the course's teachers that they bring their students up to a very high level of technical skill and understanding in a short space of time.

For the C course, I saw especially good work in Hilary Term for 'The Lettered World' and 'The Forensic Imagination', with use of very high marks justified and welcome. I am struck by how mature and judicious much of the C-course work is, and I think this comes from the teaching quality and quantity (including the unexamined A course in Michaelmas Term). The students have been enabled to acquire a good sense of research context and method in the general field and especially in the particular module area, and this is very enabling for their own work.

### B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

There is much good practice in assessment, and outcomes for the majority of students are defensible and equitable. The process has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance. However, there is some substandard marking practice. There is a large pool of examiners, some inexperienced, some rusty, and there are signs of a lack of familiarity with procedures (e.g. one case where examiners agreed a mark but commented that the external might be asked to adjudicate, which does not happen when a mark is agreed; they might have been better advised to record 'agreement not found', which triggers the external third reading). But the more obvious issue is large differences in the apparent standards being applied, despite the excellent marking criteria documentation. I think a difficulty is that such things are always relative – work is not absolutely excellent, or middling, or poor, but is judged in relation to what it is reasonable to expect of students at this stage doing this degree. That is where I think colleagues can part company, applying the criteria as though reading undergraduate work, or as though reading DPhil work. It is my view that pairs and cohorts of examiners should talk to each other formally before and during marking, to ensure that a more common set of standards is developed.

I have also witnessed a small amount of erratic marking. When comparing examiners' independent reports with the work they were marking, I could see evident in all kinds of case (B course essays, C course essays, and dissertations) a particular scenario, whereby an examiner loses sight of what the candidate is doing well and gives it scant reward, concentrating instead on particular (and sometimes relatively minor) weaknesses and marking down for those.



### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

I have some questions that I recommend the Faculty consider:

1. Why are there not more rising trajectories? The dissertation is seldom the strongest mark for the students I look at (1550-1700).
2. Where one of the two examiners is the teacher of the course (typically in the C course), is there any pattern of average marks? My impression is that the lecturer running the course is often the higher marker, e.g. because they understand the course content and can see what the student is trying to do and why.
3. What help are the students getting earlier in the year in developing their dissertation topics? In the weaker performances I saw (including strong performances that were weak relative to the student's standard in the coursework), the topics were often the problem, more than the quality or quantity of work. I saw cases where a relatively strong candidate produced a dissertation the topic and research questions of which could have benefited from obvious kinds of supervisory input and advice, and in which the methods, approaches, and argument were also in dire need of help. I suspect that, as at Cambridge, the supervisor often doesn't get enough chance to engage with the work, because the timetable is so compressed. Might something be done to put more emphasis on the dissertation earlier in the year?

I also have some observations:

#### **REFERENCING AND PRESENTATION**

I commented in my last two reports on an ambiguity in the documentation about whether or not systems of short-referencing such as the author-date system (which can save hundreds of words and thus enable a candidate to submit a longer essay) are allowed. It looks to me like this ambiguity has been removed, and the guidance now clearly requires full referencing. However, many students are not doing this, and examiners are not commenting on the fact.

I have seen appalling referencing from even very good candidates, although the very best tend to do such things properly. This is a part of their training, and it seems to be being neglected by many supervisors and examiners. Very few examiners comment on this (with honourable exceptions), and some praise presentation when the footnotes are a mess.

## BORDERLINES

I continue to believe that a more robust system is needed to prevent injustices at the borderlines. A typical scenario is where a dissertation mark is significantly lower than the coursework essays; I have seen enough evidence of examiners being very differently calibrated in relation to the criteria to think that there would be merit in doing more third reading at the borderlines. I think there are regular injustices in the rather erratic and rigid system currently applied (whereby it is up to the two examiners of an essay or dissertation to agree a mark or refer for third reading, and there is no other mechanism for identifying cases for reconsideration).

Several externals raised this issue last year, and the response that 'the Board felt that the absence of discretionary powers to round up averages had produced no obvious injustices last year, and that the greater clarity had been an advantage' rather missed the point. I for one was not pushing for rounding up, but for some trigger criteria for rereading. The externals are in a position that members of the Board are not – by sampling and reading candidates across the board we can judge that there are injustices at the borderlines. This point needs to be heard.

## **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

## **B5. Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

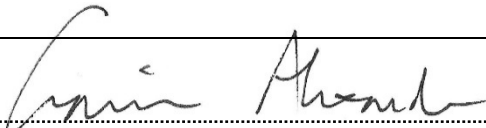
I have very much enjoyed my term as external, and have felt privileged to act in this capacity. My overwhelming impressions are of what an excellent operation this is. The course structure, ethos, teaching, and documentation are superb. The course takes a very large number of students of mixed abilities and backgrounds through a rigorous and varied training, and those students acquire and develop the skills and knowledge-base needed to progress to doctoral work. There is some highly original, imaginative, research-led teaching. Administration of a complex operation is highly professional, and the overview of assessment (a board plus externals meeting termly) seems to me to function very well in improving procedures, ironing out inconsistencies, and ensuring fairness. The teaching hours per student are significantly more than on the comparable Cambridge course on which I teach, and that difference shows. I have tried to offer robust and demanding criticism of this outstanding course, because I believe you have the capacity to make improvements where improvements are both possible and desirable. In many cases, very positive changes have been made in response to suggestions from the externals, including me. I finish, though, with some remarks about aspects of the course that remain in my view less than outstanding:

- i) Coursework essays are very long, which puts a strain on students and examiners; I think a shorter word limit would lead to better essays from all abilities, and would make the job of examining less of a burden.
- ii) The emphasis on the other aspects of the course is to an extent at the expense of the dissertation; also, dissertations are not sufficiently distinct from coursework essays in length, which may give students a misleading impression about the nature of the challenge. If students could do more work on the dissertation sooner, and thereby receive more constructive support, the dissertations might match or even exceed the coursework essays in quality. I accept, though, that getting the balance right may be impossible, and the status quo has many plus-points. As it stands, the situation does at least justify treating the dissertation as equivalent to each coursework essay in the calculation of final average mark for the course.



- iii) The large number of long coursework essays being assessed by pairs of examiners is a substantial load, and I think quality of assessment may sometimes be affected by quantity.
- iv) An improved system at borderlines and for handling disagreements is desirable. Tighter criteria for guiding examiners in agreeing marks would better prevent injustices (e.g. do not agree any mark more than x marks apart). Where dissertation marks are out of line with coursework marks and show signs of disagreement, a third reader might prevent injustices of the sort generated by a routine agreeing of the mark half-way between the upper and the lower. As often as this is the right course, in my experience, it is the case that one of the two marks is appropriate.
- v) Attention to referencing should not be overlooked, by students, teachers, and examiners

I should like to thank successive Chairs of the MSt/MPhil exam board and their administrative team for their help and support.

<b>Signed:</b>	
<b>Date:</b>	16 July 2018

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2018

<b>External examiner name:</b>	Ian Johnson	
<b>External examiner home institution:</b>	University of St Andrews	
<b>Course examined:</b>	English	
<b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )		Postgraduate

**Please complete both Parts A and B.**

<b>Part A</b>					
		<i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A / Other</b>
A1.	Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?		✓		
A2.	Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect the frameworks for higher education qualifications and any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>		✓		
A3.	Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?		✓		
A4.	Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?		✓		
A5.	Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?		✓		
A6.	Did you receive a written response to your previous report?		✓		
A7.	Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?		✓		
<p><b>* If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B. Further comments may also be given in Part B, if desired, if you answer "Yes" or "N/A / Other".</b></p>					

## Part B

### B1. Academic standards

- a. *How do academic standards achieved by the students compare with those achieved by students at other higher education institutions of which you have experience?*

My field of responsibility is the medieval area. As was the case last year, the academic standards achieved throughout the session have been comparable and more often than not superior to those that I have seen at other higher education institutions in these islands.

- b. *Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).*

Please see my previous comment. In every part of the course I have been pleased to see highly scholarly work of real ambition, inventiveness and characterfulness. You clearly recruit students of considerable talent: they respond impressively to the opportunities that your teaching and your syllabus offer them. It is particularly good to see a rich and vivacious range of approaches: students are developing their own voices and academic personalities without being dragooned into an institutional identity (something that happens at other places). Highly informed historical contextualisation, meticulous close reading, linguistic skills and the ability to deploy modern theoretical ideas are visible across the board and are very often combined with independence and critical tact. It was also clear to me that the less capable students were benefiting greatly from the expertise and support of fine targeted teaching.

Last year I noted that work from the Michaelmas Term was at times significantly (and understandably) less impressive and somewhat shakier than work submitted later. This year the earlier work did not show so many undergraduate-type flaws of approach and execution. Perhaps you are getting the message over to them more quickly and more effectively than last time.

Some fellow-external examiners raised the issue this session of a failure on the part of a significant number of students to apply historical context with methodological validity to the business of textual interpretation. I did not come across this problem. In fact, the opposite was the case. Close reading was routinely combined with well-judged historical contextualisation.

Again, the B-essays were extraordinarily impressive. The integration of textual interpretation with codicological and palaeographic skills was tremendous. Some well-published manuscript scholars (those who fail to follow up their descriptive manuscript observations with sufficient interpretation of the works in their codices) would do well to take this course.

### B2. Rigour and conduct of the assessment process

*Please comment on the rigour and conduct of the assessment process, including whether it ensures equity of treatment for students, and whether it has been conducted fairly and within the University's regulations and guidance.*

I am again impressed by the rigour and fairness of the assessment process and the immense pains taken to observe due process and to pursue justice in each case with an eye to equity of treatment across the board. Common standards are being applied with discretion and expertise to the considerable variety of tasks performed and assessed. Even more so than last year, markers are engaging in productive dialogue in coming to agreed grades. Last year's concern about identity between reports seems almost completely to have been resolved. Comments

are very full, fair, consistent and expert. They're also well targeted towards the needs of individual students. Last session's decision to try to award marks at the very top of the scale has been executed judiciously. The consistent meaningfulness of the various borderlines was also evident in the samples I was given during the course of the session.

The chairing and the management of the examiners' meetings were impeccably professional. Immense care was taken with each case without hurrying or corner-cutting. The atmosphere of the meetings throughout the year was constructive and collegial, and each examiner was given full opportunity to air points and concerns.

One possibility that I raised at the July meeting was the issue of whether or not you might wish to ask students to place an abstract at the beginning of their dissertations (or even at the beginning of their essays). This might help them to organise their arguments better and to be more self-aware about what they're doing. It is also common practice at other universities, especially in dissertations. I can see no detriment in asking students to do this.

### **B3. Issues**

*Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University?*

Although (as last year) I answered question A5 positively, because I felt that I had in fact managed to discharge my role effectively, I feel that I should re-emphasise that the turn-round time in the summer for external examiner scrutiny of assessments is unacceptably short. Less than a week is not reasonable when one is contending with routine professional demands. One of the issues that came up at the July meeting was the difficulty of getting some Oxford colleagues to agree to assess PGT work.

### **B4. Good practice and enhancement opportunities**

*Please comment/provide recommendations on any **good practice and innovation relating to learning, teaching and assessment**, and any **opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities** provided to students that should be noted and disseminated more widely as appropriate.*

As with last year, my comments on the B essays are also comments on clear excellence in teaching practice on this part of the course.

### **B5. Any other comments**

*Please provide any other comments you may have about any aspect of the examination process. Please also use this space to address any issues specifically required by any applicable professional body. If your term of office is now concluded, please provide an overview here.*

No further comments.

<b>Signed:</b>	Ian Johnson
<b>Date:</b>	30 July 2018

Please ensure you have completed parts A & B, and email your completed form to: [external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:external-examiners@admin.ox.ac.uk), and copy it to the applicable divisional contact set out in the guidelines.