FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2025

Preliminary Examination
in English Language and Literature

Final Honour School
of English Language and Literature

Contents

1 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2025

Part I

A. STATISTICS

This year there were 211 candidates for the Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature.

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

- Paper 1: EML 24; HENG 15; CLENG 14
- Paper 2: EML 5; HENG 3
- Paper 3: EML 8; HENG 5
- Paper 4: EML 11; HENG 7

Numbers and percentages in each category for English Language and Literature

Category	Number			Percentage (%)		
	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23	2024-25	2023-24	2022-23
Distinction	55	(47)	(51)	26.1%	23%	(24.2%)
Pass	153	(149)	(159)	72.5%	73%	(75.7%)
Fail	0	(1)	(0)	0.0%	0.05%	(0.0%)

Marking of scripts

All scripts are single-marked for Prelims.

As in previous years, meetings were arranged by setters of each paper with all markers during the marking window to ensure fair and robust marking.

B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

There were none.

C. Please list any changes in examining methods, procedures and examination conventions which the examiners would wish the faculty/department and the divisional board to consider.

We note that there continue to be problems with ChromeBooks in Examination Schools, including loss of power and signal. The Board also recommends to Undergraduate Studies Committee that the spell-checkers be disabled.

D. Please describe how candidates are made aware of the examination conventions to be followed by the examiners.

Candidates are made aware of examination conventions by the Handbooks which are available on the English Faculty Website. In addition, many of these conventions are repeated in emails sent cohort-wide to candidates through the year and repeated as rubrics on the exam papers themselves.

Part II

A. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE EXAMINATION

The results showed the continuation of an upward trend in recent years, possibly due to the introduction of typing in the invigilated papers.

Artificial Intelligence is a growing issue. In a small number of cases, markers suspected that AI had been used, usually in the Paper 1 portfolio but also in the invigilated exams. The Board had no means of proving such use so did not impose penalties. Recognising that the use of AI is a matter for the greater university, the Board **recommends that Undergraduate Studies Committee consider the matter, issue guidelines and lobby for the introduction of AI-detecting software**.

For referencing in invigilated exams, it is recommended that candidates include minimum information to identify a source: a name and book/article title or a name and a year. Candidates are not required to memorise or reproduce further bibliographical information such as publishers' names and places of publication in invigilated exams. **We recommend to Undergraduate Studies Committee that this advice be included in Handbooks and circulars.**

A number of candidates failed to give the number of the question they were attempting or otherwise identify it. Although this is strictly a rubric violation, the Board felt that candidates were sufficiently penalised by scoring poorly on engagement and argument and imposed no further penalties.

B. PERCENTAGE OF MARKS OF 70 OR OVER

INTRO TO EL & L COMBINED

2024-5	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2017-18	2016-17
21.9%	20.1%	21.8%	17.4%	19.8%	15.2%	22.4%

EARLY MEDIEVAL

2024-5	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2017-18	2016-17
25.0%	21.6%	24.2%	24.2%	31.8%	17%	25.6%

LIT IN ENGLISH 1830-1910

2024-5	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2017-18	2016-17
23.0%	25%	23.2%	20.8%	26.3%	16.1%	22.9%

LIT IN ENGLISH 1910-PRESENT

2024-5	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2017-18	2016-17
25.2%	22.1%	22.3%	28.5%	21.5%	20.1%	23.8%

C. DETAILED NUMBERS ON CANDIDATES' PERFORMANCE IN EACH PART OF THE EXAMINATION

Scripts awarded marks of 70+ for each paper:				
Paper	2025	2024	2023	2022
1. Introduction to English Language and Literature: Combined	21.9%	20.1%	21.8%	16.9%
Section A Language	25.1%	24.0%	27.0%	20.3%
Section B Literature	25.1%	24.0%	30.3%	19.5%
2. Literature in English 650-1350	23.0%	21.6%	24.2%	20.8%
3. Literature in English 1830-1910	25.2%	25%	23.2%	16.1%
4. Literature in English 1910-Present	21.9%	22.1%	22.3%	22.0%

D. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Paper 1: Introduction to English Language and Literature

Section A: Approaches to Language

This year's commentaries showcased work on a variety of topics, drawing on a diverse body of texts, though answers on identity and power, political discourse, and gender were especially popular. Successful commentaries offered arguments that responded thoughtfully and comprehensively to the terms of a question, alongside substantial close analyses that spanned a range of linguistic features with appropriate support from secondary literature. Innovative and carefully considered pairings of primary texts were rewarded.

Problems in less successful commentaries included: failing to use appropriate linguistic terminology, or using it inaccurately; engaging superficially with the question; choosing texts without adequately addressing any temporal, generic, or formal differences between them (including the distinct affordances of literary vs. non-literary texts, or texts translated into English); putting forward claims without adequate support from wider reading; and/or presenting secondary sources as though ticking them off a list rather than engaging critically with their ideas. There is also no benefit to including sources in the bibliography that are not cited anywhere in the commentary; nor is a list of *OED* entries a sufficient bibliography on its own. Candidates can avoid some of these problems by ensuring they prepare multiple topics for the portfolio, rather than overpreparing one topic and then struggling to fit it into any of the offered questions.

Some candidates devoted considerable space to conducting **quantitative** analyses of their texts using graphs and tables. Candidates are reminded that their focus should be on close linguistic analysis; this risks being obscured when linguistic features are generalized into bar graphs and pie charts. Tables and figures (e.g. screenshots of corpus results or Google Ngram Viewer) can be valuable as supplements to **qualitative** analysis, but they should not be used in place of that analysis. If they are used, then table contents and figure captions must be included in the overall word count.

Section B: Approaches to Literature

Examiners of this paper are open to a range of approaches, from those focusing on literary texts to those mixing literary and theoretical texts to those focusing on theoretical texts. This year, there was a pleasing variety of approaches, from the more purely theoretical to the more applied or practical critical. The stronger essays were able to engage with the prompt in a detailed and sophisticated manner and were able to elaborate their ideas with a good range of examples and cogent analysis. Simply latching on to a single word from the prompt or, worse, ignoring it completely will result in poor scoring against the engagement criterion. High scoring essays will question the question, thinking about why it has been asked and how it illuminates the critical debate at issue. At the top end of the cohort, candidates produced some really inventive and focused arguments that prosecuted the questions well.

The weaker essays were often disjointed and lacked cogency. Some were unclear about how to trace an idea across time periods or forms. Question 9, which asked candidates

to discuss fictional character as a formal construct and as a set of effects modelled on the form of a human person, produced some tortuous responses. Question 10, a quotation from Kristeva describing a text as a mosaic of quotations, produced some unimaginative re-hashes of Wimsatt and Beardsley, Barthes and Foucault. Weaker work was also prone towards cherry-picking quotations and failing to give any sense of the wider argument or ideas from any given theoretical text. Such work presented its material in decontextualized fashion at every level. It remains a concern that many candidates struggle because they take on too much for the scope of a 2,000-word essay and treat theorists/critics as sources of quotations, rather than as figures taking positions within an intellectual debate or tradition.

Examiners noted that standards of proofreading and presentation of footnotes and bibliography were lower than could be expected. Candidates are reminded that it is possible to lose marks for poor organisation and presentation.

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

This paper elicited some impressive work, with a wide range of Old English and early Middle English texts quarried. It was especially heartening to see candidates reading widely and critically beyond the set texts, and, in some cases, being able to construct historically nuanced arguments spanning their reading across a range of centuries. It was also reassuring to see that almost all candidates displayed some knowledge of Old / early Middle English, with almost no penalisations this year for rubric violation in this respect. However, the accuracy and breadth of that knowledge at the lower end could be poor. There were some cases of candidates showing knowledge of only a handful of OE words. On the whole, however, this paper showed a commendable effort on the part of candidates to engage intelligently with both early medieval language(s) and literature.

Commentary exercise: all candidates wrote on an OE passage, with *The Dream of the Rood* as the clear favourite. The best commentaries combined precise and detailed textual knowledge with impressive literary analysis. The strongest candidates were not only able to identify literary techniques accurately but also to use this identification as part of a coherent literary interpretation; weaker candidates had learned the terminology but were 'feature spotting'. The weakest scripts had a loose, and at times inaccurate, understanding of various terms: litotes, envelope pattern, stress, etc. It was good to see candidates engaging with verse-form, albeit with varying degrees of precision or accuracy. Students are encouraged to attend the Faculty lectures covering formal analysis which are offered every year. As in most recent years, there were no commentaries on either of the eME passages.

Essays: Candidates ranged widely across the paper. The very best work was highly impressive, showing detailed and analytical knowledge of primary text and the ability to build on or interrogate key secondary scholarship. At the weaker end, there were the usual issues with time management for some candidates. There was a welcome attempt in most cases to engage with the precise terms of the prompt or the directive question. However, there were some exceptions. Candidates answering Q.16 mostly appeared to be unaware that the reference to 'wounds of the spirit' from the OE *Pastoral Care* might have anything to do with sinfulness. Much more problematically, Q.12 on 'India' as presented in the OE *Alexander the Great to Aristotle* was frequently read as referring to monstrosity though there is absolutely no basis for this in the quotation provided. (Q.20 does, by contrast, refer to the monstrous.) Such essays were marked down. Candidates are encouraged to read the question-paper carefully.

One subgenre of essay answer brought together one OE work and one eME work, and sometimes not very early ME, though before the paper's cut-off date. The best of these intelligently related the features they analysed in the primary texts to cultural changes and contrasts between the two periods they discussed, making their temporal spread a strength. Weaker ones failed to acknowledge the significant gap between (say) the tenth and early fourteenth centuries. Students should remember that different times have their own specificities and not assume a homogenous Middle Ages from c. 650 to c. 1350 (and beyond!).

Almost all candidates made a commendable effort to quote and then comment precisely on texts, 'set' ones and otherwise, with precise attention to word choice (connotations etc), phrasing and literary form or structure. This entailed memorising not necessarily long quotations but precise quotations or other details of literary works. However, across the board, they attempted to handle such quotations without paying any attention to their grammar when integrating them into their own prose, resulting in clumsy and at times meaningless sentences. Candidates may consider whether it would be wiser to offer quotations in the original languages in parentheses without attempting to construct hybrid sentences in Modern English and OE/eME which run the risk of being grammatically incoherent.

Paper 3: Literature in English 1830-1910

All questions were attempted this year, with Q7 (on the importance of seeing a subject from more than one point of view), Q9 (on enslavement), Q1 (on doubt and faith), and Q6 (on the body and soul) proving to be especially popular. The total number of answers written on each question was as follows: Q1: 44; Q2: 18; Q3: 41; Q4: 16; Q5: 16; Q6: 44; Q7: 59; Q8: 36; Q9: 53; Q10: 29; Q11: 35; Q12: 24; Q13: 29; Q14: 36; Q15: 31; Q16: 22; Q17: 16; Q18: 24; Q19: 7; Q20: 8; Q21: 22; Q22: 26; Q23: 15.

Many essays wholly failed to address the quotations accompanying particular questions or prompts, while those that attempted close readings of the questions often failed to do so in a way that would illuminate the broader issues in the period they wished to discuss. The weakest essays took the simplest possible approach to the task (e.g. writing an essay about 'the past' for Q3); the majority discussed a key word (e.g. 'doubt' for Q1); the strongest thought critically about the question as a means of generating a more complex line of inquiry, going well beyond simply tagging a keyword that suited their purposes. It was noticeable that when tackling certain topics the same texts – and often the same lines of argument – recurred with surprising frequency, perhaps indicating that the candidates were repeating material they had encountered in a college class or centrally taught lecture. These candidates weren't penalised for their lack of ambition, but nor were they rewarded for showing evidence of wider reading and independent thinking.

More generally, many essays this year were marked by (and failed to achieve good marks for) a distinct narrowness in their choice of literary material. Candidates should be aware that it is very difficult to produce a good Prelims essay that sets out to compare just two or three short poems, e.g. using 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'My Last Duchess', possibly with a sideways glance at 'Jenny', to draw large-scale conclusions about the male gaze in the period. Essays which attempted to compare a long novel and just one short poem also struggled in this respect, as did essays which tried to link works from

different genres without paying any attention to the historical contingencies of genre itself. The strongest essays conveyed an understanding of continuity and change within the period, used earlier criticism in a discriminating way to propel their own argument forwards, and successfully combined range and depth of engagement. Weaker essays largely bypassed historical and geographic context, even where it is essential to understanding the literature: e.g. trans-Atlantic comparisons that were not acknowledged as such beyond the barest reference to 'America' (all of it).

Some of the best scripts were those that answered questions about literary form (Qs 5 and 14) or took thematic prompts in more formal directions (e.g. thinking about the structure of *Middlemarch* for Q13). Less successfully, many scripts that were ostensibly about poetry wholly ignored the fact that their chosen texts were not written in prose, or treated poetic forms as if they were timeless structures rather than shaped by the pressures of their own time. A handful of questions on the paper were implicit invitations to discuss and define key terms (e.g. 'society' in Q13, 'realism' in Q12): weaker essays assumed that the definition was self-evident, while the weakest essays traded in synonyms (e.g. writing about the 'self' in response to Q6's prompt to think about 'Body' and 'Soul') without acknowledging them as such.

Standards of presentation were reasonably good, although many scripts were riddled with basic grammatical and punctuational errors: some of these were the sort of typos that are probably unavoidable in a timed exam, but many more arose from not knowing how to use apostrophes and commas. (There were rather too many references to 'Dicken's' for comfort.) Many candidates used unjustified superlatives ('incredibly', 'extremely', 'completely', intensely', and 'heavily' were the most popular) rather than citing additional evidence to nuance their claims.

Finally, it is worth noting that several candidates did not put question numbers into the boxes provided, while others unhelpfully added the wrong numbers. It would be helpful to remind future candidates of the importance of making it clear which questions (and, where relevant, parts of questions) they are answering.

Paper 4: Literature in English 1910-Present

All twenty questions on the paper were taken up. By some distance, the most popular were Q.2 (on selfhood and embodiment: 'Ninety percent of my cells . . . are not my own person') and Q.12 (on particularity and typicality: 'the novel is set in a particular time and place, but . . . also about things that are happening over and over'). Attracting fewest responses was Q.13 (on academic and creative work: 'a full professor of Eng. Lit. rifling my dustbins').

Virginia Woolf and James Joyce were the novelists discussed most frequently; T.S. Eliot was the poet most often addressed, and Samuel Beckett the most discussed playwright, although Beckett's novels made appearances, too. Among other authors addressed by multiple candidates were Chinua Achebe, James Baldwin, Elizabeth Bishop, Elizabeth Bowen, Angela Carter, J.M. Coetzee, H.D., Ralph Ellison, Percival Everett, William Faulkner, E.M. Forster, Henry Green, Seamus Heaney, Langston Hughes, Ted Hughes, Jamaica Kincaid, Tony Kushner, Nella Larsen, D.H. Lawrence, Mina Loy, Katherine Mansfield, Arthur Miller, Hope Mirrlees, Marianne Moore, Toni Morrison, Vladimir Nabokov, V.S. Naipaul, Grace Nichols, George Orwell, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Thomas Pynchon, Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson, Samuel Selvon, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Wole Soyinka, Muriel Spark, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Jean Toomer,

Derek Walcott, and William Carlos Williams. The full historical span of the period was covered: many candidates produced answers on even the most canonical of modernist and mid-century writers that were fresh as well as knowledgeable, while the attention to a very wide range of contemporary authors (usually but not invariably novelists) attested pleasingly to candidates' commitment to literature as a going concern. In addition to many excellent answers on poetry, fiction, and drama, there was some impressive work on both modernist and contemporary life-writing, although other types of creative non-fiction made few appearances this year.

There were many successful responses addressing multiple authors united by a specific context (Great War poetry, for example, or literature of the AIDS crisis), and other answers offered illuminating comparative readings of authors and works connected by, for example, particular movements or sub-periods, or a combination of the two (contemporary U.S. eco-poetry, for example). However, some essays were inherently less incisive because the selection of texts being compared was not persuasively motivated to begin with, and differences of, for example, genre, date, or cultural context—and the implications of such differences—went unacknowledged. Occasional clusters of essays offering similar analyses of the same under-explained pairings underline the importance of candidates taking independent ownership of material studied in classes.

There were many good essays on single authors. The best showed impressive command of a writer's oeuvre and/or relevant contexts, although weaker essays sometimes advanced decontextualised readings of a single text, in some cases only a very short work. Examiners are keen to see essays with more information and scope because they do fuller justice to the range and depth of candidates' work on the texts and topics that have interested them most. Among essays focusing primarily on a single text, the most successful were usually addressing a heavyweight, demanding enough to give scope for a substantial and consequential argument (*Ulysses*, for example, or *Invisible Man*). Importantly, these essays also demonstrated in passing a confident grasp of the importance of relevant facts and circumstances, such as the history of the text and/or its relationship to the author's other works and/or to wider literary and historical contexts.

Successful essays were also distinguished by their sense of the meaningfulness and specificity of literary forms, modes, and styles—these essays were attuned to the extent to which form is and has a content, and to the distinctive affordances of different genres. Shortcomings in this area emerged when literary works were treated as discursive statements on particular themes, differentiated only by their implied attitudes toward those topics, as evidenced by character and event in essays about fiction. Most candidates showed very good knowledge of their primary texts, although the best answers were also familiar with relevant critical histories and traditions, drawing on contemporary criticism and scholarship as well as the acknowledged classics.

Excellent answers took many forms—there were those in which the outstanding feature was the flair of the close analysis; others left examiners especially impressed by the candidate's mature command of a literary movement or constellation—but what the best answers typically had in common was their direct address to the question. Such essays drew out and assessed the implications of the question in impressively insightful ways, regardless of whether they proceeded to assent to or (no less frequently) dissent from the presuppositions that the question disclosed. The clearest example this year of the need to attend to the question was the work that responded to Q.12, which explicitly required candidates to respond to Kazuo Ishiguro's claim that 'the novel is set in a particular time

and place, but . . . also about things that are happening over and over again'. There were many excellent answers—and some strikingly enterprising as well as effective approaches taken—but less successful responses usually stripped the phrase 'happening over and over again' of its context in Ishiguro's sentence and wrote about a particular text's internal repetitions: precisely because this was a less demanding task than the one assigned, it proved less productive of complex analysis and reflection. Candidates might also usefully keep in mind that even when a question does not require direct engagement with the quotation that precedes it, the quotation may nonetheless prove helpful for focusing or presenting an angle on their material. One instructive case was Q.4, which began with Thomas Hardy reflecting on memory and buried feeling: the wording of the question left candidates free to write on 'memory and/or emotion' without reference to Hardy's comments (and many very capable essays were written thus), but a number of answers used Hardy's description of memory as exhumation to compelling effect as a way of organising their argument.

Finally, it was noticeable that many candidates took intelligent advantage of the relative ease with which typed answers can be edited even under time pressure, leading to some essays that were conspicuous for the forthrightness of their argumentation, the precision and selectivity of their evidence, and the lucidity and grace of their expression.

E. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Professor Kate McLoughlin (Chair)

Professor Kantik Ghosh (Deputy)

Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst

Professor Stefano Evangelista

Professor Gareth Evans

Professor Marina Mackay

2 FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2025

CHAIR'S REPORT: UNRESERVED BUSINESS

Part I

A. STATISTICS

(1) 200 candidates completed their degree, of whom 25 took Course II

Class	Number			Percentage (%)		
	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23	2024/25	2023/24	2022/23
I	64	(67)	(72)	32%	(27.92%)	(29.88%)
II.I	124	(160)	(162)	62%	(66.67%)	(67.22%)
II.II	9	(11)	(3)	4.5%	(4.58%)	(1.24%)
III	2	(1)	(0)	1%	(0.42%)	(0%)
Pass	0	(0)	(0)	0%	(0%)	(0%)
DDH	0	(0)	(1)	0%	(0%)	(0.41%)
Fail	1	(1)	(3)	0.5%	(0.42%)	(1.24%)

Of the Firsts, one was achieved via the 'alternative' route requiring 4 marks of 70 or above and an average of 67.5 or above.

B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES

There were no new examining methods or procedures this year. This is the second year in which timed exams were taken using university-supplied laptops in invigilated settings.

C. ANY CHANGES IN EXAMINING METHODS, PROCEDURES AND EXAMINATION CONVENTIONS WHICH THE EXAMINERS WOULD WISH THE FACULTY/DEPARTMENT AND THE DIVISIONAL BOARD TO CONSIDER

While there were far fewer problems related to exam provision and conditions in relation to the previous year, a few students still experienced isolated technical difficulties (Chromebook crashing, etc.) during their exams. The University should continue its work in addressing these sorts of technical issues, and reasonable adjustments should be made, as they have been, to students who experienced any disruption.

D. HOW CANDIDATES ARE MADE AWARE OF THE EXAMINATION CONVENTIONS

The examination conventions are provided in the Course Handbook. They are also included, along with other guidance, in the Circular to Tutors and Candidates. In addition, the Faculty produced an online Frequently Asked Questions page and directed students to the University's guidance about using Inspera.

Part II

A. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE EXAMINATION

The standard of performance was, as ever, high. 32% of students received a First, up substantially from last year (27.92%) but still below the highs of OBOW-based exams in 2020-23 (ranging from 37.3% to 42.2%). In Exam Board discussions, examiners were impressed by the remarkable quality of the very best work.

There was a decrease in 2:1s corresponding to the increase in Firsts, though the percentage of 2:2s (4.5%) repeats the figure from 2023-24 (4.58%). These figures are markedly higher than previous years (ranging from 0.4% to 1.24% between 2020 and 2023).

The Chairs (Professor Timothy Michael and, during his period of leave, Professor Mishtooni Bose) would like to express their gratitude to Faculty administrative staff, Andy Davice and Tom Manning, for the exemplary support they provided throughout the examining process, and to their fellow Examiners, both internal and external, for the care and attention with which they conducted the business of the Board.

B. DETAILED NUMBERS ON CANDIDATES' PERFORMANCE IN EACH PART OF THE EXAMINATION

In Course I, all the papers are compulsory, though Paper 6 includes 16 options, which were usually taken up by 15 students each, and Paper 7 is the dissertation.

In Course II, taken by 25 students, Papers 1-4, 6, and 7 are compulsory, with Papers 6 and 7 being the same as Course I, and Paper 3 being the same as Course I, Paper 2. Course II, Paper 5 offers a choice between 'The Material Text' (taken by 17 students this year) and 'Shakespeare' (taken by 213 ELL students), which is the same as Course I, Paper 1.

In the following tables, Course II students are included in the data for the Course I Papers that are shared with Course II. Numbers for the other Course II Papers are too small to be presented as statistics, but suitable indications of strengths and weaknesses in the examined work are found in the Examiners' Reports (below). Similarly, enrolments in the individual options for Paper 6 Special Options are too small to allow statistics for each; a single set of aggregated statistics is presented here, and option-specific descriptions are found in the Examiners' Reports.

Paper 1 Shakespeare (Course II Paper 5)		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	58	31.18%
60-69	104	55.91%
50-59	22	11.83%
40-49	1	0.54%
<40	1	0.54%
Overall	186	

Paper 2 1350 1550 (Course II Paper 3)		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	50	25.13%
60-69	124	62.31%
50-59	22	11.06%
40-49	1	0.50%
<40	2	1.01%
Overall	199	

Paper 3 1550-1660		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	54	30.86%
60-69	89	50.86%
50-59	25	14.29%
40-49	5	2.86%
<40	2	1.14%
Overall	175	

Paper 4 1660-1760		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	49	28.16%
60-69	111	63.79%
50-59	13	7.47%
40-49	0	0%
<40	1	0.57%
Overall	174	

Paper 5 1760-1830		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	38	21.71%
60-69	125	71.43%
50-59	9	5.14%
40-49	2	1.14%
<40	1	0.57%

Overall	175	

Paper 6 special options (Submission)		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	67	35.08%
60-69	111	58.12%
50-59	10	5.24%
40-49	1	0.52%
<40	2	1.05 %
Overall	191	

Paper 7 Dissertation		
Marks	**Candidates**	**%**
70+	80	40%
60-69	107	53.5%
50-59	11	5.5%
40-49	1	0.5%
<40	1	0.5%
Overall	200	

C. COMMENTS ON PAPERS AND INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

See 'FHS 2025 Examiners' Reports'

D. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Chairs:

Professor Timothy Michael

Professor Mishtooni Bose (April – July 2025)

Internal Examiners:

Professor David Dwan (Deputy Chair)

Dr Helen Appleton

Professor Mishtooni Bose

Dr Bysshe Coffey

Dr Adam Guy

Professor Malachi McIntosh

Professor Fergus McGhee

Professor Simon Palfrey

Professor Seamus Perry

Professor Adam Smyth

Professor Noël Sugimura

Professor Annie Sutherland

Professor Ted Tregear

Professor Gill Woods

Professor David Womersley

External Examiners:

Professor Pascale Aebischer (University of Exeter)

Professor Nicola McDonald (University of York)

Professor Matthew Taunton (University of East Anglia)

2.1 FHS 2025 Examiners' Reports

Shakespeare Portfolio

The standard of this year's portfolios was generally high. Examiners enjoyed reading essays on an impressive range of topics ranging across both literary and theatrical themes, utilising a variety of critical frameworks, and considering Shakespeare in diverse cultural contexts. Some popular topics – for example, on ekphrasis and commonplace books – emerged. However, compared with last year, the work was broader in its conception, with some good work on 'older' topics such as character, tragic form, and source-use as well as more up-to-the-minute investigations of variously conceived materialities.

Across the cohort, work spanned the Shakespeare corpus, with students writing on canonical tragedies (*Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*) as well as less well-known work such as *Henry VIII/All is True* and *A Lover's Complaint*. The best work showed understanding of form and genre, by taking into account, for example, how a narrative poem functions differently from a staged play, and how meaning is affected by comic and tragic contexts.

Most portfolios covered about five or six texts in some depth, crucially demonstrating good engagement with those texts. Some students, though, also showed their knowledge of the broader canon through carefully chosen and skilfully deployed references to additional texts. Such indications of range worked best when these passing comparisons were used to illuminate a point about the main issue and text under discussion.

Strong essays situated their arguments in relation to the relevant critical 'state of play' of a topic. Indeed**,** it was encouraging to see candidates engaging in a sustained way with criticism, including older criticism, such as that of A. C. Bradley. The best of this work placed the older critical writing in an intellectual context and used it as a jumping-off point for new thinking. These essays saw candidates participating in a critical debate: demonstrating clear understanding of the issues but also making space for their own interventions.

The strongest essays clearly established the topic under investigation and articulated and developed an argument rather than a generalised discussion of a theme. These essays engaged closely and precisely with the texts in question and were sharply analytical in focus. Careful discussion of key examples and passages was balanced with an understanding of the larger plays or poems. Textual and critical complexities were handled with nuance and sophistication, rather than forcing neat conclusions. Some essays were distinguished by the clever pairings of texts; what mattered here was not so much surprising combination but rather the way the rationale for the comparison was built into the argument. These essays were also characterised by precise writing and polished presentation.

Weaker portfolios were critically limited, lacking sustained engagement with and understanding of appropriate scholarship. Some of the weakest portfolios relied on rather descriptive summaries of their chosen texts and contexts and/or were poorly researched, making claims that were not backed up with good evidence from the primary and secondary texts. Other portfolios were held back by inaccuracies in presentation and expression. Students should also note that bibliographies should only include references to works actually cited in the essays.

Paper 2: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550

All of the questions on the paper were attempted this year, with the two *Troilus and Criseyde* passages (from Book II and Book IV respectively) proving equally popular. Among the commentaries, the very best answers were characterised by a seriously analytical approach and showed careful knowledge of the passage and poem. They were truly sensitive to the interaction between the formal aspects of the passage and its meanings and effects and were marked by perceptive and sensitive close readings of language and style. A number of candidates this year chose to work through the passage sequentially, and many did this very well, displaying an impressively thorough understanding of textual details.

As always, the weaker commentaries tended to paraphrase rather than analyse the passage, and to focus on broad themes rather than on details of style, form and language. Other problems among the less impressive commentaries included misunderstandings of Middle English diction and grammar, factual errors about the poem and passage, and an overwhelming focus on one part of the passage leading to neglect of other stanzas. Some candidates spent a long time on one or two aspects of style and so did not show awareness of a range of features of the verse. On occasion, an underwhelming performance in the commentary depressed the overall mark on this paper for candidates who wrote two significantly stronger essays.

The essays demonstrated a very pleasing range of reading in the literature of the period, with excellent answers being written both on canonical and on more obscure texts. Candidates should feel confident in writing on whichever texts most interest them; there is no inherent advantage in choosing either well-known or obscure material. Sometimes candidates put surprising texts together which worked very well if they made clear why they were doing this. Many wrote on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and other romances, on beast fables, on the *Canterbury Tales*, on dream visions (especially Chaucer's poems and *Pearl*), on *The King of Tars* and *Mandeville's Travels*, and on drama (both mystery and morality plays). Other popular texts and authors included Margery Kempe, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich, Wycliffite prose and *Piers Plowman*. Further authors covered included the *Erkenwald*-poet, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Henryson, Malory, Skelton, Wyatt, Surrey and Thomas More.

The best essays showed evidence of a judicious range of reading (of both primary and secondary texts) and an ability to select appropriate material in direct response to the title quotation and prompt. At the very top end, there was some genuinely outstanding and original work, nuanced and sophisticated in argument and execution. The most impressive students were able to construct lucid arguments and to follow them through, supporting those arguments with analysis as well as evidence, and keeping the terms of the title quotation and prompt in mind throughout. Some showed a strong understanding of the material contexts of texts, although there was perhaps less discussion of manuscript and print contexts than there has been in other years.

Weaker essays tended to demonstrate a very limited range of reading, both primary and secondary. Candidates writing such essays often made only a cursory attempt to signal the relevance of their response to the title quotation or question. Indeed, on occasion, it seemed that candidates had a very fixed idea of the essays which they were going to write in advance of the exam and persisted in writing them, regardless of what the question actually asked them. However good the quality of a student's writing, if it does

not respond directly and thoughtfully to the terms of the question, it will not be awarded high marks.

It was surprising that a number of candidates seemed to struggle with time-management, writing little for their second essay. Students should remember that it is almost impossible for two excellent answers to make up for a very limited third answer, and it is always better to write three full answers.

Paper 3: Literature in English from 1550 to 1660

194 students took this paper, of whom 17 were Joint Schools. The range of texts and authors covered in responses was considerable. Examiners read a number of essays on Francis Bacon, Richard Barnfield, Thomas Browne, Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, John Donne, Ben Jonson, John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Nashe, Hester Pulter, Philip Sidney, Mary Sidney Herbert, Edmund Spenser, John Webster, Isabella Whitney, and Mary Wroth. There were also plenty of essays on less familiar authors: William Baldwin, George Chapman, Thomas Coryate, Michael Drayton, Robert Greene, Anne Southwell, and the Marprelate tracts. Then, there were some even more surprising names: Nicholas Breton, Angel Day, Margaret Tyler, Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley. Bringing in such lesser-known and non-canonical authors sometimes produced distinguished work, but not always; and some of the best essays set out to read familiar texts with a freshness and openness of insight, with some stellar work on Donne, Herbert, and Spenser. Examiners also appreciated essays which showed knowledge of the underexplored corners in familiar writers' work: Jonson's tragedies as well as his comedies and masques; Donne's epistles and epigrams alongside his lyrics, devotions, and sermons. There was a good mix of different forms on show, especially from responses on early modern prose, which dealt with pamphlets, essays, travel literature, sermons—and not just by Donne and Andrewes—and scientific and philosophical writing. There was also a mix of different languages, with materials in Italian, French, and Latin used to sharpen the analysis of English texts, and take seriously their transnational connections.

The strongest essays, as in previous years, engaged in a thoughtful and sustained way with the prompts in question, teasing out their inner tensions or counter-intuitive force. The best essays featured plenty of quotations from their chosen materials, but equally took the time to analyse those quotations in detail and in the service of their wider argument. They were adept at pulling out nuances of syntax and composition, not just verbal details, to identify what was going on in the text. They also tended to bring together different kinds of material, with close readings of texts supported by well-chosen points of contextual detail or imaginative development—and not simply application—of ideas from critical theory. Examiners welcomed essays that looked carefully at literary form, in prose and drama as well as verse. They appreciated efforts to comment on those more intractable properties of a text: the tempo of a play, for instance, its capacity to bore as well as enchant. They also appreciated the meaningful deployment of secondary criticism, though with the caveat that including such criticism is not a good in itself. Some scripts displayed an overreliance on critics to make their arguments for them; others leaned on the recentness of their scholarship without putting it to best use. Having said that, there was some notably accomplished engagement with book history (on issues of print and manuscript) and critical race theory (on issues of race and nation). In addition, the finest essays were written with real stylistic verve; and examiners enjoyed the occasional glimmers of wryness or judgement they encountered in scripts. The quality of writing was crucially linked to the quality of the essay: the best

essays were the essays where every word earned its place, and meaning was closely under control. Clear, precise, nuanced writing stood out, whatever the content being discussed.

Where responses were weaker, it was often because they weren't thinking hard enough about the questions. Examiners noticed a tendency to break up quotations for parts, latching onto individual words—and sprinkling them liberally through the essays—but without appreciating the claims they were making. That same tendency towards fragmentation was often evident in the treatment of primary texts, with whole sonnet sequences or epics represented at times by just a word or two. Examiners regularly came across essays that would have better suited a different question on the paper, as though candidates had (understandably) leapt for a vaguely appropriate prompt without weighing up the alternatives. Weaker scripts were also held back by their reliance on a handful of predictable texts. Sometimes, this seemed to reveal an overreliance on materials and frameworks from lectures; students are reminded that lectures are meant as starting-points for further independent research, not as substitutes for it. Essays on race and nation almost invariably reached for Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*, often on its own, and the most sophisticated treatments of race-making were those that moved beyond the well-trodden domain of masques. Essays on London, meanwhile, often limited themselves to the usual cast of city comedies—*The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, *The Roaring Girl*; they often struggled to formulate an argument about these plays, beyond reading them as basically referential accounts of urban life. Weaker essays on London, including answers on cony-catching writing and on the writing of John Taylor, often presented what were in effect pieces of social history rather than literary-critical analysis.

Some essays restricted themselves to reciting critical orthodoxies, often with more citation from the critics than the texts they were reading. Conversely, others took aim at such orthodoxies with a polemical zeal, fired by their indignation at one or other perceived critical shibboleth. There's room for this kind of polemic in exams—it can come off—but only with sufficient precision in its targets; and the lower-scoring examples combined a surplus of vigour with a lack of detail.

Paper 4: Literature in English from 1660 to 1760

184 students took this paper.

With regard to popular questions, numbers 1, 12 and 20 were widely answered. There was some terrific work in response to the Boyle question and the Bentley and Milton question, which was more demanding in that it required the candidate to respond to both aspects of the prompt (this meant it also led to weaker essays, which engaged with one aspect of the prompt but not the other; and which even led weaker candidates to produce rather A-level essays on the figure of Satan!). The Boyle question, in particular, brought out the best in undergraduate thinking on the epistemology of imaginative writing. The question that consistently brought the weakest responses seems to be the Addison quotation. Candidates tended to jump on the words 'vulgar' and 'polite' and entirely ignore the keywords 'pleasure' and (especially) 'imagination'. Students did not show a very detailed understanding of how 'imagination' and 'fancy' might be used by certain authors and/or across the period (as in the Shenstone quotation); equally, there were

other prompts where key words and their definition were neglected in relation to the essay's argument (viz. 'satire', 'mock epic').

It seems from this examination that students in general tend still to see this period in quite outdated terms, rehearsing the notion of Augustinism even if they are not actually using that word. The formal experimentation, the interest in the strange, the development of complex models of emotional and aesthetic response is too often lost in a reiteration of ideas about satire, social stratification, and partisan negotiations. While these are very important, scripts lacked a recognition of just how hugely exciting -- and often very weird – this period of literature is. It seems that the larger conceptual stakes of the period's imaginative writing were simply not as much in evidence in work for Paper 4 as in other periods, and there was a sense that students sometimes sadly lose sight of just how much writing of this period *is* properly imaginative.

In relation to texts, those that received the most attention were *Paradise Lost*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Rape of the Lock* (rarely moving much beyond Belinda's scene at her toilet), *The Rover*. Discussion of drama included tragedy (Otway was popular this year) as well as comedy, considering the work of playwrights such as Elkanah Settle and Susanna Centlivre and not just George Etherege, William Wycherley and Aphra Behn. The best work incorporated theatre performance as well as playwrighting. It was also noted, however, that such work on theatre was rather restricted, with very few scripts venturing beyond the libertine plays of the 1670s; others focused on prologues or a few select moments that did not show in-depth knowledge of the plays and/or their performance. They seemed pre-selected for other reasons, with no real intellectual energy being devoted to thinking about them. Scant work appeared on she-tragedy or bourgeois tragedy. One complaint was that scripts tended to approach plays in ways that ignored matters of performance: the weakest tended to summarise the plots rather than provide analysis of them and their staging, conditions of the theatre, performance, etc.

There were also a striking number of discussions of Rochester, almost all of which struggled to move beyond highly familiar readings of his vulgarity and representation of the body. The same is true of Swift's 'The Lady's Dressing Room'. There was an odd lack of any real understanding of 'libertinism' and its philosophical and performative dimensions. This led to some very jejune essays on the subject. The same could be said of Milton, where most essays lacked adequate knowledge of his theology as well as his epics and closet dramas. There was quite a bit of work on *Paradise Lost*, which was great to see, but it was disappointing that there so little awareness of important landmark studies and/or knowledge of the relevant critical terrain, including Milton's theology, historical contexts, and/or religious politics. Some candidates extended their work to *Paradise Regain'd*, which was most welcome; surprisingly few wrote on *Samson Agonistes*. The high first-class essays showed admirable depth of knowledge of Milton's poetry in the round, often alongside some of the prose works. Work on Marvell was thin, often focusing on *Last Instructions to a Painter*, without proper understanding of the work or its contexts, including Marvell's prose writings.

Pope's *Rape of the Lock* appeared frequently, with most of the weaker essays clustering around some sort of weak reading of Belinda's toilet. There was some really excellent work on Fielding, especially *Tom Jones*; many essays focused on Richardson's *Pamela*, with the strongest essays attending to the epistolary style and reflecting also on form and voice. The weakest collapsed the narrator or letter-writer with the author himself. Some candidates made out as though they had read *Clarissa* and *Charles Grandison* as well; their essays, however, made it clear they had *not*.

Across the scripts, markers noted that attention to form remains an issue. Many essays compared very different forms – epic, plays, novels, poems, diaries, letters, travel accounts -- without at any point considering how such formal differences inevitably inflect the themes or issues in question. Again, the best work was admirably alert to the affordances of form; this was especially in evidence in some work on the poetry by the likes of Finch, Pope, Thomson, Gray, and Collins. A few scripts of high quality did the same with the Labouring Poets (Duck; Collier), though as with Thomson, the best work showed knowledge of wider reading alongside close readings. Generally, candidates produced some good essays on writing about and with classical authors and genres (the Georgic in particular) and on urban experience and cityscapes (Gay, Pepys, Defoe, Cleland, etc). Other markers noted that the same authors led to weak essays, chiefly because students seemed bent on rehearsing pre-studied 'themes' or 'arguments' and so failed to address the prompt and/or show a deep understanding of these poets and their writings. The best work showed a literary sensibility able to draw out details from the primary material that reinforced fascinating conceptual links and so build up a strong sense of an argument—which is what weaker scripts or, even, high 2:1 scripts often lacked.

While the move to pair authors across a range of period and forms was refreshing, the attention to form and, also, to changes in the historical, political, and, most importantly, literary culture was surprisingly thin, thereby limiting what was actually on offer. Ahistorical claims and cursory treatment of authors on whom much has been written—e.g. Milton, Cavendish, and Montagu (the *Turkish Letters* appeared numerous times, with little awareness of what else Montagu wrote)—was therefore surprising. Candidates often seemed unaware of the problems that such assertions invited. Some very good work was seen on these same authors, including Anne Finch, when sharp attention was given to the distinctly literary aspect of their works; attention to the intellectual, philosophical, and social contexts was particularly welcome, as was discussion of the affordances of scribal and print publication, with specific examples drawn from a wide range of poems (as in the case of Pulter and Seymour).

Markers noted that it was refreshing to see candidates grappling with challenging authors and texts. But it was also noted that across the run of scripts there was not a particularly wide geographical spread in the authors attempted: only a handful of essays focused or touched on Early American Literature. Apart from Swift and a few that included Burke, there were few essays on Irish, Scottish, and Welsh authors. That said, some good work was attempted on 'voice' and ownership of voice in anti-slavery poems alongside discussion of imperial preoccupations of the period that moved fluidly from canonical authors (Pope, as in the prompt) to less well-known ones; the range of authors/texts this year included the welcome introduction of Grainger, Fowkes, Robertson, Trelawney's 'Speech of Moses Ben Saam', and excerpts from the *Barbardos Gazette*.

One thing markers agreed upon was that the quality of essays emerged with clarity not because a candidate chose to write on a relatively 'obscure' author per se (i.e. Blackmore, Smart, Robertson, etc), but because the candidate had really got to know these authors in rich detail. Sometimes the relative neglect stimulated good scholarly practice, which was also rewarded elsewhere, as in work on more canonical authors (e.g. Milton, Dryden). Bunyan made a welcome return this year, but, as with authors, such as Milton, Dryden, Defoe, and even Swift, many of the essays eschewed discussion of religious politics and/or theological resonances, while the best essays tackled the literary alongside the theology head on and were duly rewarded (this included essays dealing

with authors writings about or residing in Barbados and/or New England). There was also some welcome and refreshing work that took on a range of Johnson's *Rambler* essays as well as close readings of *Rasselas*. There was also a move to situation readings alongside prose works of varying kinds, including the philosophical ones of the period; this was very good to see, even if the analysis and sense of date in relation to other authors was not always accurate.

In terms of engagement and argument, most candidates engaged effectively with the prompts and provided three full answers on this paper. A good number in each run displayed solid to good knowledge of primary texts. Information 'dumping' was, however, noted as a particular problem: the showcasing of knowledge, however tenuously linked to the subject, must not be mistaken for, or substituted for, detailed analysis. Memorisation of quotations, while often impressive, was then let down by the fact that many candidates failed to perform close readings in service of the larger argument responding to the prompt. Markers often sensed that candidates were foisting a pre-rehearsed essay into answering a question, and that their unwillingness to show flexibility in their thinking alongside confidence in what they had learnt ended up restricting what could have otherwise been exciting explorations of their own ideas in and through the poetry, developed on the day.

As in previous years, the best scripts showed compelling use of quotation and illustration to support interesting independent argument. First-class work showed strong engagement with critical debates while retaining the candidate's individual critical voice, as evinced through nuanced close readings of primary texts. In addition, conceptual sophistication, often in the form of theoretical and/or philosophical frameworks, was evident throughout the best essays, not simply awkwardly tacked onto it. The best essays thought about the complications such frameworks might impose. Many candidates wrote with real fluency and elegance, though stylish prose in timed examinations should not come at the cost of the candidate's willingness to pursue and develop original ideas. Markers sensed that students often took a long time to get into an argument because too often they were focused on wrestling the question into a form that suited what had been pre-prepared rather than thinking through and with the prompt while drawing on their own knowledge of texts/authors.

Weaker candidates had scripts with little to no close reading, were often muddled about meaning, and were sometimes extraordinarily narrow in the range of materials they addressed (one text, or a few lines of one or two poems, in every answer). Focus on prefatory material, especially to plays and works of poetry, were weak as there was often no sense that students have read the works in question or had any real interest or investment in them. Meanwhile, the best scripts were written with intellectual energy, showcasing a literary sensibility alive to the imaginative power of these works/author as well as their relevant critical and intellectual contexts; and which took intellectual risks, often challenging received positions in the pursuit of an independent line of argument that produced engaged and engaging readings of their chosen authors and texts.

Paper 5: Literature in English from 1760 to 1830

Every question was attempted: among the most popular questions were (1) Bloom on compulsion, (2) sensibility, (4) and (15) women's writing, (5) national character, (7) fear and awe (mostly essays about the sublime), and (9a) literary self-consciousness. There was an impressive range of authors and subjects on show, including pieces about life writing and other non-fictional prose; and it was good to see attention paid to

women poets and to theatre of the period. The best answers, unsurprisingly, showed wide and incisive reading, informed by but not dependent on relevant scholarship, some showing an impressive knowledge of textual variants and paratexts, and more importantly using such knowledge in support of their arguments. Weaker answers, which were often quite short, showed limited knowledge (sometimes startlingly limited: two short poems or an Austen novel) and either betrayed no knowledge of relevant criticism or offered paraphrases of it instead of engaging with the primary texts. Such work gives the slightly depressing impression of a candidate seeking to get through with minimal effort. Many candidates had creditably memorised important points and facts but struggled to integrate them into an argument; and quite a few answers about the novel leant heavily on plot summary. Generally, the treatment of political themes was not very subtle or informed: those who wrote about Burke seemed to show little acquaintance with more than a few purple passages; and many discussions of orientalism were still re-hashing Edward Said. Writing about the drama was often lively, but sometimes felt the obligation to repeat the performance history of plays without a critical end in view.

One aspect of the paper that all the markers mentioned was the oblique relationship that many answers had to the question they were supposed to be answering. The less adept scripts tended to man-handle the question, latching on to isolated parts in order to deliver prepared material, irrespective of its appropriateness; candidates should be aware that answers which do this will be marked down. The better scripts engaged with questions and quotations analytically and probingly. There was some good comparative work, but many of the multi-author essays lacked depth: one author was given a paragraph that considered a short text or passage, then the second author was given a similar paragraph, and then the first author ushered back for a second outing of the same kind, the result being that neither author had enough space for an account of much nuance yet nor was the comparison between them properly developed either. Many of the very best essays, by contrast, were about a single author, often considering works within the context of wider movements or within the shape of the author's whole career. Finally, the markers were all conscious that errors and typos are exacerbated by the pressure of typing in exam conditions and treated such things sympathetically; but there were a dismaying number of misquotations and extremely approximate quotations which did not imply the candidate understood the works in question, and misspelt novel titles and character names (Elizabeth Bennett, Mr Knightly) don't inspire much confidence.

Paper 6: Special Options

Elements of Criticism: Earth, Air, Fire and Water

There were 15 candidates for this paper. Some strong work that considered the post-humanist aspects of ecopoetic literature (lyric verse and also prose fiction). Cli-fi and climate-disaster dystopia continued to garner attention and interest. There was some fine work attending to intermediality, especially between the visual and verbal arts as vehicles for more-than-representational treatments of the environment. Water remains the element that is most popular where students chose to concentrate on a single element. Few ventured across elements to shape a project. Essays tended to focus on two or three works from the same period of literature, but all periods were addressed across the range of papers with confidence and competence (classical, medieval, early modern, eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century) were addressed. There was some excellent discussion of indigenous and black voices, primarily originating from North America. The majority of essays were well-written, often making sophisticated

arguments. On occasion, candidates could afford to structure and signpost their arguments with more lucidity rather than simply progressing from one text to another (although when done well this often resulted in persuasive close reading attentive to individual styles and voices). Examiners remind candidates that they should pay attention to variation in genre and theme even when they are considering works that adopt the same environmental thematic perspective. Essays were well presented and annotated with good bibliographies showing wide and informed reading in criticism and theory.

Experiments in the First Person

The work produced for Experiments in the First Person was of a high standard, covering and impressive range of texts, approaches, and conceptual terrain. Many candidates embraced the opportunities offered by the class to work across periods, though the overall emphasis was on authors from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Authors discussed included Philip Sidney, Francis Bacon, Vladimir Nabokov, Rosemarie Waldrop, Alice Munro, David Foster Wallace, Joshua Whitehead, and Slavenka Drakulić. Essays that did less well tended to describe an author's first-person stance in vaguer terms, rather than showing how it operates and unfolds via specific examples analysed in detail. The stronger essays reflected on the candidate's own deployment of the critical first person while also engaging closely with the place of the first person in the writings being studied, and the very strongest managed to interweave these two emphases, critical scrutiny and self-scrutiny informing one another.

Fairytales, Folklore and Fantasy

There were 15 candidates for this option. The examiners were delighted by the high standard of performance across the scripts, and by the evident commitment of all of the candidates to the aims of this option. The subject matter covered was extremely wide and diverse, with topics including arctic exploration, Chinese literature, eating disorders, selkies and mermaids, Scottish ballads and whimsy. Authors discussed included Andersen, Carroll, Carter, the Grimm brothers, LeGuin, C.S. Lewis and Pope. Individual texts included Seumas MacManus, *Donegal Fairy Stories*; Joseph Jacobs, *Childe Rowland*; Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary*; and Frances Hardinge, *Cuckoo Song*.

Most of the scripts were extremely strong, focused and purposeful, taking their reader deeply into the worlds of their primary texts. There were many stunning essays that scored superlatively across all the assessment criteria, keeping in balance argument and engagement, so that the candidates' immersion in the primary material never overwhelmed the analytical and theoretical frameworks of the essays, which had likewise received careful thought and professional implementation. In the best of the essays, highly sensitive and attuned readings of the primary material were never offered as if their argumentative value was self-evident – instead, they were rigorously argued through. Several of the essays were beautifully written from first to last, real labours of love showing high degrees of critical maturity and discursive as well as conceptual sophistication. Less clearly-conceived essays sometimes used keywords in insufficiently-defined ways and as umbrella terms to cover a number of different phenomena. However, the strongest essays – and there were many of them this year - deployed a highly focused critical-historical lens and found their own critical niche alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, what other critics were arguing. They also

displayed a good understanding of the textual traditions and socio-cultural backgrounds relevant to their chosen topics.

Film Criticism

There were 13 candidates for the paper. Topics included: Lauren Bacall recentring the narrative of *To Have and Have Not*; the underemphasised role of physicality (as distinct from opticality) in *Vertigo*; restraint and anti-spectacle in the apocalyptic drama *On the Beach*; omniscience and perspective in relation to contingency in *The Killing*; props and objects as performative tools in Hitchcock films; mobile long takes to frame fantasy in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*; perception in *The Misfits*; colour in Douglas Sirk and Alfred Hitchcock films; the inhuman in *Rope*. The essays mostly focused advantageously on a matter of form, style, or aesthetic design, and they were all based around close film analysis which was pleasingly proficient across the board. There were a few instances of first-class work: imaginative, precise, cogent, dense, involved, sensitive, interpretively penetrating, and critically alive. Although the general standard was high, especially for candidates handling a different artform and field of study, there were more problems exhibited in the essays than in previous years and the average mark was down by a couple of points. Some of the essays seem to be struggling with length which was revealed by repetition, insecure handling of topic, and structural weakness. Expression and presentation flaws indicated that some essays looked rushed. And there were cases of ventriloquism in relation to the scholarly literature where, despite correct referencing (hence no plagiarism), candidates appeared at times to be speaking through quotation. More pronounced demarcation and addressing of quotation would have helped position and distinguish individual claims and overall argument.

Literature, Culture and Politics in the 1930's

Fifteen students took this option. Given the nature of the course, students' work tended strongly towards historicist approaches to the material (although all approaches were welcome), and a number of essays offered fresh accounts of canonical 1930s topics such as the Depression and the Spanish Civil War, while others considered less textbook dimensions of the period, such as the representation of particular types of consumption, work, housing, and leisure. There were very successful thematic essays that covered a range of authors, but excellent work was also produced on individual figures, including some very independent-minded work on unjustly neglected writers of the period. Across all types of work, candidates made the jump from tutorial essays to long-form writing with assurance, and they consistently did very well to identify the appropriate scope for an essay of this length. As always, the very strongest work found a compelling literary or literary-historical payoff for what was often impressively thorough cultural-historical research.

Making Belief on the Early Modern Stage

Eight students submitted assessments for this paper. Every essay had a distinctive focus, and across the cohort a stimulating range of topics was discussed, including chastity trials, witnessing, stage parasites, widowhood, narrative, ekphrasis, and grief. Shakespeare's late plays and *The Changeling* were popular texts, but essays also explored early plays such as *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, *Ralph Roister Doister*, and *Supposes*; canonical texts including *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Volpone*; and later work such as *The Picture.* The standard of work was very high: students engaged ambitiously and thoughtfully with the conceptual possibilities of this paper. There was some

extremely strong work at the top end; these essays were incisively argued and showed a very robust understanding of theatrical developments across the era. Such work was very well researched and balanced exploration of a range of texts with scrupulous analysis of detail. Lower scoring work was successful in the knowledge shown, but lacked precise focus and argumentation.

Modern and Contemporary Drama

The course had 15 students and generated essays on a wide variety of topics, some very original and all insightful. There was a notable interest in questions around contemporary theatre-making, especially plays by women directors and playwrights engaging with realism. There were fewer essays this year solely devoted to Sarah Kane or Samuel Beckett. Regardless of topic or subject matter, the most successful essays shared certain key features: a compelling argument and a good range of both texts and performance-related material, as well as thinking about the dual nature of theatre as both text and performance. Key areas of interest included the representation of mental disorder, the treatment of racism, representations of disability, the aforementioned realism and feminism relationship, violence and sexuality, and issues around audience engagement.

Nervous Conditions

The submitted essays for this paper were on the whole impressive, addressing the range of authors and topics studied in the course with sensitivity and nuance. Particularly strong essays addressed precise topics and showed a clear rationale for why texts were being compared, or why specific authors were being brought into conversation with particular theorists. Notwithstanding their focus, strong essays also tended to take advantage of the course as a whole, building in expertise, critical methods, and readings from different classes to develop essays of genuine sophistication and depth. Less successful essays had corollary weaknesses: bringing together very different texts without much justification; simplistic understandings of the relationship between theoretical ideas and literary texts; generic and uncritical use of umbrella terms, "Western," "diasporic," etc. The importance of expressing coherent arguments in the clearest possible prose cannot be over-emphasised.

Nineteenth-Century 'American' Literature Now

Seven students submitted essays for this option. Essays took on fiction, poetry, life-writing, the essay, and drama, considering authors such as James Nelson Barker, Emily Dickinson, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Jacobs, Herman Melville, Jean Toomer, and Walt Whitman. Candidates were equally adept at exploring historicist or literary-critical approaches as they were more theoretically-inclined analysis. The strongest essays drew on a significant body of independent research, while always working within a distinct and clearly-articulated scope. Less strong work tended to show a relative paucity of knowledge of its materials, and to be ordered associatively, so lacking in broader synthesis.

Old Norse

Nine candidates sat the Old Norse paper this year. On the whole, the standard was high. Each of the passages set for translation was attempted. The very best candidates produced fluent, idiomatic, and virtually flawless translations that evinced deep

understanding of Old Norse as a literary language and that were able to respond sensitively to lexical, stylistic, and syntactical features; most candidates were able to produce translations that accurately rendered and gave a good sense of the original. Weaker scripts, however, sometimes found it difficult to render the original with much accuracy, and were on occasion marred by error, imprecision, and omission. Generally, the poetic texts were translated more accurately than the prose texts. In the essay portion of the exam, candidates showed an impressive ability to range across (and beyond) the set texts, confidently marrying detailed close textual analysis with confident and precise knowledge of scholarly tradition, including very recent scholarship, to produce sensitive, nuanced, and — at times — thought-provoking pieces of literary criticism. The very best candidates produced essays so impressive that it was hard to see how, in the context of a 3-hour exam, stronger work could realistically have been expected. Most essay questions on the paper were attempted, with the following exceptions: 3a (on Christian figures), 7 (on violence), 10 (on theoretical approaches), 12a (a linguistic commentary), and 12b (on the middle voice). The most popular questions were 2b (on landscape/the natural world) and 9 (on the function of dialogue).

Seeing Things: Poetry and the Visual Arts

Fourteen candidates took this option. While the dynamics of ekphrasis were central to many essays, which examined poets' responses to particular artists and artworks, other approaches were also successful. Candidates traced themes and pursued analogies across poets' own work in both media (e.g. Bishop, Plath), examined the relation between word and image in intermedial work (e.g. Blake), analysed visual art created in response to poetry (e.g. illustrations of Tennyson, Hartigan on O'Hara, the dialogue between works by Loy and Cornell), and studied creative collaborations between poets and visual artists (e.g. 'photopoetry'). Stronger essays found ways of focusing these discussions – by attending, for example, to engagements with colour or light, or to tensions between stillness and movement, speech and silence, presence and absence, or by pursuing specific questions of identity or specific misgivings about visuality – while taking care to situate these in a wider theoretical frame, drawing on the long history of reflection on relations between poetry and the visual arts. Thinkers canvassed included Lessing, Baudelaire, Benjamin, Barthes, Berger, Sontag, Mitchell, Krieger, Heffernan, Didi-Hubermann, Cheeke, and Miller. The best work drew productively on biographical material, was well-informed by existing criticism on its chosen poets, and – above all – was minutely attentive to form and style. Weaker essays operated at too great a distance from the poems, were conceptually thin or confused, and lacked argumentative shape and direction. Authors studied included Frank O'Hara and Sylvia Plath (both of whom attracted two essays each), William Blake, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Tennyson, Michael Field, Yeats, Rilke, R. S. Thomas, Mina Loy, Elizabeth Bishop, Muriel Rukeyser, Derek Walcott, John Hollander, and Louise Glück.

Seeing Through Texts: The Visual and Material in Late-Medieval Literature

Eight candidates took this option. As in previous years, the essays were on the whole varied, inventive and thoughtful, with some excellent work being rewarded with high marks. That high-quality work was able to integrate perceptive discussion of visual or material objects and encounters with the texts that were inscribed on or in them, or were written about them. It engaged closely with the experience of encountering writing in its material form, and reflected on the critical and theoretical implications of analysing different media. Nearly all the work was well-prepared and had a good argument,

incorporating candidates' reading about the contexts of what they were examining with close reading of specific artefacts and texts.

The Avant-Garde

Twelve students submitted essays for this option. Essays considered the work of, inter alia, Aimé Césaire, Jean Cocteau, Ithell Colquhoun, David Gascoyne, Wyndham Lewis, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, and Valerie Solanas. A number of essays explored alternatives to more straightforwardly author-based approaches, looking instead at specific avant-garde configurations within their national contexts - in France, Romania, and the UK, for example. Alongside literary forms (essays, manifesti, novels, and poetry), many essays drew effectively on the plastic arts too. Periodicals were also a generative source of research and insight. A number of students showed real accomplishment in working with material in languages other than English. The overall standard of essays, then, was strong, with many distinctive research projects and independent arguments on show. Less strong essays felt overburdened by their material, or lacked clear ordering or analytical principles from which a clear argument could be drawn.

The Idea of Criticism

There were 9 candidates for this paper. The essays submitted covered a wide range of topics: the current 'legitimation crisis' for politically-oriented literary criticism; the criticism of Lukács and its legacies; the performative aspects of I. A. Richards's Practical Criticism; the photography criticism of Bourdieu and Sontag comparatively considered; the changing relation of academic to non-academic criticism over recent decades; post-criticism's lingering affiliations with close criticism; radical critical pedagogies (from Freire to the Gaza-crisis encampments); the handling of sound in poetry criticism and its associated theoretical literature. The most successful of the essays defined a specific approach to the formal, historical and political features of the writer or selection of writers under consideration, and thought intelligently about ideas and arguments that had been the subject of sustained seminar discussion. More independently conceived essays tended to be stronger in their close analysis of the texts discussed than in their handling of the wider intellectual and philosophical contexts relevant to particular examples of critical practice.

The Medieval Now

Twelve students took this option which focusses on medievalism in Modern and Contemporary works. Overall, the standard of work produced was very good and it was pleasing to see a variety of critical approaches to medievalism being adroitly employed. Maria Davanah Headley's work was a popular focus, as were Siân Hughes's *Pearl* and Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*, but there were engaging essays on a variety of other texts. Most candidates brought medieval texts into productive dialogue with Modern and Contemporary materials, but there were successful pieces that took a more conceptual approach to medievalism. The best work presented sophisticated and illuminating interrogation of texts' construction and use of medievalism, employing precisely delineated analysis grounded in nuanced readings to support ambitious and clearly articulated arguments. Weaker elements in otherwise competent work included: limited or vague argumentation, comparatively superficial engagement with primary and secondary material, poor structuring, imprecision in defining key terms and concepts.

Occasionally, otherwise good work was marred by poor presentation, and many essays had issues with the content and formatting of the bibliography.

Tragedy

Sixteen candidates took this paper. The course encourages comparative work across a great variety of periods and forms, from ancient to contemporary, and between different literatures (in translation and otherwise, according to student choice). Real ambition and creativity were on show in several essays that successfully explored works across disciplinary boundaries, considering literature with art, theatre, film, or graphic novels, properly historically and geographically contextualized. There was also some excellent work done on single authors and texts, showing that a precise focus can likewise produce original and sophisticated responses. The best scripts had a quality of exactness about their thinking and writing. Candidates who did less well often relied on more superficial or circular analysis, or simply failed to develop clear arguments; some were penalised for insufficient grounding in the critical or theoretical background on which they relied. A few weaker scripts failed to construct an argument that could illuminate texts comparatively, and instead merely juxtaposed a selection of disparate examples, or relied on description rather than analysis. A great number of candidates made effective use of their freedom to discuss works outside the seminar reading list; in some cases, however, the chosen works were of insufficient sophistication to sustain the analysis brought to bear on them.

Utopias and Dystopias

This was a strong and committed cohort, who responded very positively to the challenges of the course – to address a utopian tradition reaching from Thomas More to the present, in order to think about the ways in which literary expression might give rise to possible worlds.

The submitted work was a mix of more familiar reading of literary utopias / dystopias – by writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Atwood and George Orwell, and more innovative responses to the topic. The best essays addressed original and productive theoretical questions – a searching essay on the relation between utopian thought and the ‘littoral imagination’; an essay on the utopian qualities of Agamben’s bare life; a highly original essay on the reflection of the anti-utopian tradition in the US television show *The Good Place*.

This run of scripts suggests that students in future are well advised to take utopian questions beyond the more well-recognised canon, where it can be difficult to generate new thinking, and to develop a critical utopianism in relation to emerging conceptual or textual terrains.

Overall, it was a pleasure to teach this course and to read the varied and often perceptive essays that emerged from it.

Word and Image

Fourteen students took this option. The work submitted was very impressive in the spectrum of questions, materials, and forms it considered, from allegories of word-image relations in the graphic novel to the politics of body art, and from close readings of ekphrastic verse to explorations of the rhetoric of the museum label. All the essays

showed an admirable determination to wrestle with one or more of the complex theoretical issues at the heart of this option – including the temporalities of the verbal and visual, the aesthetics of presence, and new approaches to and definitions of ekphrasis – and they did so using an exciting range of critical methods.

Weaker work generally struggled to temper such conceptual ambition to the constraints of a 6,000-word essay, and were less effective in moving from large questions to precise argument and analysis; they also tended to give less attention to differences of form and media, and sometimes mistook bold statement for critical sophistication. By contrast, the best of the essays understood how to manage and refine their conceptual ambition; they attended in insightful to the affordances and ontologies of different forms in their comparisons of (for instance) novels and plays; and they made judicious use of close reading to foster and nuance arguments that were consistently cogent and refreshing.

Writing Lives

Thirteen candidates took this Paper 6 option. They approached the relationship between 'life' and 'writing' in a variety of productive ways and covered a range of genres, from grief memoir to letters to literary fiction. Most, though not all, of the essays addressed life-writing from the mid-twentieth century onwards. The overall standard of work was high. There were excellent essays on individual authors, which ranged across different examples of life-writing and, where relevant, brought in observations on fiction, poetry, etc. to illuminating effect; there also were strong essays that took a more comparative approach. The best essays were able to balance convincing observations about the form and style of life-writing with well-illustrated, nuanced analysis of their chosen authors' understanding of selfhood (or related themes, including alterity and embodiment). These essays also demonstrated an impressive command of primary and critical materials and were usefully aware of contexts. Essays that scored less highly suffered from a bluntness or imprecision of argument. All of the essays were nicely conceptualised and were ambitious in the questions they raised.

Paper 7: Dissertation

There was a tremendous amount of creativity and resourcefulness on display in the dissertations this year. This could be seen in the wide range of authors, texts and approaches. Among the individual authors featured were: A.R. Ammons, Anne Bradstreet, the Brontës, Rupert Brooke, John le Carré, Margaret Cavendish, Noel Coward, Charles Dickens, Keith Douglas, Stephen Duck, T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, James Hanley, Felicia Hemans, Meena Kandasamy, John Keats, Martin McDonagh, Robert Macfarlane, Conyers Middleton, Edgar Mittelholzer, Iris Murdoch, Wilfred Owen, Jessie Pope, Iain Sinclair, Gertrude Stein, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf. There was a notable amount of comparative work, where subjects included: Donne and Italian poetry, Shelley and Rimbaud, modern English and Japanese texts, English and French medieval romance, James Schuyler and Fairfield Porter, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Louis MacNeice, Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop, Keats and Milton, Austen and Mary Shelley, Laura Riding and Robert Graves, Mick Imlah and Philip Larkin, Sarah Kane and Varlam Shalamov, Brian Friel and Wole Soyinka. And there was a wide range of genres, media and approaches, with subjects including: hardboiled fiction, film (e.g. stop-motion animation; the work of Charlie Kaufman), the influence of Ovid on medieval English literature, the influence of Homer on modern poetry, Anglo-American balladry, Scottish medieval verse, antisemitism in medieval literature, syntax in *Beowulf*, River Thames Frost Fairs, islands in eighteenth-century literature, the Female Tatler, glass in Renaissance literature, Romantic rural labouring poets, the Bildungsroman, the influence of Larkin on Wordsworth, collage in visual art and modernist poetry, Large Language Models, self and identity in medieval lyrics, and the Beat Generation. A wide range of critical approaches and concepts were used, including theories of creative and biographical criticism.

Examiners praised the strongest dissertations in terms that showed that they were already of postgraduate standard, and it is important to emphasise that they were not necessarily looking for arguments with which they might agree: it was a pleasure to read and think both with and against these dissertations. The strongest papers showed immersion in the primary material together with a keen awareness of the differences between criticism and theory, a willingness to appraise rather than simply deploying critical methods, and judicious assessment of the amount of historical, theoretical or sociocultural context necessary to address topics credibly (e.g. understanding of contemporary religious controversy).

Among the traits of the strongest dissertations were confident reference to visual arts where relevant; clear close reading in the service of the argument; precise thinking, and awareness of the need to resist over-interpretation. Candidates showed good critical judgment in deciding what to do with footnotes, making judicious choices between essential and subsidiary information. They also made good judgments when using modern terminology to address a range of historical phenomena. Where earlier states of the English language were used, such candidates showed excellent knowledge of linguistic detail. Several candidates had gone the extra mile, where necessary, in order to familiarise themselves with archival materials, or early drafts of better-known primary texts. Others had taken the trouble to master the technical vocabularies of fields relevant to their subject (e.g. film theory). They had a clear understanding of where their dissertations stood in relation to existing critical conversations and used secondary literature to show that they were not arguing in a vacuum, even when they were addressing comparatively little-known topics or neglected authors. Across the board there was sophisticated understanding of relevant critical debates and issues, with such

candidates able to find nuanced and independent vantage-points from which to craft their dissertations. It was clear that all of this work was the result of drafting and re-drafting, with candidates having made the best use of the time available in which to hone their work.

In terms of the stated assessment criteria, the less strong dissertations were often good on information and engagement, but less strong on argumentation, and sometimes even presentation. Some were descriptive rather than analytical, or yielded only simple and self-evident results from close readings of texts. In such cases, there was often a flawed understanding of the methodology required. Dissertations in this category were of uneven or mixed quality: often very ambitious, but sometimes dealing with topics too big to be dealt with incisively within the limits of an 8,000-word piece of work. In terms of skills, there were sometimes errors (for example, in the understanding of Old English) or under-theorisation, generalization from a small amount of evidence, or lack of familiarity with the existing critical conversations surrounding an author or topic. Particularly in a longer piece of work such as this, candidates need to give the sense of engaging with a critical tradition, and of understanding and mastering the necessary skills and materials to address the topics they have chosen (e.g. the necessity of including images in dissertations discussing film).

Course II Paper 1: Literature in English 650-1100

Twenty-six candidates sat this paper. The most popular question was 1 (on voice AND/OR material culture). Questions 18 (an *Andreas* quotation), 20 (time AND/OR natural world) and 18 (audience) were also popular. There was a good range of answers across the paper, and all questions were attempted except 10, which lent itself to a reception-studies or *Beowulf*-focussed response. Candidates answered on a reasonably diverse range of texts overall, but many scripts clustered around a relatively narrow range of material. The *Exeter Book Riddles* proved highly popular, and there were several answers on the *Chronicle Poems*, verse hagiography, the *Physiologus* and charms (*Æcerbot* drew several candidates). There was comparatively little work on epic poetry, Alfredian prose and prose hagiography, and very few candidates wrote on homilies. No candidate wrote on post-medieval responses to this period. A small number of scripts only examined canonical poetry, familiar from Prelims: the corpus is rich and diverse and FHS candidates ought to be working widely across it.

The best work offered nuanced and engaged readings of Old English texts, with attention to genre, chronology and context, and made effective use of appropriate criticism as part of compelling arguments that directly and robustly addressed the question. Work gaining lower marks included: answers that only minimally addressed the question; scripts which treated the texts as homogenous and grouped materials without clear rationale; those using dated or inappropriate criticism (such as student readers) and terms (e.g. 'elegy') uncritically, and those which presented surveys or comparisons without precise close reading or effective argumentation.

Candidates generally handled the Old English language with confidence, despite the challenge of typing without recourse to special characters. Several scripts applied a theoretical lens incisively (although there were also many cursory references to theory). Likewise, sophisticated use was made by some candidates of Anglo-Latin materials, material and visual culture, and manuscript and historical context. There is scope for candidates to do much more of this kind of methodologically sophisticated work, and to range more widely within the corpus, but it was encouraging to see many candidates using diverse materials and approaches with confidence and nuance.

Course II Paper 2: Medieval English and Related Literatures 1066–1550

Twenty-seven candidates took this paper. There was a good spread of answers across the questions, with all but question 13 attempted; most popular were 2, 5, and 6. One of the encouraging aspects of this paper was the impressively detailed and wide-ranging knowledge shown by candidates, often moving fluently from close reading of detail – with excellent use of quotation – to larger comparisons between authors and traditions. English lyrics from across the period were discussed alongside material originally in French, Occitan, Arabic, Italian, and Latin; there was also a great deal of strong work on Old Norse and on Welsh. The best work used the comparative possibilities of this paper to great advantage, combining sufficient contextual awareness with close attention to detail. Weaker scripts often lacked that awareness or became repetitive in taking a single line of argument. The strongest answers characteristically began with a direct, analytical approach to the question or quotation, and had a coherent argument which developed across the materials adduced. This is the last year of the current theme of 'Lyric', and it is to be hoped that candidates for 'Romance' in future years will show similar enthusiasm and achievement.

Course II Paper 3: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550

See FHS Paper 2: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550.

Course II Paper 4: The History of the English Language to c. 1800

This year's portfolios spanned a substantial range of topics, though essays on dictionaries, cant, and/or gender were especially popular. Commentary work was more varied, covering biblical translations, chronicles, poetry, treatises, recipes, wills, saints' lives, and letters. Just under half of the portfolios engaged substantively with Old, Middle, Early Modern, and Late Modern English; in portfolios that covered only three periods, OE was the most frequently left out. In Section A, question 3 (on 'proper language') was by far the most popular choice (13 responses), while no candidates attempted questions 1, 5 or 7 (language change; periodization; Englishes/colonization). In Section B, answers were more evenly spread across questions 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 16 (intralingual translation; text types; Standard English; syntax/diachronic relation; language change), with no attempts at questions 14 or 15 (print/manuscript culture; foreign lexical influence).

More successful essays included those which did not simply repeat arguments from secondary sources but critically engaged with them, offering new insights, illustrating their points with well-chosen examples from primary texts, and presenting an appropriately comprehensive view of their subject (for the length of the essay) rather than narrowly focussing on too limited a quantity of text. Addressing difficult concepts with an informed appreciation of their complexity was also a helpful technique for strong responses. Successful commentaries included those which analysed a diverse array of features in their chosen passages, supported their explanations with correct linguistic terminology, and substantiated their interpretations with relevant secondary reading. Across both answers, attention to historical contextualization helped to create rich responses. Less successful responses included those which struggled to produce material relevant to the exercise, remained at a more generalised level, simply synthesized critical materials at the expense of sufficiently developing their own view, or made too limited use of primary text.

Candidates are reminded to proofread their work before submission to correct typographical errors (missing punctuation, mistyped names and dates, spelling errors, and so forth).

Course II Paper 5: The Material Text

Seventeen students submitted work for this paper. All students attempted both questions, as the rubric requires. On the commentary question, about half the candidates tackled each of the two options. A pleasingly wide range of topics appeared in answers to the second question: text–image interaction, medieval maps, marginal glossing, digitisation, the history of reading, objects bearing text such as the Franks Casket, et cetera.

Some strong answers for the first, commentary, question explored how a good number of aspects of the set page interacted in specific details. Other strong answers focused on a limited range of aspects of the page (e.g. layout, punctuation, decoration) and used detailed evidence to develop a reading of those. Answers that received high marks showed both precise knowledge of the manuscript and the capacity to use that knowledge in analysing the

particular set page. Well-performing answers typically grasped the use of subfield-specific terminology relevant to whichever aspects they discussed (e.g. palaeography for talking about script models, textual criticism for talking about editing). Some weaker answers for the commentary question showed knowledge of the manuscript but struggled to deploy that knowledge analytically to the set page; the paper asks candidates to comment on specific evidence, not just to show that they have absorbed some facts. The weakest answers showed a weak grasp on core concepts. Whether strong or weak in other qualities, answers for the commentary usually put the set manuscript page in conversation with the assigned passage from an edition, which was good to see.

Strong submissions for the essay question explored one well-delineated topic, usually in a small set of examples or in one specific example. Candidates then made arguments based on incisive analyses of evidence from their case studies. While also performing well in other aspects, the very best essay submissions established facts previously unknown to scholarship and received appropriately laudatory marks. This is by no means a requirement for a high mark, but deserves mention to record the standard of the best work. Weaker submissions for the essay question sometimes wandered around a topic rather than incisively discussing particular material examples. Some weaker answers made sweeping assumptions about the Middle Ages rather than recognising the cultural specificities of different places and times. The weakest answers drew on inappropriate sources for background information and were consequently misled; a large reading list is provided during teaching for this paper.

Throughout the paper, clear prose and careful scholarly presentation earned rewards. The best answers had evidently benefited from good time management that left room for checking. Lower-marked submissions often showed flaws in these areas. Markers granted some leeway for unorthodox but consistent referencing of manuscript material, in light of the fact that manuscript studies is a technical topic to which students are new. Inconsistent formatting in bibliographies was a frequent problem even for otherwise careful submissions. Candidates should remember that checking the bibliography is not scutwork that can be automated away, but a chance to review one’s intellectual process.

The examiners were pleased and impressed by the committed engagement with material texts in almost all submissions, across the range of final marks—a credit to the enthusiasm of candidates taking this paper.

Course II Paper 6: Special Options

See FHS Paper 6: Special Options.

Course II Paper 7: Dissertation

See FHS Paper 7: Dissertation

2.2 External Examiner Reports - 2024/25

Professor Pascale Aebischer, University of Exeter

- DCLE: Honour School of Classics and English
- DENA: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course I
- DENB: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course II

First year of term of office

Part A

1. Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?

i) Academic standards of students
Yes

ii) Academic achievements of students
Yes

2. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:
(Please refer to paragraph 16 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

i) The frameworks for higher education qualifications?
Yes

ii) Any applicable subject benchmark statement?
Yes

14. In relation to the academic process:

Does it measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?

Yes

Is it conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?
Yes

15. In relation to the information and evidence provided to you:

Did you receive it in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

Part B

1. 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 are very high. I read scripts across the whole range: from third-class work and failed essays right through to a dissertation which was justly awarded a mark of 86 in recognition of the fact that it was publishable in its present state.

The class boundaries correspond to those that we have at the University of Exeter, except for the 2.1/1. boundary and above, where we are more willing to reward excellence and move further up, awarding marks of 75+ more readily than is the case in Oxford. See my comments under 'issues' below.

1. b) Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).

The Shakespeare portfolios that I read are more consistently between the solidly okay to excellent range than the exams, reflecting the ability of students to work on their chosen subjects over a longer period of time and use their critical faculties without having to build up a vast memory bank first. The portfolio essays seem driven by the students' individual interests more than the search for an arcane or niche area with which to impress their examiners; as a result, they convey a sense of genuine engagement which is sometimes lacking in exam scripts that can tend towards 'info dumping' and trying to dazzle with obscurity and memorised arcane arguments.

In exams, students write across an impressive range of topics and authors, and they have memorised an astonishing number of citations from primary and secondary sources. At the highest end of the essays, this leads to outstanding work that engages with the essay prompt and deploys the learned material intelligently in response to the prompt.

At the lower end, however, there is a clear tendency to fit memorised material into question prompts that don't quite lend themselves to the memorised essay. This is reflected in some of the scripts I read and also in some of the draft examiners' reports, e.g. Course I, Paper 2/Course II, Paper 3: 'on occasion, it seemed that candidates had a very fixed idea of the essays which they were going to write in advance of the exam and persisted in writing them, regardless of what the question actually asked them.' Can there be more of a sense of challenging students to think new thoughts in the moment?

I particularly enjoyed reading Papers 6 and 7, where students are driven by their own interests and write genuinely engaged and interesting work. Reading entire runs of scripts by single candidates allows you to see where students are building on things that they learned and investigated for other papers, developing specialisms of sorts. This produces a good standard of work even for your weaker students.

2. 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.

2a) The MCE process is conducted with care and rigour, with each candidate given individual consideration of their particular circumstances, but also with a view to ensuring parity between similar circumstances. To simplify future MCE board meetings, it might be worth taking notes about the 'rules' applied in the first board meeting to simplify decisions in the second board meeting, e.g. what is done in cases where there is a laptop failure.

2b) The practice of double-blind marking, followed by discussion and possibly a third-marker's intervention is clearly onerous, but it produces fair results, though more attention could be given to more justified decisions at both the lowest and the highest ends of the spectrum.

2c) the comment sheets are used in a range of different ways by different markers: some jot down a few 'notes to self' to remind themselves of the strengths and weaknesses of individual essays; others are more discursive and present more of an argument for why a specific mark should be awarded. Notes are sufficient for an external examiner or third marker to understand some of the thinking behind the award of a mark; having no notes would be problematic, especially where there is a difference between how two markers assess a particular essay.

There is a notable variation in how the reconciliation box is treated by Ml. 'We met and discussed the essays' or 'We discussed the essays on Teams' does not explain how a mark was arrived at in relation to criteria and is especially problematic when the raw marks are almost 10 marks apart and in different classification bands (as they were in one case I looked at). One marker did not use the box at all and just noted the agreed mark without comment or justification.

When two markers specifically disagree on a specific aspect of a student's essay, the reconciliation comment should really explain how that issue was resolved (e.g. Ml: 'The world - Katherine Philips. Very smart focussing of the prompt.' And M2: 'Struggles to keep to topic/title'. - which is it?).

There is a sense of contradiction sometimes between the granularity of the individual marks given to elements of a paper and the agreed comments that most often give a very general overall sense of where the paper as a whole sits within the grade boundaries. Might the Faculty want to revise its approach to the marking sheets and suggest that markers simply take notes on the overall exam script rather than award marks for individual essays? That might save time for markers and also prevent some 'retro-fitting' of individual marks in order to arrive at the average mark which the marker decides is appropriate for the exam as a whole.

2d) ANF third markers: There is variation in practice where an ANF third marker is brought into marking team. Some third markers respond in their own comments to the comments of the first two markers: this seems to me to be best practice and it accords with what your guidelines say: "3rd markers should read the script and the comments sheets of the examiners in order to understand the point of dispute, and then use the criteria to award a mark." But other third markers seem to ignore the first two markers and come up with an entirely new comment and assessment of the essay that does not take account of the strengths and weaknesses identified by the other markers. The mark they arrive at might

therefore seem bizarrely arbitrary, even though it is the result of a complex process.

2e) Sitting exams is clearly a rigorous way of assessing students, but you might want to think about whether the skills that are required for the exams are skills that are useful for the students' intellectual development and engagement. It is not just the question of 'info dumping', which is commented on in a couple of examiners' reports and which is also in evidence in some of the MCE notices, where students comment on the extent to which they have been hindered by circumstances from memorising their essays or retrieving memorised material, but also a question of development of different methodologies and critical approaches. Your best students do manage to display a good range of approaches, but average students don't seem to go much beyond a historicising literary reading and seem to not have a good grasp of theoretical concepts or the intellectual history behind the critical material that they use.

Comparing the exam scripts with the coursework also suggests that students do not enjoy developing an engaged and engaging argument in an exam setting as much as they enjoy writing their coursework. There was a clearer sense of - for want of a better word - fun in the coursework, and more risk-taking which also meant that students who produced middling exam scripts could suddenly excel for a piece of coursework for P1, P6 or P7. In those papers, there was a greater sense of methodological individuality and rigour than for the exams.

3. Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University? If you acted as external examiner for multiple courses, please indicate whether the issues related to all or selected courses.

3.1 The purpose of exams: At the exam board, there was a discussion of typing speeds and the length of exam essays. If you add to this a consideration of the length of the exam papers and the number of questions that students are invited to consider before they choose which to answer, it makes it almost physically impossible to find the time to think while writing. That, in turn, incentivises students to learn essay answers by heart and not respond to essay prompts in the moment. The Faculty might therefore want to reconsider what exams are meant to test: is it just a prodigious ability to memorise enormous amounts of information and text, or is it active thinking and the harnessing of a memory bank to produce a new argument under pressure? If it is the latter, then the current system is not necessarily achieving the desired outcome and some consideration might be given to how else exams might be structured.

3.2 MCE notices:

a) There were issues with invigilation/disability accommodations not being in place. In such cases, the committee decided to implement a consistent policy of awarding the highest level of MCE. This seems entirely appropriate, but it does suggest that there are problems with communicating with exam schools and colleges what accommodations are necessary for students, to prevent distress and meet legal requirements.

b) The clogged-up welfare/disability system is affecting students who have late diagnoses of long-term conditions that affect their ability to study. This is

not something that the English Faculty can directly address, except through guidance to students about how to ensure that they have a paper and evidence trail that can be used to fill gaps created by waiting lists for assessment and treatment. Clear communication and guidance might make a difference here (this is probably already in place, but not visible to me as an external examiner).

c) Issues with laptops failing during exams. While unavoidable, it does seem that provision could be put in place not just for extra time to make up for minutes lost while a laptop is replaced and a login process is completed, but also — and crucially - for affected students to be given a five-minute break at the end of the normal time as the other students pack up and leave. The clock can then be restarted for affected students after the disruption is over. The necessity of such a step is evident from the number of comments, in the MCE notices, about the disruptiveness of having to write while others are leaving, and the difficulty these students have dealing with the stress of not being able to concentrate during this period.

Additionally, if there was a uniform agreed way of handling these situations, then this could be communicated to all students at the start of the session, so that anxiety about how such a situation might affect them, should it occur, can be reduced.

d) Students with MCE3 notices across the board: Is there something that the university could do that is equivalent to an SPLD that will support students with extreme life circumstances in a way that is recognised in the exams system rather than 'just' a fitness to study process that's housed within a college?

Current rules mean that a candidate who's been affected by something very severe across the board can't have action taken unless they're borderline, whereas someone who has had just one paper affected can have that discounted. This seems unfair.

3.3 Scripts/marking process:

a) Criteria for top and bottom ends: At the lowest and highest ends of the spectrum, there can be very large discrepancies between individual marks for individual essays.

At the bottom end of the spectrum, I found an example of where two markers were 30 marks apart for an essay and another where one marker awarded a 35 and the other a 50. This suggests that the criteria at these ends are too loose to be genuinely helpful to calibrate the work with the fine gradations that are in evidence in the 2.2-2.1 range. For a student's transcript and also their average for the purposes of degree classification, it may genuinely matter whether a 'Fail' mark is a 10 or a 39 at the level of an individual essay, as that can impact the overall mark for a paper and hence of the student's degree classification. For one of your weakest students, the recurrence of this issue across several scripts meant that greater granularity in the marking (and clearer criteria that allow greater differentiation between marks of 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, and 35) might have made a significant difference to their average and possibly degree classification.

At the top end of the spectrum, more granularity and clarity in the criteria, e.g. decreeing that for any work that is publishable without further revision should be awarded a mark of 85, which would then allow an essay where there are a few typos or just one inelegant formulation to be awarded 84, would ensure that prizes can be

awarded with greater robustness than is currently the case. I read both the prize-winning dissertation and the runner-up and would have ranked them as both meriting publication without any alteration. As it was, both dissertations were awarded prizes and both students will be happy, but there is still a lingering sense that the marks they were awarded could be more rigorously matched to criteria and that doing so might have yielded a different result.

b) Lack of relevance seems to be treated differently by different markers.

c) First-class marks at the lower end: There were several essays for both of these marks of runs where I would have expected higher marks to be awarded, placing these students more securely within the first-class boundary. There seems to be some 'squishing' of marks downwards when they approach or are just at/above the first-class boundary. Cumulatively, this results in borderlines and low firsts being awarded for work that is securely first-class and could well be awarded 72-74, if not 75/76. The mindset at present seems to be focused on why students should not be awarded a first-class mark instead of focusing on the reasons why they should, because they excel in one or more areas. It might be worth reminding colleagues that the marking guidelines indicate that 70-74 should be awarded to scripts that 'will be at least very highly competent across the board, and probably excel in at least one group of criteria. Relative weaknesses in some areas may be compensated by conspicuous strengths in others.' When examiners use the words 'excel' or 'excellent' in their comments, or speak of the sophistication of an argument, this should therefore be seen as a trigger for a first-class mark, as other weaknesses within a script might well be compensated by such signs of excellence.

3.4 Workload for external examiners: This is my first year as an external examiner, so this comment reflects my unfamiliarity with the quantity and type of reading expected in this role. I was asked to read 9 runs of scripts, many of which had long word counts for exams. The volume of reading expected made it difficult to be attentive to individual essays, especially when reading outside my expertise and having to orient myself within a field. It meant that I was reading faster than would allow me to really concentrate on a script and identify, especially where raw marks were quite far apart or there was a disagreement between markers, how a mark was arrived at and whether it was justified. For comparison, at the University of Exeter, we employ 4-5 examiners where you employ just 3, which makes for a more manageable load of reading. You might want to reconsider the number of scripts allocated to individual external examiners and/or the number of examiners you employ, especially now that you have more 2.2 students and your rules stipulate that all such runs of marks must be read by your externals.

B4. 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 is a lot of evidence of careful marking and a commitment to getting to the correct result for your students. Involving a third marker whenever there is an ANF is an excellent practice. I agree that removing this automatic process for first-class marks is appropriate, especially if the criteria at the top end are revised to ensure that there is a clearer matching of marks to criteria (see my point 3.2a) above).

The scripts show evidence of excellent teaching, with students encouraged to explore their own interests and showing a wonderful range and often also depth of knowledge. If there is a certain absence of fun in the scripts produced in exam conditions, that might be because students are labouring under the impression that obscurity = originality = a good mark. I have seen some scripts providing incisive, fresh readings of canonical texts that were rewarded by excellent marks, so this is not borne out by the actual exam assessment practice and students might be reminded that they need not memorise arcane detail and much secondary material in order to succeed.

The MCE process is supportive and thorough. In the absence of the option of resits/deferred exams that can be sat in the summer, which is practice elsewhere and might be something that the English Faculty could consider, the actions taken by the MCE committee and subsequently the board are the best that can be done. There was some excellent discussion of how to deal with, e.g., candidates that were affected by MCE3 notices across the board or across all their exams and the policy arrived at (awarding an uplift of 2 marks for affected assessments) seems commensurate and appropriate. I much appreciated the board's commitment to equity and its willingness to go over the same decision repeatedly in order to reach a conclusion that seemed appropriate and that could be justified.

The boards were run in an exemplary fashion, allowing sufficient time to pause on the mark runs of individual candidates where necessary and consider individual cases in relation to similar runs of marks and MCE notices for other candidates, ensuring that there is equity and appropriate action across the board.

The administrative support is excellent and the hospitality cordial and generous. Particular thanks to Tom Manning and Andy Davice for their organisational support and the care with which they prepared for the meetings and to Mishtooni Bose and Timothy Michael for chairing the meetings and helping me find my feet in this first year of my turn as external examiner.

Dr Nicola McDonald, University of York

- DMHN: Honour School of History and English
- DENA: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course 1
- DENB: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course II

Part A

1. Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?

i) Academic standards of students
Yes

ii) Academic achievements of students
Yes

2. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:
(Please refer to paragraph 16 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

i) The frameworks for higher education qualifications?
Yes

ii) Any applicable subject benchmark statement?
Yes

3. In relation to the academic process:

Does it measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?

Yes

Is it conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?
Yes

4. In relation to the information and evidence provided to you: Did you receive it in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

5. Regarding your previous report, please indicate whether you: Received a written response to your previous report?
Yes

Are satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?

Yes

Part B

B1

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?

This year (compared to last), I read a much wider range of work, from the top to the bottom, and it was rewarding, in particular, to read so much outstanding work; the standards achieved in each category were readily congruent with those of my own department where I have been examining for 20+ years.

b) Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).

The very best students on the all courses for which I saw material are genuinely outstanding and would readily rank amongst the top in the country. The breadth and depth of the Oxford course is noteworthy and top students rise to its challenge, repeatedly producing starry work -- exceptionally well-informed, the product of extensive research and sharp, thoughtful analysis emerging out of astute close reading, written up with real sophistication and verbal aplomb -- on material as diverse as hip hop and Shakespeare, Walt Whitman's treatment of the ocean, and late medieval prison writing (to give but one example). The ongoing importance of seated exams (over half of the papers) is also a stand out of the Oxford degree and it is noteworthy how good some of your students are at demanding, timed work (although more on this below). This is to be celebrated. Weaker work, however, was in evidence too, and in much the same way that it is at my own institution (failure to do sufficient research; failure at close reading; poor writing and referencing; and so on), although given the preponderance of seated exams, there was in evidence very particular ways in which student achievement varied from mode to mode (some students produce notably poorer work in seated exams, although the very top students impress with their confident handling of all forms of assessment).

B2. 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 assessment process is exemplary, with all papers rigorously marked by two examiners (again this must be something of an outlier across the sector, but still perhaps necessary given the nature of tutorial teaching). I particularly noted that this year it was easier to follow the logic behind examiners' allocation of marks, with comments being more fulsome and typically typed up, rather than handwritten (as I saw last year) and so easier to parse. I'd like to note, in particular, the conduct of the meetings of the Board of Examiners which I attended, where every effort was made to ensure equity of treatment across candidates and to respond, in particular, to MCEs with both compassion and transparency. There is impressive evidence, right across the exam board, of examiners trying, within the limits of the system to treat all students with demonstrable equity.

B3. Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University? If you acted as external examiner for multiple courses, please indicate whether the issues related to all or selected courses.

I would like to note a few things that arose from both my reading of assessments and my experience on the MCE Committee:

1. I remarked last year, that examiners were often parsimonious in handing out marks above 70 and especially above 79. There were more marks at 80 and very, very occasionally above, this year, which was good to see, but there is still a tendency for comments on the top submissions to outstrip in their praise the achievement indicated by the marks awarded. So a 'superb essay, excelling across the full range of criteria' was marked only at 74; another essay judged 'sophisticated, erudite, ... consistently wide ranging, highly informed, closely and powerfully attentive, and loudly and stylishly written' was marked at just 78 (it's hard from the comments to imagine how the work could be better). This is not so much a problem within Faculty itself, where the top students are being awarded the top marks; but when Oxford students seek e.g. postgraduate funding and are in competition with the top students from elsewhere whose marks might well reach into the 90s, they will inevitably be disadvantaged.

2. In comparison with last year, there was a notable improvement in the handling, by the Exams Schools (and occasionally Colleges, where exams were being taken in College), of SpLDs and the adjustments they afford, as well as in mitigation allowed for computer failure in seated exams. However, there continue to be discrepancies in how different students are treated (on the ground, when the computer, e.g., fails) and in the consistency with which SpLD requirements are observed, almost invariably to the students' detriment. It is incumbent on the University to address this as a matter of urgency; but it would likewise be helpful if there were a clear a priori agreement about how the MCE Committee responds to the disruptions that emerge through the University's mishandling of the failure of its own systems. This year we typically registered disruption occasioned by a University failure, on an MCE, at a Level 3 (which, from my recollection, was different from the previous year) and I thought that this was a good policy that should be continued.

3. One thing that examiners raised repeatedly in the Board's discussion was the matter of what was termed the 'canned essay', i.e. pre-prepared essays that are shoe-horned into exam questions, rather than essays that respond creatively to the questions posed. I was struck, across the board, that the answers to exam questions that achieved the highest marks were almost invariably between 1800 and 2000 words, leaning to the higher end of that average, whereas weaker work more typically hovered around 1100 and 1300 words (and yet weaker essays often falling below 1000 words). The longer essays often stood out for not only their impressive use of primary quotation, but the students' grasp of not just ideas from secondary criticism or even key words or turns of phrase but whole, and accurately referenced, sentences from scholarship. This is impressive. But a quick calculation, based on an average typing speed (among non-professionals) of 40 wpm, suggests that the top students are often reproducing essays that are largely pre-written, since there simply isn't enough time available in the exam to respond creatively to a question and to type that much verbiage. There is no question that the students who are able to produce such long and flawless essays are very good, but it wasn't always clear what the exam was assessing: i.e. a creative response to an exam question or the ability to memorise (and then minimally modify) a very good piece of pre-produced

work. I noted too that while examiners often remarked that an essay did not respond to the question as well as it could (both with good work and poorer work), the penalty accrued by not responding to the chosen question, especially in the case of a very good essay, was minimal. It was clear, from discussion at the Board, that a more serious conversation at Faculty level about what seated exams are seeking to assess is overdue; the highly polished prose, with extensive secondary (as well as primary) quotation, that I saw in so many of the lengthy, first class essays almost never evidenced a creative response to an exam prompt (which it seems is what, theoretically at least, examiners are hoping for).

B4. 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.

Assessment practices, including double-blind marking and the distinctive mix of seated exams and course work, continue to be gold standard for the discipline (although with the caveat above about 'canned' essays). Your students are clearly very well taught, across a historically rigorous and increasingly imaginative range of papers, and they justifiably often do very well. The MCE and Exam Board meetings that I attended were impressively well run, by the chair (Mishtooni Bose) and administrators (Andy Davice and Tom Manning), and throughout were conducted with exemplary attentiveness, care, and judiciousness (especially in the case of borderlines and mitigating circumstances).

B5. a) 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.

As above in B4.

Professor Matthew Taunton, University of East Anglia

- DEML: Honour School of English and Modern Languages
- DENA: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course I
- DENB: Honour School of English Language and Literature Course II

Part A

1. Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience?

i) Academic standards of students
Yes

ii) Academic achievements of students
Yes

2. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:

i) The frameworks for higher education qualifications?
Yes

ii) Any applicable subject benchmark statement?
Yes

3. In relation to the academic process: Does it measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?

Yes

Is it conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?
Yes

4. In relation to the information and evidence provided to you: Did you receive it in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

5. Regarding your previous report, please indicate whether you: Received a written response to your previous report?
Yes

Are satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?

Yes

Part B

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?

Having reviewed runs of scripts from across a good stretch of the full range (from high firsts to 2:2s), it is clear to me that the level of attainment is very high. Students show an impressive command of English literary tradition, across an impressive historical range, and show a strong grasp of the relevant academic conventions in presenting their work. The academic standards on display are good, and often exemplary.

b) Please comment on student performance and achievement across the relevant programmes or parts of programmes and with reference to academic standards and student performance of other higher education institutions of which you have experience (those examining in joint schools are particularly asked to comment on their subject in relation to the whole award).

Students performed very well, showing an almost uncanny ability to memorise quotations from both primary texts and secondary criticism (which the Oxford system encourages them to do quite copiously) and also in many cases demonstrating considerable intellectual agility in responding to exam questions on the spot. This is most evident, as one would expect, in the first-class students, who have performed at least as well as students receiving first-class marks in other institutions. The grade boundaries are in the right places, congruent with what I am familiar with at other institutions.

2. 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 examination process at Oxford is extremely rigorous. Each script is double marked and, where the two examiners cannot agree a mark or where the variance is 11 marks or more, a third marker is called in. This is unusual for the sector and is very labour-intensive-as such it represents a decision to focus academic resource on this, taking time away from the other things the faculty might be doing. What this communicates to me is that the English faculty places the highest value on the integrity of the marks awarded, and they place an emphasis on the accreditation side of a university education. This is a gold-plated examination process and students and staff can be fully confident that the marks awarded are fair.

As I commented last year, there is a high degree of consensus between markers on each paper about what constitutes a good essay in each individual field, and in fact a lot of consensus about what constitutes a good essay across the papers and across the discipline. True, there seemed to be somewhat more cases this year where a third marker was called in to mediate when first and second marker were at variance, but not so many, in my view, that one should worry that the consensus is starting to break down!

The examiners' comments are sometimes very detailed, going well beyond what it would take to justify the mark awarded. Showing your working is helpful to the external examiner, but I'm not sure it adds much to the rigour of the process, and it comes too late to be useful to the students - graduates, as they are now. In some cases these comments involve three markers, who all engage in some depth with the arguments presented and offer thoughtful and constructive feedback on the essays. This doesn't

seem to me to be a good use of the markers' time. Some ideas about altering the marksheet to make this less labour-intensive (and also less prone to litigation) were floated in the exam board — I think that could save the faculty some valuable time, without any detriment to the students.
The marking scheme is applied very rigorously. One of the other externals pointed out that it does not allow much scope for differentiation at the higher end and more detail here could help markers to reward truly exceptional work. That seemed to me a good point.

3. Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University? If you acted as external examiner for multiple courses, please indicate whether the issues related to all or selected courses.

The focus on timed, closed book exams, encourages students to spend their study time memorising large chunks of both primary texts and secondary criticism, and in some cases 'potted' essays that are hastily adapted to fit the question. This is widely known and discussed by the faculty but they are unsure what to do about it. That said, while memorising a lot of material, strong students do nevertheless demonstrate considerable intellectual agility in these timed exams.

This year the board experimented with a new practice for dealing with rubric violations, whereby marking pairs make referrals to the board of examiners when they spot one. The idea of rubric violation encompasses some very common mistakes, some versions of outright cheating, and many things in between. As the board found, the difference between a flagrant attempt to gain an unfair advantage by violating the rubric, and an honest mistake that is in any case self-penalising, cannot easily be made visible to the board of examiners. If it is visible at all, it will be so to the two, often three, markers who read and mark the scripts as a matter of course. As I pointed out above, Oxford has very robust, and indeed extravagantly expensive, marking procedures in place. What I took away from the board's discussion is that, while creating broad classifications at exam board level for the different genres of rubric violation may create the impression of consistency, it always seems fairer to look at each case in context and in detail. The marking pairs (and often trios) have already done this detailed work. These markers are therefore well placed to agree a mark that takes into account the rubric violation and I suggest that you could trust them to do so. (Obviously I am not referring to the established practice of subtracting marks for over length essays - that seems to be well understood and consistently applied).

I'll also say a word on the MCE process. There were fewer invigilation problems compared with last year which is great to see (though still a handful that could be ironed out). There were quite a few Chromebook failures again. Such failures are inevitable when so many exams are being run in this way — so I think the faculty should focus on the question of how students are prepared for the very real possibility of technical failure, what agreed mitigations are in place, and how invigilators are trained and prepared to apply these consistently. Normally, extra time was added on to the end of exams to compensate for time lost during a Chromebook failure - I would suggest that this is an appropriate mitigation. But even so students applied for MCEs because of the disruption, especially when other students noisily left the examination room. Again, this is an expected feature of your process which would ideally be clear in advance to students so that they are not alarmed and outraged when it happens to them, and so it does not impact on their performance. The MCE panel discussed whether some

additional time should be provided on the spot to allow for the period of noisy disruption as other candidates leave the room. 5 minutes on top of the time added to account for the duration of the system failure was mooted.

In some very acute cases where students have significant MCEs (illnesses, injuries, bereavements, legal issues, etc.), they were left with very difficult choices about whether to soldier on and take the exams, hoping for some clemency at the exam board, or wait a whole year to retake. Many, perhaps most, other universities offer summer resits. While I accept of course this would be difficult (though obviously not impossible) to change, a handful of Oxford students, who, for reasons beyond their control, face acute disruption during those two weeks in May, are not being well served by the absence of any summer resits.

4. 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 I commented last year, this is an extremely robust examination system (heaps of good practice here) that is deliberately not innovative. While constant innovation should not be valued for its own sake, I do think Oxford is missing opportunities to make the assessment and teaching more attuned to the ways in which the discipline, and the world around it, is changing.

5. 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.

It has been a pleasure to act as external examiner this year, as previously - it is a rich degree programme with highly committed staff and a very strong cohort of students.