



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

**FACULTY OF ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE**

# **EXAMINERS' REPORTS 2024**

**Preliminary Examination  
in English Language and Literature**

**Final Honour School  
of English Language and Literature**

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## Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature 2024

### Part I

#### A. STATISTICS

This year there were 204 candidates for the Preliminary Examination in English Language and Literature.

Joint Schools Candidates took English papers in the following numbers:

- Paper 1: EML 33; HENG 15; CLENG 14
- Paper 2: EML 5; HENG 0
- Paper 3: EML 10; HENG 8
- Paper 4: EML 18; HENG 7

#### Numbers and percentages in each category for English Language and Literature

| Category           | Number  |         |         | Percentage (%) |           |           |
|--------------------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|-----------|-----------|
|                    | 2023-24 | 2022-23 | 2021-22 | 2023-24        | 2022-23   | 2021-22   |
| <b>Distinction</b> | 47      | ( 51 )  | ( 57 )  | 23%            | ( 24.2% ) | ( 24.2% ) |
| <b>Pass</b>        | 149     | ( 159 ) | ( 178 ) | 73%            | ( 75.7% ) | ( 75.4% ) |
| <b>Fail</b>        | 1       | ( 0 )   | ( 1 )   | 0.05%          | ( 0.0% )  | ( 0.04% ) |

#### 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 consistent marking.

This year, Papers 3 and 4 were disrupted by protests in the Exam Schools. On the instructions of the Proctors, the Chair wrote to all students taking these papers to advise that a cohort-wide Consideration of Mitigating Circumstances by Examiners (MCE) would be applied for on their behalf and that any student considering themselves to be ‘unduly impacted beyond the rest of the cohort’ should apply to the Proctors for an additional, individual MCE (Annex E, Examinations & Assessment Framework [EAF]). 20 students applied for an individual MCE on this basis, of which the Mitigating Circumstances Sub-Committee considered that 8 had been unduly affected beyond the rest of the cohort. The rest were considered under the cohort-wide MCE.

Considering the remedies available under Annex E of the EAF (disregarding an entire paper, disregarding one or more elements of a paper, adjusting the cohort’s mark profile by scaling up), the Board compared the overall averages of the affected papers with those of the other two papers.

These were as follows:

Paper 1: 63.9  
Paper 2: 63.51  
Paper 3: 64.58  
Paper 4: 64.66

The affected papers, Papers 3 & 4, did not appear to have been significantly impacted by the disruption on this basis; indeed, the averages were higher than for Papers 1 & 2.

We also looked at the percentages of Distinctions for Papers 3 & 4 over the last 8 years:

**Paper 3**

| <b>2023-24</b> | <b>2022-23</b> | <b>2021-22</b> | <b>2020-21</b> | <b>2018-19</b> | <b>2017-18</b> | <b>2016-17</b> |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 25.9%          | 23.2%          | 20.8%          | 26.3%          | 24.2%          | 16.1%          | 22.9%          |

**Paper 4**

| <b>2023-24</b> | <b>2022-23</b> | <b>2021-22</b> | <b>2020-21</b> | <b>2018-19</b> | <b>2017-18</b> | <b>2016-17</b> |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 22.4%          | 22.7%          | 28.8%          | 21.5%          | 22.0%          | 20.1%          | 23.8%          |

The papers did not appear to have been significantly impacted by the disruption on this basis, either.

We therefore decided that none of the remedies available to us under Annex E of the EAF were appropriate. But, wanting to acknowledge the impact of the disruption, we decided to pay particularly close attention to borderline marks in Papers 3 & 4. We therefore reread every 69 and 39 received for those papers. (Some of these would have been reread anyway under our policy for borderlines.) 9 scripts were reread and 6 marks were raised.

As a Board, we felt restricted by the options available to us under Annex E. The examples given for which scaling up would be appropriate for examination disruption are ‘pigeons, bells, building work, failure of a University IT system, or errors in papers’. More specific advice from the Proctors in these exceptional circumstances would have been helpful.

In addition to the protests, there were other glitches, including instances where students did not have disability-related adjustments in place because of a failure in the automated system which is meant to notify the College when Disability Advisory Service uploads a Student Support Plan.

After all rereadings, the total number of Distinctions increased from 40 to 47 or, in terms of percentage of the cohort, from 19.7% to 23%.

## **B. NEW EXAMINING METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This year was the first year in which Papers 2, 3 and 4 were taken as in-person, invigilated, 3-hour, typed (as opposed to handwritten) exams, submitted via Inspera. Examiners were in agreement that the examination methods and procedures were robust and effective.

**C. Please describe how candidates are made aware of the examination conventions to be followed by the examiners. (Please attach to the report a copy of the examination conventions and any other relevant documentation, including the relevant standing orders – see *Examination Regulations, Regulations for the Conduct of University Examinations, Part 4, cl. 4-1-4.2.*)**

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**

Despite the disruption to Papers 3 & 4, the results are commensurate with those of the previous 8 years.

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

| <b>Scripts awarded marks of 70+ for each paper:</b>             |             |             |             |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Paper</b>  | <b>2024</b> | <b>2023</b> | <b>2022</b> |
| 1. Introduction to English Language and Literature:<br>Combined | 20.4%       | 21.8%       | 21.2%       |
| Section A Language  | 24.4%       | 27.0%       | 27.1%       |
| Section B Literature  | 24.4%       | 30.3%       | 24.6%       |
| 2. Literature in English 650-1350                               | 21.9%       | 24.2%       | 25.0%       |
| 3. Literature in English 1830-1910                              | 25.9%       | 23.2%       | 20.8%       |
| 4. Literature in English 1910-Present                           | 22.4%       | 22.7%       | 28.8%       |

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

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

##### **Section A: Approaches to Language**

Work for this paper covered a wide variety of topics, responding to the range of questions available. Many of the scripts produced excellent commentaries for Section A, employing a clear methodological framework to analyse well-chosen passages. The best commentaries were notable for their precise and systematic linguistic analysis, often employing to good effect a range of appropriate tools and techniques and engaging directly with the set quotation.

Less successful commentaries often resulted from poorly chosen passages (ones that did not provide plentiful evidence for linguistic comparison and contrast). As is often the case, candidates sometimes veered towards literary criticism rather than incisive linguistic analysis. Equally, candidates sometimes took passages of creative writing and subjected them to

commentary as though they were examples of colloquial spoken language. Literary language is, of course, a valid area of study for this paper, but attention to the domain of language use is an important foundation for analysis.

Relevance was frequently an issue, as some commentaries struggled to engage directly with the implications of the question. While many commentaries included extensive citation from a range of scholarship, this did not always directly inform and support the primary analysis. Some commentaries also spent unnecessary time quoting and paraphrasing parts of the commentary passages where references to the supplied line numbers would have enabled a more precise and focused discussion.

A notable issue this year was that a small number of scripts produced work that, in both scope and subject matter, looked more appropriate for the FHS Course II History of the Language paper 4 than for Prelims paper 1a, apparently drawing upon teaching materials provided for that FHS paper. Candidates are reminded that these are different papers with different requirements and expectations. Only work that responds directly to the requirements of the assessment is likely to be successful.

## **Section B: Approaches to Literature**

Candidates attempted all the questions on this paper. Questions 9, on transhistoricism; 1, on the self-sufficiency of a literary work; and 10, on ‘fictional beings’, were particularly popular. The standard was pleasingly high. Candidates took a variety of approaches: solely discussing theorists; illuminating literary theories with examples from primary texts; using theories to explore primary texts; focusing on primary texts. The examiners welcomed all approaches and found excellent work in each. The best work applied theories rather than simply quoting them as truth. Less successful work failed to engage with the prompt, showed signs of being pre-packaged, rehearsed well-worn arguments without challenge and offered platitudes about the ‘universality’ of literary works.

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

All candidates attempted one of the two Old English passages for the commentary exercise; none attempted either of the Middle English passages. A commendably wide range of texts, in both Old and Middle English, covering both prose and verse, was discussed.

The strongest commentaries evinced an impressively accurate understanding of their chosen passage, seamlessly synthesising comments on content and style while maintaining a tight focus on the set passage. There were insightful comments on metre/stress/alliteration (with accurate reference to Sievers types and various rules of alliteration), on various rhetorical figures, on syntax and grammar, lexis, theme, etc. At the other end of the scale, the weakest commentaries seemed to have only minimal familiarity with the passage, or Old English more broadly. Words, phrases, and – at times – entire sections were misunderstood. Some candidates also seemed to have a shaky grasp of critical terminology, variously misspelling it, misunderstanding it, or using it in very vague terms. There were also instances where candidates offered general comments about the text from which the passage was drawn, which were only vaguely relevant to the task at hand. Some candidates appeared not to have grasped the genre of commentary writing, and produced general discussions that were at some distance from the passage.

In their essays, the strongest candidates showed accurate knowledge of a wide range of texts, and were able to use this knowledge – in dialogue with critical materials – directly to answer their chosen prompt and were able to craft a response that was of an appropriate scope for an examination essay. The stronger essays tended to frame their argument in relation to critical materials at the outset and, moreover, explicitly articulated their argument. There was also impressive work that dealt with both pre- and post-conquest material. The strongest of this work had a clear rationale for bringing such materials together (e.g. charting diachronic change). Weaker essays showed some or all of the following: irrelevance to the question/prompt (surprisingly often the case with Q. 3, on genre, and Q. 7, on style); (significant) errors in quotations in Old and Middle English, occasionally not bearing any relation to the ostensible meaning; quoting Old English and Middle English texts in translation rather than the original; not making any reference to critical materials (or not making any real use of the materials cited); obfuscatory and incorrect prose; treating all texts, pre- and post-conquest, as if they come from a unified and homogenous 'medieval' period. There were also frequent issues with awkward integration of quotations in the original languages into the candidates' own prose in terms of grammar and syntax.

There were some signs of hasty writing; several scripts would have benefited from a few minutes devoted to revision so that typographical or grammatical errors could have been corrected. As in past years, there were some penalties for rubric violations (not showing substantial knowledge of Old/ Middle English in both parts of the paper or of at least three texts across the two essays).

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

Every question was attempted, but some (e.g. 3, 4, 8, 11, 14, 21, 22) proved significantly more popular than others. This tended to be because the question allowed wider scope for interpretation rather than because certain topics were especially favoured. A broad range of material was tackled from across the period and around the English-speaking world, with drama and American literature now featuring as prominently as Tennyson, Eliot, Dickens, and the Brontës. There was also a notable number of responses on non-fiction prose (e.g. Emerson, Ruskin, Arnold, Wilde). Less canonical figures who attracted thoughtful work included Hearn, Webster, Sorabji, Barrie, Dunbar, Egerton, and Boucicault. Candidates should not assume, however, that the surest route to a high mark is to write on less well-studied authors and texts: some of the very best writing this year was on major literary landmarks (e.g. *Middlemarch*, 'In Memoriam', *Portrait of a Lady*) – often in conjunction with other texts by the same author. The best essays tended to think comparatively, teasing out points of difference and affinity between their chosen texts, and using these to sharpen their claims and build a nuanced argument. Some strikingly original and well-argued comparisons were drawn (between, for example, Dickens and Whitman, Melville and Ruskin, C. Brontë and Stevenson), but there were also many poorly thought-out combinations, and a disappointingly large number of candidates who used exactly the same essay structure (a comparison of two canonical texts) in all three answers without providing any evidence that they had read more widely in the period. In offering texts for comparison, candidates should explain clearly what makes them worth studying *together*, situating them with respect to each other on a wider literary or historical map. Broad thematic comparisons, or the fact that a couple of remembered quotations from each text can be vaguely connected to the topic at hand, are unlikely to produce successful answers. This tendency was especially pronounced when candidates chose to compare texts that were widely separated in time (e.g. those written several decades apart) and/or space (e.g.

those written by British and American authors) without paying any attention to their broader cultural contexts and the differences as well as the similarities between them.

Many essays also failed to consider the relevance of significant differences in form and genre, or were reliant on an evidence base that was simply too thin to sustain a sufficiently specific or persuasive argument (e.g. the comparison of a single short story with a couple of poems by a different author). A recurrent problem with answers on poetry was a tendency to examine individual lines or phrases entirely divorced from their context in the larger poems to which they belonged. With novels and plays, plot recounting was frequently offered in place of argument. While sweeping generalisations about ‘the Victorians’ were pleasingly rare, complex terms such as ‘realism’, ‘sympathy’, or ‘the Gothic’ often received little scrutiny. More generally, candidates should be encouraged to pay closer attention to literary technique – writing on slave narratives in particular would have benefited from greater sensitivity to questions of genre, structure, rhetoric, and tone. A remarkable number of candidates had serious difficulties with grammar, punctuation, and spelling (including authors’ and characters’ names). Chaotic syntax impaired many candidates’ ability to express themselves clearly and coherently.

Successful scripts took consistent care to address the particular questions posed, rather than proffering prepared answers on broad themes. For example, question 19 was specifically about the relation between faith *and* understanding, while question 22 asked candidates to discuss *the particular quotation from Jacobs* in relation to enslavement and/or life-writing. Candidates should be reminded that the prompt quotation is not ornamental: it is an essential part of the question being asked. The strongest essays began with a clear interpretation of the quotation, relating it to their own knowledge of the period and using it to give nuance and direction to their argument; weaker essays either ignored the quotation altogether or used it as a springboard to write about something else entirely. Longer answers were not always better answers, but more fulsome responses tended to develop more ambitious and complex arguments, backed up by a wider range of reference. Work at the top end of the range was extraordinarily impressive: elegant, commanding, and precise, powered by perceptive close reading and richly informed by relevant contexts and critical perspectives.

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

All questions were answered; the most popular question was question 6 (on identity, with a quotation from Franz Kafka about being unsure about one’s place in the world), followed by questions 9 (on nothingness) and 2 (on national/cultural identity). The most popular author written about was Virginia Woolf, followed by Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Other authors written about by several candidates included James Baldwin, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Marianne Moore, Langston Hughes, Philip Larkin, Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Bishop, Zora Neale Hurston, Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, J. M. Coetzee, Philip Roth, Ralph Ellison, Muriel Spark, E.M. Forster, Ted Hughes, Angela Carter, Zadie Smith, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood, William Faulkner, Katherine Mansfield, Robert Lowell, D. H. Lawrence, Hope Mirrlees and Sam Selvon. There was a good historical range reflected: essays addressed work from the very beginning of the period to the absolutely contemporary, which is encouraging, and suggests a lively range of interests within the candidate body. There was a good level of knowledge of these texts on the whole, and evidence of deep reading and intelligent engagement with literature.

There was a wide range of approach to these questions evidenced, from historically-grounded contextual reading to innovative textual analysis. Good work could be found in all categories.



The best writing on this paper engaged at greater depth with the questions and quotation, grappling with their terms, tone, and language. The strongest essays interrogated these quotations, weaving deftly in and out of their engagement with these passages and an effective analysis of their chosen texts. Weaker answers dealt with the questions in a cursory or glancing fashion, failing to properly explore their implications for the themes and texts addressed in the essays. There was a tendency in some essays to be imprecise in the way they addressed the question, substituting their own, related but not analogous, terms for the terms in the quotation. For example, it was noted that, in question 4 (on dream and reality, with a quotation from D. H. Lawrence), some essays substituted other concepts, such as fantasy or imagination, for 'dream'. This could produce essays that were solid, but lacking in the type of precise analysis required.

Strong essays were aware of form, style and genre, and engaged with the difference this makes to the way texts might be disseminated, understood, and received. For example, some stronger essays on dramatic works showed detailed knowledge of particular productions and were able to explore how the staging of a text dynamically affected reception. Similarly, amongst the essays focused on fiction, stronger pieces were attentive to narrative voice (first or third-person narrator), point of view, setting and sense of place, etc. Likewise, strong work on poetry noticed the metre, imagery, and rhythm of particular poems whilst placing them in their proper context. It was noted that there were fewer essays on poetry alone this year, whilst many compared poetry with fiction (pairing Eliot and Woolf, for example). As in previous years, there was a tendency in some essays to remain focused on a narrow range of texts (for example, many essays on Eliot still stayed centred on *The Waste Land* and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'). Whilst the best essays focused on a small number of poems for analysis, there was a sense that those texts had been chosen from a wider body of work. Answers on only one text (unless on a very expansive work, such as Joyce's *Ulysses*) limited candidates' ability to mount a strong and developed argument. Weaker essays on fiction often tended to stick to a character-based analysis, rather than an account of the formal properties of a novel.

The strongest essays were aware of where particular texts fitted into an author's wider oeuvre and career, and demonstrated an understanding of the chronology of an author's development. Some of the strongest essays also demonstrated an understanding of how critical reception of an author may have shifted over time. There was some really impressive work in this category, which often explored how political, ethical, and aesthetic questions could be addressed by thinking about the trajectory of an author's career or critical reception. Weaker answers showed little or no understanding of the context out of which texts emerged, and often dealt with secondary criticism in a superficial way. Work that properly engaged with criticism by grappling with it, exploring its ramifications, and arguing with it (rather than just disagreeing with it) was more successful. Some essays relied on historic criticism (Martin Esslin on Beckett, for example) and a sense of evolving critical debate was lacking.

The theoretical knowledge gained in Paper 1B can provide a very useful frame for the textual analysis candidates can perform for this paper. When theoretical framing was used well, it often resulted in very successful essays that could lean into the texts in sophisticated and intelligent ways. Some weaker essays sometimes gave the impression that choice of texts had been conducted at random. It was often interesting – and exciting – to see texts from two different periods compared (say a novel from the 1920s and one from the 2000s), but the rationale for these choices needs to be properly evidenced in the essay. Again, successful essays were able to do this by way of examining form, genre, allusion and intertextuality. There were some spelling mistakes/typos in scripts (the introduction of typed exams means it can be harder to

tell the difference), but this was not a marked problem in this paper. Weaker essays also (as in previous years) tended to make sweeping and generalising statements about terms like 'modernism', 'existentialism' and 'absurdism'. These kinds of statements should be discouraged; a narrower and more precise focus on the philosophical and aesthetic contexts of literature is welcome.

There was a breadth of impressive work on this paper, a range of strong essays showing detailed knowledge of the texts, intelligent and articulate argument, and original, lively and elegant writing.

#### **D. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

Professor Kate McLoughlin (Chair)  
Professor Kantik Ghosh (Deputy)  
Dr David Barnes  
Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst  
Dr Fergus McGhee  
Dr Daniel Thomas

# FINAL HONOUR SCHOOL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 2024

## CHAIR'S REPORT

### Part I

#### A. STATISTICS

240 candidates completed their degree, of whom 31 took Course II.

| Class | Number  |         |         |         |         | Percentage (%) |         |         |         |         |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|       | 2023/24 | 2022/23 | 2021/22 | 2020/21 | 2019/20 | 2023/24        | 2022/23 | 2021/22 | 2020/21 | 2019/20 |
| I     | 67      | 72      | 79      | 94      | 93      | 27.92%         | 29.88%  | 37.26%  | 42.2%   | 41.7%   |
| II.I  | 160     | 162     | 128     | 128     | 127     | 66.67%         | 67.22%  | 60.38%  | 57.4%   | 57.0%   |
| II.II | 11      | 3       | 2       | 1       | 2       | 4.58%          | 1.24%   | 0.94%   | 0.4%    | 0.9%    |
| III   | 1       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0.42%          | 0%      | 0%      | 0%      | 0%      |
| Pass  | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 1       | 0%             | 0%      | 0%      | 0%      | 0.4%    |
| DDH   | 0       | 1       | 0       | 0       | 0       | 0%             | 0.41%   | 0%      | 0%      | 0%      |
| Fail  | 1       | 3       | 3       | 0       | 0       | 0.42%          | 1.24%   | 1.42%   | 0%      | 0%      |

Of the Firsts, two were 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

This year marked the return of 3-hour, closed-book, invigilated exams, but it was the first year in which exam answers were typed on university-supplied laptops. In contrast to the OBOW ('open-book, open-web') exams of 2020-2023, and consistent with the practice of handwritten, 3-hour exams in pre-pandemic years, no word limits were set. Candidates were reminded that irrelevance would be penalized, as would failure to complete the required number of answers for a paper or failure to comply with the rubric.

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

The return to invigilated, closed-book exams for the period papers has brought with it greater confidence that the work submitted is the student's own: there were far fewer cases of suspected plagiarism requiring referral to the Proctors this year compared to last. Students and assessors alike also seem to have adjusted, on the whole, to computer-based exams with little difficulty.

There were, however, problems related to exam provision, conditions, and invigilation, as noted by the External Examiners in their reports. These problems do not seem to have been confined to English, and similar problems have been reported by colleagues in other faculties. Shortly after the exam period ended, I asked the senior English tutors at all colleges to inform me of any such issues. I received six responses, which, together with information provided in

subsequent MCEs, indicate areas requiring greater attention in the future: students with special needs arriving to an exam to find that agreed-upon arrangements had not been made, technical glitches (often compounded by invigilators unprepared to deal with them), other problems related to invigilation (distracting microphone announcements directed at different sets of students), etc. Problems were reported by students sitting both Exam School- and College-based exams. The Chair's summary of these incidents has been forwarded by the English Faculty to the Division. It should be noted that the vast majority of our 240 students experienced minimal or no disruption. Still, to quote one of our External Examiners, 'it is essential that these problems are addressed as a matter of urgency'.

Another concern flagged by an External Examiner, both this year and last, should also be mentioned here: the backlog in the University's Disability Advisory Service, which has resulted in delays in getting appropriate adjustments in place in time for exams. This should continue to be raised by the Faculty in Divisional and University discussions.

#### **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 Inspira.

### **Part II**

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

The standard of performance was, as ever, high. 27.9% of students achieved a First (down slightly from last year [29.9%], but down more considerably from the highs of 2020-22 [ranging from 37.3% to 42.2%]). In Exam Board deliberations, both internal and external examiners were impressed by the remarkable quality of the very best work.

The most significant departure from recent years, in terms of results, is the increase in the number of II:ii classifications (from 1-3 in recent years to 11 this year). There are a number of possible explanations for the shift; that this cohort was one of those most affected, at A-levels, by the pandemic is surely one of them (as noted in one of the External Examiners' reports, this pattern is not confined to Oxford). The Faculty should continue to monitor this to see if it constitutes more than the sort of variance one might expect in year-on-year performance.

While the general standard of performance was high, marks were down from previous years, in both timed assessments and coursework submissions. Coursework submissions showed the more pronounced dip, as reflected in the percentage of 70+ marks (though only information for 2024 is shown in 'C.' below): 27.98% for the Shakespeare Portfolio (28.11% in 2023 and 29.74% in 2022); 36.56% for Paper 6 (39.13% in 2023 and 40.2% in 2022); 37.24% for the Dissertation (41.53% in 2023 and 37.5% in 2022).

For Course I students, the percentage of 70+ marks has varied as follows: for timed assessments, 25.7% (2024), 27.7% (2023), 25.9% (2022); for coursework submissions, 33.9% (2024), 36.9% (2023), 37.25% (2022).

I would like to express my gratitude to Faculty administrative staff for the exemplary support they provided throughout the examining process, and to my fellow Examiners, both internal and external, for their dedicated engagement and sound judgment.

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

In Course I, all the papers are compulsory, though Paper 6 includes 20 options, which were taken up by up to 15 students each, and Paper 7 is the dissertation.

In Course II, taken by 31 students, Papers 1-4, 6 and 7 are compulsory, with Papers 6 & 7 being the same as in 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 20 students this year) and 'Shakespeare' (taken by 11 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.

| <b>Paper 1 Shakespeare (Course II Paper 5)</b> |                   |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                   | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+  | 61                | 27.98%   |
| 60–69  | 135               | 61.93%   |
| 50–59  | 17                | 7.80%    |
| 40–49  | 5                 | 2.29%    |
| <40  | 0                 | 0%       |
| <b>Overall</b>                                 | <b>218</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 2 1350–1550 (Course II Paper 3)</b> |                   |          |
|--|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                 | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+  | 47                | 19.83%   |
| 60–69  | 131               | 55.27%   |
| 50–59  | 55                | 23.21%   |
| 40–49  | 2                 | 0.84%    |
| <40  | 2                 | 0.84%    |
| <b>Overall</b>                               | <b>237</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 3 1550–1660</b> |                   |          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>             | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                      | 69                | 33.17%   |
| 60–69                    | 125               | 60.10%   |
| 50–59                    | 11                | 5.29%    |
| 40–49                    | 1                 | 0.48%    |
| <40                      | 2                 | 0.96%    |
| <b>Overall</b>           | <b>208</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 4 1660–1760</b> |                   |          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>             | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                      | 43                | 20.87%   |
| 60–69                    | 129               | 62.62%   |
| 50–59                    | 31                | 15.05%   |
| 40–49                    | 1                 | 0.49%    |
| <40                      | 2                 | 0.97%    |
| <b>Overall</b>           | <b>206</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 5 1760–1830</b> |                   |          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>             | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                      | 36                | 17.39%   |
| 60–69                    | 148               | 71.50%   |
| 50–59                    | 21                | 10.14%   |
| 40–49                    | 0                 | 0%       |
| <40                      | 2                 | 0.97%    |
| <b>Overall</b>           | <b>207</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 6 Special Options (Submission)</b> |                   |          |
|---|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                                | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+   | 83                | 36.56%   |
| 60–69                                       | 125               | 55.07%   |
| 50–59                                       | 19                | 8.37%    |
| 40–49                                       | 0                 | 0%       |
| <40   | 0                 | 0%       |
| <b>Overall</b>                              | <b>227</b>        |          |

| <b>Paper 7 Dissertation</b> |                   |          |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Marks</b>                | <b>Candidates</b> | <b>%</b> |
| 70+                         | 89                | 37.24%   |
| 60–69                       | 130               | 54.39%   |
| 50–59                       | 16                | 6.69%    |
| 40–49                       | 4                 | 1.67%    |
| <40                         | 0                 | 0.00%    |
| <b>Overall</b>              | <b>239</b>        |          |

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

See ‘FHS 2024 Examiners’ Reports’ (attached).

### **D. MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES NOTICES TO EXAMINERS**

69 candidates submitted a total of 77 MCEs (69 candidates submitted 74 MCEs in 2022-23, which marked an increase from 48 candidates submitting 62 MCEs in 2021-22). In accordance with Examinations and Assessment Framework guidelines, all were carefully scrutinised by a Board Subcommittee (consisting of the Chair, the three External Examiners, and two Internal Examiners), which assigned an impact score for Board use in consideration of any mitigation. Based on these assessments, twelve MCEs had a material impact on results and/or classification by Board action. In accordance with EAF guidelines, no individual marks were changed, the Board using instead its power to classify without a mark or marks, to reverse pending penalties not related to missing or late submissions, or to raise a classification. The Chair wrote to these candidates individually to explain the decisions taken.

### **E. PLAGIARISM AND POOR ACADEMIC PRACTICE**

Following routine scrutiny of Turnitin reports by the Exam Board Secretary Tara Hathaway, Board investigation of suspected cases, and further investigation and documentation by the Chair, fewer than five candidates have been referred to the Proctors for evidence of plagiarism. At the time of writing, the Board was still awaiting an outcome from the Proctors.

Eleven candidates were penalised by the Board for Poor Academic Practice. The Chair wrote to the candidates’ Senior Tutors to explain the Board’s penalties.

Candidates, their tutors, and future examiners should be aware that any piece of coursework run through Turnitin becomes, by default, part of the Turnitin database against which future submissions are checked for matches. This creates the possibility that reuse of *formative* work that has been scanned by a tutor or by a student can produce ‘hits’ when *assessed* work which uses it is scanned later.

Candidates and their tutors should be aware that current University policy expressly prohibits the use of Turnitin by students.

## **F. NAMES OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EXAMINERS**

### **Chair:**

Professor Timothy Michael

### **Internal Examiners:**

- Professor David Dwan (Deputy Chair)
- Dr Bysshe Coffey
- Professor Nandini Das
- Dr Bethany Dubow
- Professor Jane Griffiths
- Dr Adam Guy
- Professor Margaret Kean
- Dr Amy Lidster
- Professor Michèle Mendelssohn
- Professor Malachi McIntosh
- Professor Simon Palfrey
- Professor Nicholas Perkins
- Professor Seamus Perry
- Professor Annie Sutherland

### **External Examiners:**

- Dr Nicola McDonald (University of York)
- Dr Matthew Taunton (University of East Anglia)
- Professor Alison Shell (University College London)

# FHS 2024 Examiners' Reports

## Shakespeare Portfolio

259 students took this paper, of whom 218 were Single Honours candidates and 41 were from Joint Schools. Essays covered the entire range of Shakespeare's output. Themes and subject-matter were various, including rhetoric and sententia, prayer books and scripture, clowns, props, fools, fatness, reporters, rumour, contagion, pauses, homosocial endings, memory, maps, eunuchs, ekphrasis (and much more), as well as the usual interest in bodies, gender, violence, sex and sexuality, queerness, ecology, and modes of power. There was widespread attention to textual variants, staging practices and dramaturgy, the vagaries of editing, the material book, and adaptations in numerous media from the seventeenth century to the present.

The range on show is impressive, but it remains a bit of a worry that essays are so topic-centred, in a way that sometimes neglects the distinctive qualities of Shakespeare's writing. Quite often it felt as though students were preoccupied with designing a plausible portfolio, with three suitably diverse approaches, rather than committing to really thinking about what these plays and poems are doing, how and with what effect. It was always refreshing to find portfolios that took on the plays with critical gusto and imagination. As ever, the very best essays did do this, almost always also informed by powerful engagement with other critical or theoretical thinking and with pertinent scholarship. Taking on the plays, of course, does not preclude productive engagement with other primary materials and contexts. The best essays were always nuanced and sophisticated and written with elegance, never forcing neat conclusions. They often showed genuinely subtle, discriminating interpretive skill, or were trenchant and passionate (as well as precise) in bringing their chosen works to life. Scripts that achieved very high marks often revealed clear independence of thought.

There were very few poor portfolios, and scholarly presentation and referencing was usually (though not uniformly) impressive. Several scripts displayed Poor Academic Practice because of insufficient, incorrect, or incomplete referencing. Those that achieved only average or below marks tended to be predictable and iterative, lacking incisive attention to texts, rehearsing contexts in too generalising a fashion. Sometimes the critical stakes might be lacking: some essays did not clearly define their key terms, segueing into inevitably vague arguments. Others seemed to cherry-pick useful quotations or examples linked to a specific topic without reflecting on the larger context. Some of the weakest portfolios were poorly researched, making speculative assumptions about early modern culture which were so broad as to be incorrect. There were plenty of good essays that looked at Shakespeare being adapted in different cultures and artforms, but the better ones would always also reveal things about the Shakespeare works at issue. Some essays in this mode, for instance on Shakespeare in America or performance history in various milieu, were very lively and engaging but tended too much to reportage to achieve the highest marks. The critical element remains paramount.

While it's impressive that candidates are excited by recent criticism and current critical hot issues, it might also help if candidates looked at earlier approaches to Shakespeare. Using older criticism would not mean simply returning to its conclusions or ignoring its contexts;



rather, it could be valuable to use that work as a jumping off point to look at the plays or poems in new ways. That said, weaker scripts often had little sense of current critical interests at all and thus came out with rather dated conclusions.

A few scripts demonstrated insufficient coverage in their selection of texts, and there were occasional 'commentaries' that amounted to little more than a semi-close reading of a single speech. Most portfolios covered, on average, five to seven texts in some detail, often including references to and/or short discussion of additional texts. Of course, there are many ways of showing both breadth and depth, and there were some genuinely outstanding essays on single plays.

## Paper 2: Literature in English from 1350 to 1550

245 candidates took this paper, of whom 8 were Joint Schools. Both commentary passages and all essay questions were attempted. Authors and texts frequently covered in the essay questions included the Gawain Poet, Julian of Norwich, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Chaucer's dream poetry and a variety of Canterbury Tales; Malory and Henryson also made regular appearances. Other texts covered included various medieval romances (especially *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*), religious lyrics, the York Plays, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, *Everyman* and *Mankind*, *Mandeville's Travels*, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was good to see essays exploring literature from the end of the period – Wyatt/Surrey and Skelton – and some ambitious work on *Piers Plowman*.

The scripts varied greatly in quality. While the best commentaries were characterized by close and thorough attention to the language and style of the passage, weaker commentaries discussed *Troilus and Criseyde* in the most general terms, citing extensive secondary criticism and including very limited analysis of the passage in question. One recurrent problem was a tendency to import ideas from elsewhere in the poem, leading to misinterpretations of the content and significance of the specific passage (this was particularly the case among candidates discussing Pandarus's manipulation of Criseyde in question 1a). Among those candidates who did prioritise the passage in question, the weaker performances were characterised by a tendency to analyse individual words or short phrases without paying any attention to their context; this practice led to significant misreadings. Understanding of basic grammar and syntax was also often very poor, and many commentaries were simply too short to allow sufficient focus on the details of the passage.

The strongest essays demonstrated an exceptionally impressive depth and range of knowledge of the literature of this period. They engaged attentively with both the letter and the spirit of the title quotation, mobilising its ideas and terms to propel and shape their own argument. Discursively sophisticated and marked by an appropriate level of engagement with secondary literature, these essays were often executed with great subtlety and nuance. Furthermore, they were attentive to issues of form and style and, crucially, were aware of the context of the passages that they were quoting and discussing. As is always the case, weaker essays did not engage sufficiently with the title quotation or prompt. And while several of these candidates began their essays by appearing to consider the title quotation, they tended to discard it as the essay proceeded. There were also answers that appeared to ignore both quotation and prompt entirely, or that cherry-picked a term from the quotation and neglected its context. This cherry-picking was often particularly problematic; these candidates attempted to force individual words and phrases to mean something which they clearly did not, leading to answers which appeared to disintegrate as they progressed. Less effective answers also tended to choose a moment in a text to analyse while demonstrating little sense of how this moment spoke to the rest of the text or why it mattered. In these essays, too, use of recent – and, indeed, relevant – secondary material was frequently patchy, and a number of answers demonstrated little awareness of the critical field.

In terms of range, some essays showed knowledge of only one or two texts. This is not, in itself, a problem. Indeed, some of the strongest performances in this paper involved close, perceptive and incisive readings of individual texts, or of a small selection of texts. However, essays which focussed on, for example, a single short poem, while displaying limited

evidence of close engagement with the Middle English, and little awareness of the literary culture in which the poem was written and circulated, were regarded as problematic. At the other end of the spectrum, while some of the essays which explored a broader range of texts were outstanding, many were unsuccessful. In sacrificing depth for breadth, they exhibited insufficient command of the material in question. Strong essays which considered a range of material were all intellectually agile, marked by an astute awareness of the ways in which their primary materials relate – or not – to each other.

### Paper 3: Literature in English from 1550 to 1660

217 students took this paper, of whom 9 were Joint Schools. A wide range of authors was considered, with a notable proportion of responses on Thomas Dekker, John Donne, George Herbert, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Hester Pulter, and Edmund Spenser. Other well-represented authors included Francis Beaumont, Elizabeth Cary, Margaret Cavendish, John Ford, Thomas Heywood, Thomas Kyd, Aemilia Lanyer, John Lyly, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Nashe, Katherine Phillips, Mary Sidney, Philip Sidney, John Webster, Isabella Whitney, and Mary Wroth. Women writers were also discussed in relation to topics other than their gender, in a welcome development that illustrates the extent to which women's writing is now more fully integrated into the study of literature in the period. Examiners were impressed by the range of material discussed, and by the independent spirit with which many of the best scripts crafted unexpected, illuminating comparisons between well-known works and less traversed material – including unedited pamphlets, manuscript works, natural philosophical essays, rhetorical and poetic treatises, and Greek and Latin sources. Examiners admired the depth and subtlety of closes analyses offered, especially where this was performed in the service of advancing a conceptually sharp, relevant line of argumentation, supported by precise contextual knowledge.

Examiners navigated a wide variety of essay lengths. In some cases, length came at the cost of relevance and argumentative coherence, while essays that were very brief struggled to demonstrate candidates' range of reading and contextual knowledge.

As in previous years, outstanding responses were characterised by their clear relevance to the question as well as analytic depth and sophistication. These responses engaged incisively with the prompt quotation, teasing out nuance and points of generative tension in order to build a focussed, dynamic argument. Strong responses consistently re-read their own material in light of the prompt and question, nuancing the key terms they were given, which they made indispensable to the architecture of their essay. Examiners welcomed responses that took time to close-read the material they cited and which constructed sophisticated frameworks for their analyses by drawing on historical detail, sources, critical and theoretical materials, and knowledge of genre. Examiners also welcomed responses that paid precise attention to diction, syntax, and verse form (as in the case of discussions of the sonnet) and which were able to sharpen these readings argumentatively through consideration of the literary, social, and political significances of formal features. Examiners noted that some of the best responses on drama took advantage of skills honed by the Shakespeare portfolio by paying attention to theatre history and performance, and by thoughtfully engaging with textual variation.

Examiners observed that responses that ventured beyond a narrow range of familiar texts by individual authors were better able to show range, depth, and independence of thought. For example, many essays on Spenser were limited to *The Faerie Queene* (and in some cases largely to Book I of *The Faerie Queene*). On the whole, these responses compared less favourably to those that were also able to show knowledge of Spenser's shorter poetry, prose, and sources – or to bring his work into dialogue with sources from intersecting discourses (colonial, theological, rhetorical, poetic, natural philosophical, etc.). Relatedly, examiners were refreshed to read responses on Nashe that considered works other than *The Unfortunate Traveller* and responses on Jonson that considered works other than *The Masque of Blackness* and his most anthologised city comedies. As in previous years, examiners saw limited work

on early Milton. Examiners also saw little engagement with Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, Thomas Carew and John Suckling. A noticeable proportion of responses on the period's devotional writing were held back by an imprecise understanding of how writers engaged with religious politics and scripture; though, of the essays that ventured to grapple with these contexts, a number were outstanding. Of the essays that discussed travel writing – examiners saw consideration of Thomas Coryat, Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Harriot, Walter Raleigh, and John Smith – strong responses were marked by sensitive engagement with critical and theoretical materials, awareness of generic development, and a precise grasp of historical detail. Some genuinely enterprising essays about literary style were especially welcome, including some brilliant work on writers as diverse as Thomas Browne and Lancelot Andrewes.

Weak responses were marked by lack of engagement with the question, often addressing the question only cursorily or partially. In a few cases, examiners had difficulty identifying which question an essay was addressing. Weaker responses were also limited in range (two plays or a few short poems) or struggled to move beyond the rehearsal of critical orthodoxies. Many answers (on drama, in particular) would have benefited from a wider range of reference: though it might be reasonable to focus on only two or three plays, comparisons with other texts situate responses in a wider framework, enabling analysis of what is really distinctive about the main texts under discussion. Weaker responses also tended to engage with their primary texts partially, that is, by limiting analysis to a well-known episode or scene. These responses missed the opportunity to deepen their reading through consideration of the larger work and its more subtle, or structural, complexities.

## Paper 4: Literature in English from 1660 to 1760

214 students took this paper, of whom 8 were Joint Schools. All questions were attempted. Particularly popular themes were women's writing, satire, 'nature' poetry, and perception. There were some thoughtful answers to Q19 on personhood, sovereignty, and property. Very few candidates selected to respond to Q20 on areas of criticism and this reflected a widespread lack of interest or willingness to engage with critical and theoretical thinking in the essays which were primarily historicist in their approaches. That said, there were some candidates willing and able to make intelligent and compelling use of theoretical work across their scripts.

Milton, Cavendish, Swift and Pope continue to feature strongly, and Thomson was also a favoured author. Much of the work on Pope focused on *Rape of the Lock*; engagement with Swift was often based on a very narrow number of poems. There was an increase in the amount of work on Restoration drama, and this featured a welcome wide range of texts and good knowledge of performance. In contrast to some previous years, candidates were willing to discuss more of Rochester than his erotic verse and gave attention also to his satires and his plays. Authors who received relatively little attention include Bunyan, Addison, Finch, Fielding, and Collins; authors who received less attention than in past years include Marvell and Gray. There has been an increase in answers on women writers, especially Behn (also by far the most popular dramatist discussed), and on labouring-class writers, with a number of essays on Duck, Collier, and Leapor.

Essays were generally of a good length and mostly sought to show sharp critical engagement with both a quotation and its rubric. The examiners rewarded incisive and well-directed argument; very long essays were not necessarily better at achieving such clarity. The best essays demonstrated a candidate's ability to think spontaneously and independently in response to the question, and to select relevant material. The strongest essays were able to combine close analysis of textual details with a wider view of the literature and culture of the period. Some of the essays were very well-written, in clear, professional, and elegant prose. Less successful scripts offered clearly pre-prepared material that was only tenuously related to the question. A narrow range of reading was also a problem in some scripts where candidates appeared to have revised a very limited number of authors/texts and so were not able to demonstrate wider reading in the period and wide knowledge of its literature.

In the main, candidates appeared to have adjusted successfully to the format for this examination (3-hour invigilated typed paper).

## Paper 5: Literature in English from 1760 to 1830

235 students took this paper, of whom 28 were Joint Schools. It was good to see candidates writing on a wide variety of authors, though as usual there were a handful of recurrent favourites: Austen, Mary Shelley, Wordsworth, the Gothic novel, Clare, Coleridge, Keats. There were some less common appearances: Yearsley, Baillie, Landon, De Quincey, Blake, Burns, Owenson; some informed essays on the theatre of the period; and some more thematic pieces about the discourses of slavery (Cowper, More, Equiano, Wheatley), revolution (Burke and his opponents), feminism (Barbauld, Wollstonecraft, Smith), and sublimity (Burke, Wordsworth, a few outings for Kant).

It is straight-forward to point out what distinguished the strongest scripts: they showed a good knowledge of several relevant primary texts, they engaged purposefully from the beginning with the terms of the question, they were long enough to deal with the subject in a coherent and structured argument, and they made pertinent reference to secondary literature, critical or contextual. Some outstanding scripts showed a great attention to form, others to historical context. Candidates tended to write about two or three texts by different authors in a comparative spirit; but there were numerous single-author essays (among others, on Blake, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Mary Shelley, P.B. Shelley, Sterne, Clare) which were excellent and clearly gained from the greater focus.

The less good scripts, of which there were quite a few, showed the opposite of these virtues. Some barely engaged with the question they purported to answer beyond a cursory opening sentence or two. Some contained very little material, and so simply could not demonstrate an adequate knowledge of the subject: an essay about Austen is not likely to prosper if it is limited to a consideration of just one or two texts, in some cases very short pieces of juvenilia; an essay about Keats that takes on just two odes is, unless of neo-Empsonian brilliance, effectively capping its own mark. Similarly, an essay which is not much more than 600 or 800 words is going to find it hard to say anything very complex; on the other hand, some superhuman typing produced essays of up to a couple of thousand words, but evidently written at such a speed that it was difficult for the candidate to organise the material into an argument. It is naturally unimpressive to see the names of novels and characters and critics misspelt. Finally, writing in a comparative way about two or three authors can work very well, but the essay does need to convey why this selection of authors makes sense: sometimes that is obvious (writing about abolition, the Wordsworth-Coleridge circle, responses to Revolution, etc.), but in some cases the authors discussed seemed associated only by occupying the same space in the candidate's mind.

## Paper 6: Special Options

### *Detectives, Ghosts, Spies: Agents of the Victorian World*

This was the first year ‘Detectives, Ghosts, and Spies: Agents of the Victorian World’ was offered. Twelve candidates took this Paper 6 option, and the standard was high. Candidates took a range of approaches to the genres under discussion, though, unfortunately, there was no work submitted on spy fiction. There was equally compelling work on a single genre (detective fiction, ghost stories) and on intersections between the two. The strongest essays were reflexive about the genres covered, and made compelling points about their parameters, conventions, and the contexts from which they emerged. These essays were sensitive to how particular authors deployed one or more genres in unique ways; they were attentive to questions of style and form. They were impressive in developing a conceptual frame and managed to balance this work with nuanced textual analysis. Less convincing submissions took the nature of each genre as given, could be descriptive or evaluative, and could be over-reliant on clichés about, for example, the figure of the detective. That said, the vast majority of the essays demonstrated a good command of the material and an ability to develop a cohesive argument.

### *Dream Literatures, Dream Cultures*

There were fifteen candidates for this paper. The range of topics worked upon was very wide, reflecting the transhistorical coverage of the five seminars. Some candidates developed essays around psychoanalytic ideas; others looked at the influence of theological and patristic writings about dreaming. Several people wrote on Joyce, and quite a few on Milton. The best work showed a deep engagement with the epistemological and hermeneutic problems of dreams and dream-texts; what worked less well was the tendency of some candidates to take ‘dream’ very loosely, wanting to write about things which were interestingly outlandish, but not actually dreams, literary or otherwise.

### *Early Modern Criminality*

Thirteen candidates submitted essays for this option. Overall, the standard of the submitted essays was strong, showing plenty of engagement with the texts and themes of the course. Several candidates enjoyed exploring the intellectual possibilities of comparing non-canonical texts (such as pamphlets and broadside ballads), with canonical ones (such as plays and novels), and using modern theoretical frameworks to think about early modern texts. The examiners were pleased to see some fresh and inventive approaches, a willingness to challenge critical conventions, evidence of wide reading in primary and secondary material, and fluent, detailed arguments. Outstanding work often showed confident and adroit use of resources, rich and interesting choices of texts, attentive close readings, sophisticated arguments informed by a thorough engagement with secondary reading, attentiveness to readerships, and an emphasis on granularity over generalisation. Weaker elements in otherwise competent essays included a lack of attention to generic conventions when making comparisons, descriptive rather than analytical writing, underuse of relevant contexts (such as



contemporary legal frameworks and religious beliefs), and a narrow focus. Choosing too many texts for analysis led some candidates into generalisations, whereas too few could undermine the persuasiveness of an argument. The examiners encourage candidates to think about whether using sub-headings/divisions enhances the fluency of their arguments. It is very important that candidates are scrupulously attentive to the presentation of their essays, as it is disappointing to see otherwise competent work undermined by poor punctuation, inaccurate spelling, erratic referencing, and carelessly formatted bibliographies.

### *Elements of Criticism: Earth, Air, Fire and Water*

There were fourteen candidates for this paper. Especially rewarding was to see so much original work which took significant insights and ideas in contemporary ecocritical thinking to open up new ways of reading materials (from Anglo-Saxon verse to eighteenth-century science to experimental poetry and country music). This year the writers whose works were on the course reading list that garnered most interest were Seamus Heaney and Alice Oswald (where her recent lectures as Professor of Poetry were drawn on effectively in a number of essays). Candidates wrote very well on the representation of the nonhuman and the displacement of anthropocentric voice. The majority of essays demonstrated outstanding close reading, modelling the conceptual significance of ideas of 'scale' (thinking from the local to the global) in the critical and theoretical sources the course addresses. There was less interest this year in works of cli-fi and representations of climate disaster and more in contemporary poetry and the aesthetics of ecological writing. Of the four elements, 'fire' was the least attended to and 'water' the most, but many essays offered reading that explored the interaction of elements in literary works and the figurative affordances of those interactions. Weaker essays tended to group works with a shared theme or object of representation but struggled to move beyond description and the identification of an environmental perspective on the part of the author. Weaker essays also tended to move between discussion of different forms of writing (most obviously, between prose and verse) without considering the implications of form or genre for their argument. Essays were in nearly all cases very well presented and annotated with full bibliographies.

### *Fairytales, Folklore and Fantasy*

Fifteen candidates took this option. The topics covered were wide-ranging in terms of period, genre and form, including some answers incorporating film and game. The best essays offered sophisticated and well-argued analyses of judiciously selected and thoroughly contextualised corpora, informed by excellent definition of the terms of their analysis. Less successful essays struggled to balance engagement between a multitude of texts or were overwhelmed by general context at the expense of more specific analysis. Less successful essays were nonetheless engaged, imaginative and ambitious. The examiners were impressed by candidates' engagement with the course, and with their enthusiasm for the topic.

### *Film Criticism*

There were sixteen candidates for the paper. Candidates chose a wide variety of films from the period (roughly 1930-1960). The choices of film indicated extensive viewing and purposeful research, and the matching of film/s to topic showed shrewd judgement. In the odd case where

candidates chose films that had been studied closely on the option, they developed a fresh angle or discussed the film in relation to another film which opened new avenues. Relevant scholarship was discovered and intelligently utilised. Topics included: the significance of objects; the relation between identity, psychology, and point of view structures; masculinity and domestic space; disorientation; the subversion of conventions; windows and mirrors; and gender dynamics. Around half the essays focused on female characters and related concerns, and these were sensitive and finessed. All the work was characterised by developed and involved close work, which was attentive to film form and style, and either moved through scenes moment-by-moment or highlighted patterns across a film. Topics were either directly related to the strategies of the films or drew on them to make interpretations. There was never any indication that the films became secondary or were being used merely as support. Presentation, using relevantly orientating and revealing frame grabs, was also of a high standard. It is remarkable that in such a short time – barely a term – the candidates manage to acquire sharp film analysis skills and learn about many informing contexts and critical debates. However, it is no surprise that, in the understandable effort to position and contextualise, the essays occasionally made sweeping statements which were not always based on secure knowledge. Otherwise, the essays were comparable to advanced work on a dedicated film studies degree. Flaws or lapses in the essays were mostly generic rather than arising from problems with the study of film.

### *Global Victorians*

Thirteen students took this paper. The work submitted treated a wide geographic range of writing (America, Canada, Australia, India, the Caribbean). The course was hugely successful in encouraging the students to engage with the diasporic writing of the period. The ambition and range of works discussed was impressive. A majority of students chose to focus on the work of a single novelist or poet, with relatively few offering comparative analyses of two or more writers. Though predominantly nineteenth-century and literary in focus, many essays made reference to spoken word performances, or to later adaptations of the works under discussion (including graphic adaptation). The best essays offered original insights into the aesthetic qualities and political significance of their chosen texts, some few even offering new archival findings from the UK and further afield. Keenly engaged with questions of cultural encounter, orality and literacy, phenomenological experience, and political (including gender-political) identity, the strongest essays drew intelligently on recent contributions to socio-historical and critical scholarship while remaining attentive to genre, voice, implied audience, and style. Less effective essays lacked clarity of articulation or tended to reiterate the approaches of influential critics without testing their insights through close engagement with the literature.

### *Good Poets, Bad Politics? Wordsworth and Eliot*

Thirteen candidates chose this option. The submitted work was almost universally excellent and surprisingly various. While some candidates wrote entirely on one of the two authors, many of the strongest essays found original and surprising links between their works, including some patient close reading of echoes of the *Prelude* in the excised portions of *The Waste Land* and a productive pairing of ‘Prufrock’ and ‘Descriptive Sketches’. Popular topics included: nationalism and localism (including good work on both poets’ relationship to France), apathy, Burkean habitual behaviour, the continuity (or not) of the self over time, and

authority vs. self-determination. Weaker essays sometimes found it difficult to discuss the working-out of political ideas in poetic form and became too reliant on letters and other biographical materials; the best were quite sophisticated in their ability to discuss both poets' adoption of, and departure from, inherited verse forms. Slightly more precision about dating would sometimes have been useful, but all of the submitted work displayed wide reading, pleasure in the material, and a relatively critical and historically sensitive approach to the different methodological approaches of the secondary criticism.

### *Language, Persuasion, People, Things*

Fifteen candidates took this paper, and in general the standard was very high. Weaker candidates relied on survey-like synopses in which comment could be unduly gestural, especially in its socio-historical/socio-cultural framing. Losing sight of the vital symbiosis of language, persuasion, people and things was another problem, irrespective of whether the 'thing' in question was material or abstract. Discourses of food/consumption of various kinds were popular this year and ideas of commodity activism, and its ideological doubleness, were often harnessed well. Commodity feminism, and its assorted fakeries and anxieties, generated some thoughtful and rewarding analysis, and some richly documented discussion. Many essays were a genuine pleasure to read, combining depth, breadth, and some strikingly innovative and independent work. Historical materials were used well, as were modern forms of digital ephemera, often gathered in informative appendices and carefully referenced in relation to source text, date, and provenance. The selection and use of primary materials were often impressive.

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

Fifteen students took this option. As in previous years, a number of essays identified a cultural or social phenomenon of widespread interest in the period (for example, a specific aspect of domestic life, work, recreation, and so on), and often ranged across a substantial number of texts (both literary works and ephemera from the period) in order to describe and account for its importance; in contrast, some essays, albeit fewer, considered in valuable depth the work of a single major author. Whatever their type, essays typically showed substantial research, and commendable confidence about going far beyond the reading list. Whereas the somewhat less successful essays tended to re-describe a familiar theme or canonical career, and thus encountered some difficulty making a critically forceful claim about it. The most successful essays were not only impressively knowledgeable but independent-minded, turning their accumulation of well-observed, well-informed detail into a fresh and substantial claim about the decade and/or its major figures.

### *Literature's Silences*

Fifteen students took the paper this year. The essays covered a wide range of topics – from over-punctuation in John Clare, to the relation between music and silence, to the 'subnarratable' in Nicholson Baker, to the relation between silence and clothing in Donne, to silence in *Beowulf*. The range and eclecticism of the essays were matched by some fine close reading, and there were some essays of striking theoretical adventurousness. The best work was at once formally inventive, historically informed, and attentive to the literary qualities of

the texts under discussion. Weaker essays struggled to conceptualise or historicise literary silence, and some candidates were not quite able to realise the ambitions they set themselves. But there was serious engagement with the topic in all of the submitted essays.

### *Old Norse*

A range of abilities were demonstrated on this paper, from candidates who were able to translate fluently from Old Norse into English to those who struggled significantly with grammar and vocabulary in the translation exercise. Most candidates translated the poetic texts well, but the prose texts were more of a challenge. There was a pleasing engagement with both the set-texts and other Old Norse literature across the essay questions, with some sophisticated readings of both sagas and Eddic poetry, as well as a range of topics including landscape, gender, and emotion. The best candidates combined detailed analysis with incisive argument and showed an impressive familiarity with Old Norse literature and culture.

### *Possibilities of Criticism*

Students took on a wide range of topics, often showing great flair and critical imagination. Most of the essays were marked with a real ambition to think about the acts of reading and writing, what might be at stake, the sources and purposes of what we do. Some essays were very philosophically informed and methodologically reflexive, others more personal; a number of outstanding essays combined delicate autobiographical and theoretical inquiry with very close attention to the texts at issue. Alertness to the form of the texts studied helped shape the form of some of the best essays. The less successful essays usually tried to take on too much without sufficient reading or rigour (or perhaps sufficient time to do the idea justice) and ended up too abstract or speculative. Authors engaged with included Carson, Benjamin, Proust, Deleuze and Guattari, Faulkner, Yeats, Keats, Nabokov, Wittgenstein, Frank O'Hara, Bulgakov, BS Johnson, Dylan Thomas, Alan Ginsberg, Kierkegaard, Maggie Nelson, Alice Oswald, Edward Said, Saadiya Hartman, Fred Moten, as well as film, photography, pop music, and Farsi poetry.

### *Postcolonial Literature*

Fourteen students submitted essays for this option, covering a range of topics. Authors covered included Dambudzo Marechera (a particularly popular choice), V.S. Naipaul, Doris Lessing, Michael Ondaatje, Wole Soyinka, Sarah Howe, and Mary Jean Chan. Particularly strong work engaged with a substantial corpus of primary texts in detail and attended to historical and theoretical contexts with a similar depth and precision. Weaker work used key terms – “Western”, “trauma”, “exile” – in vague or simplistic ways, or made impossibly sweeping statements about, for example, “traditional Western narrative” and so on. The importance of making arguments in the simplest, clearest possible terms cannot be overstated. Overall, this was an enjoyable set of essays, showing an ambitious range of reading and research.

### *Texts in Motion: Literary and Material Forms, 1550-1800*

There were fourteen candidates taking this option. Work produced was generally of a high standard. The topics covered across the cohort were varied, drawing on a range of material forms and approaches. All of the candidates showed a resourcefulness and ingenuity in finding original and engaging areas of study. Objects for focussed consideration included decorated plates; text on wax seals; gravestone inscriptions; annotation to musical manuscripts; private library collections and the digital representation of printed miscellanies. Candidates were generally able to locate their individual case studies within a set of broader conceptual arguments about material culture or the history of reading and editing. The strongest essays showed an excellent grasp of scholarly debate combined with close attention to textual and material detail, and an impressive skill in linking the details of copy-specific information with wider arguments about intellectual context. Weaker essays showed a degree of generalisation that did not allow the candidate to focus on individual works, or the ways they might be read in different material, geographical or temporal contexts.

### *The American Novel After 1945*

Fourteen students took this paper, although fifteen originally enrolled. All students compared two novels in their essays and most of them chose texts from our set reading list. Several students engaged with theories of literary postmodernism and the representation of racialised and gendered identities. Many essays successfully considered literature in relation to specific aspects of U.S. history. Other topics included the figure of the child, haunting and memory, family structures, time and space, satire, patriarchal violence, ecocriticism, and the Anthropocene. *Kindred* by Octavia Butler was a text chosen by three students, as was *Housekeeping* by Marilyn Robinson. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward was the most popular text and chosen by four students whilst a fifth student chose another Ward novel, *Salvage the Bones*. Where students chose novels by authors not on our set list, they chose inventively: *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Eva's Man*, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, and *Green Island*. The most engaging and successful essays were rigorously researched. In these essays the students wrote thoughtfully about the implications of their chosen texts and arguments. The best essays were also fluently and sometimes elegantly written. Essays that were awarded marks in the first-class range were written by students who maintained impressive control over their materials and built on existing scholarship confidently and accurately. Several essays were awarded marks across the II.i range, and these were very competent across the range of criteria. In the weaker essays, students were not able to offer a consistently clear argument nor coherently frame their topic with critical theory, and, at times, relied quite heavily on exposition. In other instances, the ambition of an essay did not match its execution.

### *The Good Life: Morality, Film, Literature*

Fifteen candidates returned work on this paper. Most of the essays were wide-ranging, ambitiously interdisciplinary, and adroitly argued, with six of the fifteen receiving first-class marks. While some students used the texts and frameworks of specific seminars as the basis for their essays (Cavell or Baumbach on marriage, for instance), they still produced inventive work. Others wrote on an entirely new set of topics, texts and auteurs (e.g. Ingmar Bergman,

Werner Herzog and Ben Wheatley). Most of the essays managed to address – however indirectly – the main methodological concern of the paper: how artworks invite us to think about moral issues in distinctive ways, often through the rudiments of their form or by curating particular kinds of experience for the reader/viewer. Consequently, the best work treated the technical and aesthetic qualities of literature and film, while offering sophisticated accounts of their philosophical entailments. In most cases, the genre distinction between philosophy and art was tested but not unthinkingly elided. The strongest essays used artworks to complicate moral theories, not simply to confirm their truth. Weaker work, on the other hand, tended to shirk such complications and lacked analytical edge.

### *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 a range of works while still making careful and historically informed comparisons between them. There was also some excellent work done on single authors, periods, and texts, showing that a precise focus can likewise produce original and sophisticated responses. Candidates who did less well often relied on more superficial or circular analysis; others were penalised for not keeping engagement with ‘tragedy’ the central focus of their essay. A few weaker scripts failed to construct an argument that could illuminate texts comparatively, and instead merely juxtaposed a selection of disparate examples. Several candidates considered transformations and appropriations of ‘tragedy’ under the pressures of shifting cultures, analysing postcolonial, feminist, and queer literatures, and there was some brilliant work done exploring theories of tragedy in relation to cinema and film. It was pleasing to see a number of candidates make effective use of their freedom to discuss works outside the seminar reading list. Of the set texts, there were strong discussions of *Home Fire* and *Phèdre*.

### *Writing Lives*

Fifteen candidates took this option. The standard of work was high, and candidates tackled a very varied range of authors and topics, including writing about motherhood, trauma, illness, travel, religious identity, and migrant experience. Many of the essays were not only carefully researched but distinguished by perceptive close reading, dwelling imaginatively on aspects of form, genre, and tone to illuminate and complicate their thematic interests. The best mobilised such attention in pursuit of a clearly defined and well-organised argument that focused a wider set of claims about what life-writing is and does. Although most essays engaged seriously with critical and theoretical discussion at some level, many could have benefited from a more explicit sense of the wider stakes of their inquiry, while others had a tendency to hang large theoretical claims on a small number of examples. Some of the most ambitious and original work was animated by lively comparative thinking, but there was also excellent work on single authors. Where more than two authors were examined the quality of the analysis tended to suffer, with additional primary texts occupying an uncertainly marginal role in the argument. Structure was a common point of weakness: often good local observations were let down by diffusion of purpose, while even some of the stronger essays could have benefited from greater shape and direction. Contemporary life-writing attracted the largest number of essays, but there was also a good showing of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century writing (including letters, diaries, poetry, and plays). Authors studied

included Richard Ayoade, Roland Barthes, Rachel Cusk, Dickens, Joan Didion, Adam Kay, Keats, Chris Kraus, Primo Levi, Maggie Nelson, Emily Ogden, Amos Oz, Shlomo Riskin, Eve Sedgwick, Warsan Shire, Wilde, and Wollstonecraft.

## Paper 7: Dissertation

The dissertations covered a pleasingly wide range of genres—from novels to short stories, to poetry, periodicals and more. Candidates tackled a wide range of authors, from the ultra-canonical to the downright obscure, including Baldwin, Barnes, Bulwer-Lytton, Elizabeth Bowen, Clare, Crabbe, Craik, Didion, Duck, Douglas Dunn, William Empson, Faulkner, Feinberg, Elena Ferrante, Forster, Gissing, Kirsty Gunn, Haggard, Hemingway, Ted Hughes, Shirley Jackson, David Jones, James Joyce, Keats, Kees, Margery Kempe, D. H. Lawrence, Vernon Lee, Rosamond Lehmann, H.P. Lovecraft, Katherine Mansfield, Miller, O'Hara, Sylvia Plath, Ezra Pound, Jean Rhys, Rolle, Rushdie, Shaw, Strand, Shakur, Edward Taylor, Thoreau, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, and Hedd Wynn.

Dissertations focused on a very wide range of topics. Some examples: influence (of one author on another, of one medium or genre on another); representations of figures or ideas from earlier periods; subjects relating to archives and book history (e.g. examining features like textual variations between editions or copy-specific annotations, hand-written marginalia in printed texts); African-American literature; Afro-pessimism; AI writing; children's literature; fanfiction; gender; gothic and romance texts; hip-hop; the graphic novel; dialect, lyric and modern poetry; labour; Old English riddles; the periodical press; queer theory and life-writing; religion; self-published fiction; the short story; sociolinguistics.

No single approach guaranteed success, with both convincing and less convincing efforts visible throughout the whole spread of writers and topics. There was also a particularly high level of language competency shown in Old Norse, Middle English, and even Latin.

The very best work was ambitious, detailed in its close analysis, critically informed, rigorously argued, thoroughly researched, and aware of the stakes of its argument. It pursued a viable topic and did so in an exploratory and genuine way. It tended to be adept at shifting scales of analysis (e.g. from individual word choice to social contexts), and at thinking about the way shifts in materiality and literary form affect the meaning of works. It displayed an intimate familiarity with the critical commentaries on their chosen authors while also putting this literature into dialogue with critical theory, philosophy, or current methodological debates. The best dissertations had these strands effectively woven through the argument, alongside relevant biographical and political contexts, comparisons with contemporary authors and/or influences, as well as pertinent episodes from reception history. What made all the difference here was the candidate's depth and breadth of reading and, consequently, their ability to select which materials to present. Adventurous engagement with unusual and marginal texts was most effective when the candidate was self-reflexive about their choices and able to demonstrate what new insights the material offered.

Problems arose in the dissertations because of the use of a narrow range of primary texts or a superficial survey of too many; lack of comment on prose's formal features (for example, where dissertations harvested texts for themes without any comment on the way those themes were treated or expressed); lack of research (when there was little engagement with secondary criticism); over-reliance on research (when critics' arguments were ventriloquized); poor organisation (for example, the organisation of material into sections on different authors, where a thematic organisation that took the argument forward in stages would have been more effective).



In the least accomplished dissertations, there were fairly fundamental problems of range and conceptualisation: too many materials; too few materials; no explanation of why texts by particular authors/from particular periods/of particular forms had been selected; insufficient reasoning behind comparisons; ideas and texts were not fully thought-through; assertions were unsupported by clear evidence. Weaker dissertations seized upon one or another aspect—literary theory, political context, reception history—through a single example, leading to brittle, unconvincingly tendentious readings.

In terms of reading and bibliography, weaker work over-relied on digital sources or overlooked a debate's most interesting or influential contributions, a good proportion of which have always been published in books. A few keyword searches on the exact keywords that the candidate has already chosen as their own will not suffice. (In other words, the age of the critical monograph has not yet passed, and JSTOR's algorithm for 'related texts' is not a substitute for scoping out a field yourself).

The worst dissertations seemed like stretched tutorial essays or even EPQ-level work. They demonstrated little understanding of what work at this level requires. It is important to remind candidates that it is expected that dissertations are the culmination of their coursework. It is therefore expected that they involve thinking more deeply and researching more widely than for a tutorial essay. Candidates need to show awareness that literature has a history and is informed by historical considerations, meaning that decontextualised close analyses of a single author or a 'compare and contrast' of two or more writers will not a dissertation make.

Some candidates could have dedicated more focus to considering how the different phases of an argument work, and how those phases might be divided up and signposted in a dissertation. Subsections were often a useful, logical means of structuring ideas. However, the most successful dissertations were conceived as a cohesive whole, rather than as discontinuous subsections without clearly articulated through-lines. Referencing, as ever, ranged from professional to barely apparent. Candidates in the latter camp should be reminded that a disdain for referencing misses its importance not just for the appearance and legibility of their writing, but also as part of the protocols of scholarly work.

Markers signalled their support for candidates' use of the dissertation to write on texts, authors, genres, and approaches that don't fit easily into the period paper structure, to explore the limits of their degree's English-language requirement, and to engage with literature's interfaces with other artforms. Markers observed, however, that less successful essays sometimes pursued ultra-niche subjects, hyper-obscure writers and very narrow topics without connecting them to a body of critical discussion. None of the topics covered lacked for a serious secondary literature, and a set of relevant critical debates around them. And yet candidates too often treated these topics as an occasion to avoid proper engagement with relevant scholarship. Instead, they either opted to make up a critical context - often in a spurious, thin, or ill-advised manner - or worse, to avoid offering any surrounding critical framework at all.

## **Course II Paper 1: Literature in English 650–1100**

Thirty-three candidates took this paper. There was a good range of answers across the paper. Popular questions included 4 (language and creativity); 6 (gender; body parts); 10 (audiences); 12 (translation); 14 (identity); 17 (error and/or judgement). Scripts included discussion of a good range of texts and genres, including epic poetry, Alfredian translations, sermons, saints' lives, riddles, chronicles, practical writing and charms. The best work was able to draw on detailed readings of Old English texts to make plausible arguments in response to the questions. It also engaged with scholarly and critical debates about the material. Directly addressing the issues that a question raises (rather than writing an essay that's only adjacent to the question) is an important factor in the highest-achieving work, and there were some excellent examples of this. Work gaining lower marks included answers that were not squarely engaging with the question; that only used a limited range of material or misread the texts being used; and answers that were series of observations without a clear direction of travel. Some good use was made of texts from related traditions, of material culture, and of historical evidence. However, there is scope for more candidates to explore those aspects of the period, in order to show a broader understanding of the contexts of Old English writing.

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

Thirty-four candidates took this paper. There was a good spread of answers across the questions. One of the very positive aspects of this paper was the great range and variety of material that candidates discussed, often with evident enjoyment as well as thought. Along with English lyrics from across the period, material originally in French, German, Occitan, Arabic, Italian, Latin, Old Norse, Welsh, Portuguese, and other linguistic traditions were included. This range and diversity can help to open up fresh readings of texts and break out of expected critical patterns. The best work used this to great advantage, and was also able to show enough contextual awareness to reflect on how lyric as a (very broad) genre is inflected by different circumstances and impulses. Weaker scripts often lacked that awareness or brought widely scattered material together without a rationale. Sometimes scripts either tried to over-read translated material, or conversely, became descriptive rather than analytical about it. But many candidates did rise to the challenge of writing on translated texts, sometimes thoughtfully reflecting on the pros and cons of a comparative approach. As always, answers that really tackled the central challenge of a question or quotation, and had a coherent argument, were at an advantage. Overall, it was encouraging to see so much good work on this wide range of material.

## **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**

There was a very good range of answers and topics in submissions for this paper. Most questions were answered, and attracted a diverse set of responses, as well as showing a good balance of answers and exploration across the different periods covered by this paper. Dictionaries, register, cant and slang, as well as gender, were all popular; there was one taker for Question 1, and, surprisingly, only one for question 5 on regionality. There was some excellent work in evidence, demonstrating a cogent engagement with the different levels of linguistic organisation as well as the socio-historical and socio-cultural markers of texts and their transmission. Weaker answers tended to be overly descriptive or survey-like in their approaches, while losing focus on the real implications of the question chosen. Candidates should remember that attention to formatting and presentation is important, and that a list of *OED* entries is not a bibliography.

## **Course II Paper 5: The Material Text**

Twenty-three students submitted work for this paper. All students attempted both questions, as the rubric requires. More students wrote on the Nowell Codex than on the Vernon Manuscript in answering the first question, but twenty-three is a population small enough to wander in preference according to healthy year-by-year fluctuations in students' enthusiasms. A pleasingly wide range of topics appeared in answers to the second question, answers which also attended to many types of evidence: script, decoration, image, inscribed stones, punctuation, etc.

Some strong answers for the first, commentary, question were detailed and rounded, addressing several aspects of the manuscript page and edition. Other strong answers took just two or three features (e.g. script, images) and developed a precise reading of those. Two editions were available for discussion in the Vernon question, because the set page transitions between two different works; students could choose to tackle one or both editions. Some strong answers considered both editions and some strong answers considered only one; both approaches worked well when applied with skill. All strong answers showed not only detailed knowledge of the manuscript at hand, but an ability to select from that knowledge and apply it in original analysis.

Some weaker answers showed knowledge of the manuscript discussed but did not apply that knowledge, leaving it inert in their account and unable to earn high credit. The commentary part of the paper requires knowledge of the set manuscripts, but that knowledge needs to be marshalled and put to use in specific local discussion of the set page and edition. Pleasingly, all answers for the commentary paid some attention to the set page(s) from the edition(s) alongside the manuscript page. It was also good to see very few candidates this year castigating the editions for the changes made rather than assessing exchanges analytically to understand how and why the edition has been produced. There is certainly room for concise, well-evidenced value judgements about the set edition in the commentary, but it was good to see candidates avoiding simplistic criticisms of editors for the act of editing, and we hope this will continue in future years.

Strong submissions for the essay question tended to explore one tightly-defined topic, either through a detailed case study of a single work, manuscript, inscription, etc., or through a small, delineated sample of such objects. As on the commentary, the range of approaches could vary, but the detailed analysis of concrete evidence united all the best answers. Candidates who did well on the essay question knew the research on their area of interest well but also selected precisely what was relevant from that research to help build their own arguments. Weaker submissions for the essay question tended to write in more general terms, not affording themselves chances to dig into concrete material evidence. Some weaker submissions displayed a working knowledge of relevant secondary literature but struggled to distinguish an independent voice and analytical thrust beyond reporting and summarising pre-existing work, risking writing only a survey. The examiners were surprised by how many essays didn't (briefly) note the probable dates or rough date ranges for works and manuscripts. This was only a minor problem, but future students are encouraged to remember that 'the Middle Ages' covers a very long time containing a great deal of variety and change, and that some sense of chronological position within that great range might often prove helpful.

Across both questions, all the best scripts had clear prose, and few errors in spelling, punctuation, and scholarly apparatus, showing evidence of completion in draft before the deadline and careful checking of the argument and presentation. Weaker submissions typically lapsed in one or more of these aspects. For this paper, markers grant 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. Otherwise, though, high standards of scholarly apparatus and presentation are expected, since this is a coursework paper. The Material Text occupies a position in the assessment ecosystem analogous to the alternative, the Shakespeare paper, and time management allowing for revision and checking is part of the exercise.

Most of the submissions relatively weaker compared to the best work were still solid writing, standing as a credit to the hard work of the candidates. The examiners were impressed by the enthusiasm and commitment shown by almost all answers.


## **Course II Paper 6: Special Options**

See FHS Paper 6: Special Options.

## **Course II Paper 7: Dissertation**

See FHS Paper 7: Dissertation.

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2024

|  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>   | Nicola McDonald   |  |  |
|  <b>External examiner home institution:</b> | University of York  |  |  |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>   | FHS English Language and Literature; FHS ELL Course II; & FHS English and History |  |  |
| <b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)   | Undergraduate   |  |  |
| <b>Year of term of office:</b> (please delete as appropriate)  | First year  |  |  |

*Please complete both Parts A and B.*

| <b>Part A</b>  |  |                                  |  |            |           |                    |
|--|--|----------------------------------|--|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|  |  | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i> |  | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.  | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>                              | YES                              |  |            |           |                    |
| A2.  | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:<br>(i) the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and<br>(ii) any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i> | YES                              |  |            |           |                    |
| A3.  | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?   | YES                              |  |            |           |                    |
| A4.  | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?  | YES                              |  |            |           |                    |
| A5.  | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?  | YES                              |  |            |           |                    |
| A6.  | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?***   |                                  |  |            |           | N/A                |
| A7.  | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?***  |                                  |  |            |           | N/A                |
| * <i>If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</i> |  |                                  |  |            |           |                    |
| ** <i>A6. and A7. If you are in your first year of term of office you should enter select N/A / Other.</i> |  |                                  |  |            |           |                    |

## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

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

I was given to read principally runs of work of students at the 2:1/2:2 borderline, as well as those who were awarded 2:2s, which undoubtedly gives me a skewed vision of the achievement of FHS English Literature and Language students; I also read the work of Course II First-Class students. Across the board the standards were broadly 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 work of Course II First-Class students was dazzling, in depth and breadth, in argument and style, and readily matched the very top Firsts in my own department, although (as I will comment further on below) not all the marks awarded were as starry as they could have been. Borderline candidates were just that, borderline, and again in line with borderlines in my own department, typically showing some strengths, whether of breadth or depth or creative thinking, whose (sometimes slim) preponderance pulled them into the higher class. The borderline, in the FHS, is slightly more generous than at my own institution (especially at the 2:1/1 borderline, but at the 2:1/2:2 as well), but the notable (historical) range and number of compulsory papers students are required to take alongside the still heavy emphasis on seated exams (back to their normal three hours for the first time since the onset of the Covid pandemic) is what, I think, makes that generosity appropriate. I also want to note that your students are unusually good at seated exams (compared to what I have seen elsewhere); this is no doubt a result of the distinctive nature of your teaching, and the particularity of the tutorial essay, but it is impressive to see the range and depth of work (including extensive primary and secondary quotation) produced in exam conditions in a short three hours.

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

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

The examination process was conducted, from what I saw, with impressive impartiality and rigour throughout. Notable is the retention of blind double marking, across the board (Oxford is surely now an outlier in this respect among UK universities); but I was also struck at how regularly, when there were significant irreconcilable differences between markers, rather than forcing a compromise mark, a third marker was called in who invariably offered thoughtful and judicious commentary and marks.

Particularly impressive, too, was the care with which the MCE Committee examined an enormous range and noteworthy volume of applications (with MCE meetings taking up almost as much time as the Exam Board itself).

### **B3. Issues**

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

- I noted in B1 that not all the marks awarded for Course II Firsts were as starry as they could have been. I saw few to no other marks graded above 80 (i.e. in the runs of marks read aloud at the

Board meeting). The very top Oxford students are without doubt exceptional. Other universities use the full range of available marks with much more generosity than do your examiners. This probably doesn't have much effect on degree classification, but it does mean that Oxford students going forward to open competitions for post-graduate funding (or indeed any post-graduate competition where numerical marks matter) will not have as high-flying marks as their peers. It's unclear to me why, when you have 30 marks in the First-Class bracket, you don't use more of them. Some of the Course II papers I read were really outstanding and would elsewhere have much more widely accrued marks of 80 and above.

- Although the bulk of examiners' comments were clear and fulsome, enough to follow the line of argument/reasoning that went into the award of a particular mark, a few examiners are unhelpfully short and elliptic in their comments. Some kind of standardisation between markers (or a base line of what is expected) would be helpful.
- Finally, and perhaps most seriously, from the evidence of the MCE applications there were very serious problems with two things: seated exams invigilated in colleges (where invigilators repeatedly did not have the correct information, typically about the candidate's specific adjustments [often relating to time], or paperwork; and the centrally provided technology which failed (in a variety of ways) with surprising regularity. It is essential that these problems are addressed as a matter of urgency.

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

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

As remarked above, in B1, the ability of even borderline (and 2:2) students to produce (for the most part) cogent work in exam conditions is notable; it must (like blind double marking and the remarkably low number of marks above 80) be one of the things that most distinguishes assessment at Oxford.

The MCE and Board meetings, on each of the weeks I attended, were conducted with impressive attentiveness, care, and judiciousness (especially, where relevant, to borderlines and mitigating circumstances). Timothy Michael was an exemplary chair; and Andy Davice and Tara Hathaway likewise provided exemplary administrative support – their knowledge of the detail of what looked from the outside like seas of numbers (of candidates and their marks) was awe-inspiring.


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

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

|                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Signed:</b> | Nicola McDonald |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 21 July 2024    |

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

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2024

|  |                                   |           |  |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------|--|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>   | Alison Shell                      |           |  |
|  <b>External examiner home institution:</b> | UCL                               |           |  |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>   | English / English and Classics BA |           |  |
| <b>Level:</b> (please delete as appropriate)   | Undergraduate                     |           |  |
| <b>Year of term of office:</b> (please delete as appropriate)  |                                   | Last year |  |

*Please complete both Parts A and B.*

| <b>Part A</b>  |  |            |           |                    |
|--|--|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|  | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i>   | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.  | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i>                              | X          |           |                    |
| A2.  | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:<br>(i) the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and<br>(ii) any applicable subject benchmark statement? <i>[Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports].</i> | X          |           |                    |
| A3.  | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?   | X          |           |                    |
| A4.  | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?  | X          |           |                    |
| A5.  | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?  | X          |           |                    |
| A6.  | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?***   | X          |           |                    |
| A7.  | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?***  |            | X         |                    |
| * <i>If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</i> |  |            |           |                    |
| ** <i>A6. and A7. If you are in your first year of term of office you should enter select N/A / Other.</i> |  |            |           |                    |



## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

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

Over the three years I've acted as an external, the single and joint honours students at Oxford have shown a spread of ability very similar to those on comparable programmes I've taught on at Durham (1997-2010) and UCL (2010-present) and vastly out-perform students on both those institutions' combined honours programmes. The quantity of first-class degrees awarded by Oxford during that time has, though, been around 4/5% higher than at UCL in recent 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).*

Oxford attracts a high proportion of the best English Literature students in the country – and, surely, in the world. Achievement at the top end is commensurate with that. Over my term of office I've seen several scripts – especially extended essays and dissertations, with their freer remit – which are nearly, or completely, publishable as they stand. Across the board, high competence is the norm, which is no less praiseworthy because the peaks are so spectacular. I've seen a few runs of scripts at the bottom end, and felt in each case that they were accurately, compassionately evaluated – which is all the more impressive because, with such weak students, points of comparison are fewer. On the topic of below-average achievement, Oxford and UCL both awarded an unusually large number of 2:2s this year, perhaps attributable to the knock-on effects of the pandemic.

I've been on the Classics and English exam board throughout my term of office. In cases where single and joint honours students sat the same assessment, I couldn't usually have known a candidate's origin from internal evidence – though it was sometimes guessable, for the best possible reason, in cases where candidates were exceptionally well-informed about the classical tradition. More generally, I've been struck by most joint honours candidates' ability to maintain a roughly equal standard of achievement in both disciplines.

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

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

Oxford's markers are zealously fair-minded, and share a vision of how justice can be done. Like the other externals, I've had a part to play in delivering that justice: most of all, perhaps, in policing the 1/2:1 boundaries, which I'm confident are defensibly positioned. Year on year, fairness has also been demonstrated via the statistical breakdowns of grades given by different groups of markers.

The process of double-blind marking – to my mind, the only adequate means of assessment – maximises independent engagement with scripts, and yields raw material for detailed, constructive evaluations of a student's overall performance that I've never seen bettered. That said, there were a few instances where, in the light of entirely positive comments, I had to second-guess the rationale for a relatively low grade; while it's obviously impractical to point out all mistakes and flaws, a greater degree of specificity was sometimes needed. Relatedly, it would be helpful if markers could always note how the presence of SpLD sheets affected their deliberations: whether in the space for individual comments, or as part of recording the discussion process. In general, I sometimes felt I wasn't given the right kind of information in relation to the latter; some markers merely noted that discussion had happened, others that they'd met over Zoom or Teams. Last year, the comment sheets I saw from

Classics tended to be briefer than from English, and – in a very few cases – perfunctory. I can't comment on the comments this year, since I didn't see any – but, in general, I do think that English is a model of best practice.

Examiners' meetings are the place for airing tricky casuistical issues; both in the Single and Joint Honours boards I've attended, debate on these has been rigorous, courteous and good-humoured, with an exemplary alertness to points of comparison. Like the MCE sub-committees, they're highly effective in ensuring equity of treatment for students.

### **B3. Issues**

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

I only have one area of concern – but it's a serious one, relating to the backlog in the University's Disability Advisory Service. This is the reason for my negative assessment under A7 above.

Addressing the shortcomings of the DAS in my 2022/3 report, I said: 'there's clearly a mismatch between need and provision at the moment, and the mitigating circumstances forms told of more than one near-tragedy; I hope it won't take an actual one for things to improve. I understand that the DAS is actively rethinking its service with a view to providing earlier adjustments, which is a welcome development.' However, as I write this report a year later, I believe that -- if anything – things have got worse. Even though the faculty administrative staff plainly did a heroic amount of troubleshooting to get students assessed in a timely manner. The MCE committee also reviewed some very distressing cases where colleges didn't appear to be delivering on known pastoral responsibilities, leaving the care of vulnerable students up to their friends. I recognise that this is a university-wide problem – but that makes improvement all the more urgent.

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

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

I'm glad you distinguish between good practice and innovation, since so much of Oxford's curricular excellence comes from preserving areas of study that have been jettisoned elsewhere. That said, it's evident from the teaching materials and exam papers I've seen that you innovate with the best: I'd like to single out the sensitivity you've shown in diversifying the canon.

I have one specific suggestion for enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities in relation to exams. The OBOW system, though stopgap in origin and problematic to implement, had positive aspects: especially, to my mind, the exciting scope it gave for candidates to draw on wide reading. The move back to desk exams has, for all its practical advantages, seen a diminution of that referential range – which I accept is inevitable for the time being. However, desk exams that enabled candidates to draw on appropriate internet resources would be the best of both worlds; I've corresponded with Tim Michael about this, and am glad to hear it might be a possibility in the future.

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


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

This is my last year of service, and most of my comments above are informed by the experience I've had over my full term of office. It's been a thrilling ride, and I've witnessed the Faculty's remarkable flexibility in coping with a barrage of complex circumstances – Covid, the marking boycott of 2023, the resistible rise of AI. My warmest thanks to the diligent, hospitable, commandingly clever Chairs of Examiners – Bart van Es, Matthew Reynolds, Peter McCullough, Tim Michael – and to the members of successive Exam Boards. Every year I've been so impressed by your deep and nuanced engagement with the job at hand, the courtesy you show to each other, and the way that you put students first. Lastly, Tara Hathaway and Andy Davice have been top-notch administrators. You're a stunning body of people – thanks for the memories.

|                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| <b>Signed:</b> | Alison Shell  |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 6 August 2024 |

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

## EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT FORM 2024

|  |  |                                       |                                     |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>External examiner name:</b>   | Matthew Taunton  |                                       |                                     |
|  <b>External examiner home institution:</b> | University of East Anglia  |                                       |                                     |
| <b>Course(s) examined:</b>   | BA in English Language and Literature (Course 1 & 2)<br>BA in English and Modern Languages |                                       |                                     |
| <b>Level:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )   | <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate   | <input type="checkbox"/> Postgraduate |                                     |
| <b>Year of term of office:</b> (please <i>delete as appropriate</i> )  | <input type="checkbox"/> First year  | <input type="checkbox"/> Last year    | <input type="checkbox"/> Other year |

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

| <b>Part A</b>  |  |                                  |            |           |                    |
|--|--|----------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------------|
|  |  | <i>Please (✓) as applicable*</i> | <b>Yes</b> | <b>No</b> | <b>N/A / Other</b> |
| A1.  | Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? [ <i>Please refer to paragraph 6 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports.</i> ]                              |                                  | ✓          |           |                    |
| A2.  | Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect:<br>(i) the frameworks for higher education qualifications, and<br>(ii) any applicable subject benchmark statement? [ <i>Please refer to paragraph 7 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports.</i> ] |                                  | ✓          |           |                    |
| A3.  | Does the assessment process measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?   |                                  | ✓          |           |                    |
| A4.  | Is the assessment process conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?  |                                  | ✓          |           |                    |
| A5.  | Did you receive sufficient information and evidence in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?  |                                  | ✓          |           |                    |
| A6.  | Did you receive a written response to your previous report?***   |                                  |            |           | ✓                  |
| A7.  | Are you satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?***  |                                  |            |           | ✓                  |
| * <b>If you answer "No" to any question, you should provide further comments when you complete Part B.</b> |  |                                  |            |           |                    |
| ** A6. and A7. <i>If you are in your first year of term of office you should enter select N/A / Other.</i> |  |                                  |            |           |                    |

## **Part B**

### **B1. Academic standards**

*c. 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 read runs of scripts from a sample of candidates, including a high first and several borderline cases, I can confirm that the academic standard achieved by these candidates is comparable to that in other HE institutions I have experienced. The best work is on a par with the very best undergraduate work I have seen. The 1<sup>st</sup> / 2:1 boundary, where I was asked to look at a number of cases in detail, is in roughly the same place as at my own institution and others I am familiar with (taking into account quite different modes of assessment). As one would expect, the candidates who cluster around this boundary are also often performing at a very high level. It is really impressive how much these students know.

*d. 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).*

Among the high-achieving runs of scripts that I sampled, it was notable that in the majority of cases the students performed consistently well across the board. The historical range of the compulsory elements of the degree programme (papers 1-5) makes for a demanding course. It is striking that there is no obvious pattern of (relative) underachievement in (for example) the medieval paper, which requires some facility with middle English and might therefore be considered especially demanding for some students. In general students are achieving their potential across the board, and they are evidently getting excellent teaching and support in preparation for the exams. I did notice that the Shakespeare portfolios I read were particularly impressive. The format of that assessment—a portfolio of three essays of 2000 words written over the course of the year—is one that allows students to shine. Clearly it would not be possible to assess all the papers in this way (that would potentially be overwhelming for students) so in noticing that I don't mean to imply that anything ought to be changed. It's just an area I noticed where there is some very strong work going on.

In terms of the joint schools, I had a little less of a fine-grained sense of how student performance tended to break down across the two subjects studied. I was not required to read any runs of scripts in detail but attended the Board meeting and read the overall runs of marks. Students seemed to perform consistently across all papers from both schools, suggesting that academic standards are well aligned between the two schools in each case, and moreover that where students are taking a modern language alongside English, they are rising to the challenge of acquiring proficiency in both subjects.

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

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

The examination process is extremely rigorous and fair. It is a model system in every respect. Every script is double marked. In a large majority of cases, the two markers independently arrive at marks that are very close to one another. This suggests that there is a high degree of consensus among the markers about how the mark scheme should be applied – making for an extremely robust set of marks. With small differences the two examiners have a discussion and arrive at an agreed grade. This will not always be an average of the two raw marks, but the discussion enables examiners to bring particular strengths and weaknesses of the scripts to each others' attention before settling on the fairest mark. Where the raw marks diverge by more than 10 marks, the script is read by a third marker, and a mark

agreed based on a discussion. Strict anonymity is observed throughout. There must be cases where (for example) a dissertation student can be recognised by the focus of their project, but I saw no evidence that this was influencing marks in any way. This is a labour-intensive process, but it produces an extremely fair set of results. Oxford students can feel entirely confident that they are being assessed fairly, and in line with the University's regulations.

### **B3. Issues**

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

There were a number of mostly minor issues around the administration of exams in colleges, as noted by the Board of Examiners, which we picked up predominantly via the MCE subcommittee as students submitted MCEs. Though generally minor in terms of their overall impact on assessment, these had the potential to leave some students feeling upset or badly treated, and should therefore be a concern. These fell into two categories:

- a. **Invigilators** in colleges were in a few cases unaware of the specific protocols and stipulations surrounding a given paper (e.g. that a paper copy of the commentary passage be provided in the Medieval paper), or did not cater fully for the provisions in an individual candidate's student support plan.
- b. **Technical failures** afflicted the more widespread rollout of invigilated and timed Chromebook exams. The total number of such failures (reported via the MCE route) was not high in relation to the total number of candidates and exams, but these are an inevitable feature of any exam that involves computers.

In both cases the Board became aware of the issues via the MCE process. In discussions with the MCE subcommittee and the main Board, some ways forward were suggested to deal with a). Clearly the difficulty is that the invigilators are often appointed by colleges, and there is something of a lack of accountability there. It would be a good idea to look at how invigilators are trained and ensure that this is both consistent and specific enough (i.e. regulations around specific papers are understood). But the number of problems of this kind were low in the context of how many exams were taken. In reality, there are a few unfortunate cases, which do not add up to a systemic problem.

In terms of b), there really isn't much that can be done to prevent technical issues arising (other than obviously ensuring that the hardware is up-to-date etc., which I assume would be done as part of the normal course of events). Ideally problems should be mitigated on the spot – e.g. a replacement computer issued, and time added to the end of the exam to compensate for lost time during the malfunction. In many cases this happened. However, as it stands, the MCE process is still likely to be called upon to deal with a good number of these types of errors. The Examinations and Assessment Framework doesn't currently suggest that this is one of the things that would ordinarily count for an MCE. The things currently listed are:

- sudden illness or accidental injury
- more long-standing conditions which may or may not have resulted in alternative examination arrangements under Part 12 (see paragraph 17 below)
- bereavement (usually the death of a close relative/significant other)
- significant adverse personal/family circumstances
- other serious circumstances (e.g. the impact of a crime)

While in every other way less serious than a bereavement or a serious injury, a computer not working during a timed exam can significantly disrupt the exam. It might be worth considering adding some guidance for MCE subcommittees regarding how to deal with computer problems in timed and invigilated conditions.

Overall, the issues were small in number and minor or negligible in terms of their impact on the fairness of the process. And they were well handled by a system that is sensitive at picking up problems, and which allows space for academics, external examiners and administrators to discuss sensible and equitable forms of mitigation and redress, within the regulations.

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

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

The system of timed and invigilated exams and the structure of papers 2-5 is firmly in the ‘tried and tested’ category. It is extremely robust and fair (good practice), but not innovative in itself. The switch to Chromebook exams is a new phenomenon and has been handled well (noting the inevitable technical problems as above). It’s much easier to read these exam scripts than it would have been were they handwritten. But these assessments have been designed to replicate as closely as possible, but in a more legible form, the handwritten exams they replaced, so it is hard to see this as innovation in assessment. None of this is to say that innovation does not occur on the teaching side of course, and the range of knowledge and (at times) the intellectual agility of the students’ answers suggests that they are being extremely well taught. The Shakespeare portfolio, the dissertation, and the dissertation-like long essay assessment for paper 6 are also traditional forms of assessment, and they produce some excellent work (with the caveat that students at this level are often better at writing 2,000 word essays than marshalling a long-form argument over 8,000 words, which perhaps explains why the Shakespeare portfolios seem relatively shiny in comparison to the dissertations I read).

I teach in a different kind of institution where there is a much greater variety of assessment practice (and indeed sometimes too much innovation for my taste). Still, if I was looking for ‘opportunities to enhance the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students’, I think one possibility would be to consider introducing some forms of assessment that are more attuned to the ways the discipline and the world are changing (e.g. engaging more directly with AI and other digital tools). Given the system at Oxford, it is very possible that these things are going on in colleges and at earlier stages of the degree.

Also, as a twentieth-century specialist, I find it a little bit remarkable that there is no compulsory post-1830 paper, especially given that the Oxford English Faculty has great academic strengths in Victorian, modernist, and postcolonial literatures. In practice most students do engage with post-1830 literature either in paper 6 or in their dissertation, and of course they would be expected to study these in years 1 and 2. Still, there may be some scope for further enhancement of learning (and, in particular, summative assessment) opportunities in this area.

Overall, there is a great deal of good practice across the board and a very fair system of assessment. It produces some outstanding work and a consistently broad and deep knowledge of the curriculum. Everyone involved should be extremely proud of their work and of the rich education that they are providing for students.

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

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

Just to say that the Boards were extremely well run, and examiners were provided with clear and timely information and informed advice throughout the process. This is much appreciated as it makes the job of an external examiner much easier. Thank you Tara Hathaway, Andy Davice, and Tim Michael for the hard work in making this all run so smoothly.

|                |                                    |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Signed:</b> | Matthew Taunton (signed digitally) |
| <b>Date:</b>   | 23/07/2024                         |

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