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External Examiner's Report - M.Phil. (Music Studies), 2016-2017

This is my third year as External Examiner for the M.Phil. in Music Studies. The cohort consisted of 11 students taking the Musicology pathway, while four had opted for the Composition pathway. As had been established last year, a separate external examiner adjudicated the composition students so my comments pertain only to the musicologists. I was provided with all information and papers in a timely and complete fashion (the provision of all coursework and projects electronically in advance of the meeting was a big improvement since it removed the pressure to look at everything on the day of the visit itself), and my visit to the Faculty on 21 September 2016 went smoothly and without any problems. Due to the efforts of the Senior Internal Examiner, Nick Cook, and the administrative support staff, most notably Emma Chapman, the entire process unfolded with admirable smoothness and efficiency.

As there had been no problematic cases, it had not been necessary to scrutinise work in the spring or over the summer; in advance of the meeting itself, I was able to see the entirety of the work from across the academic year, especially of course the final dissertation projects. All of them were unproblematic, with a range of achievement from the satisfactory to the truly impressive. In contrast to last year, the coursework was returned with only one agreed mark, while the dissertations, as previously, received two marks (which were then averaged) and two separate reports. The marks for the dissertations diverged to some degree, but never straddled degree-class boundaries; given that the dissertations had been marked by a wide range of markers, both internal and external, it was reassuring to see that the markers in virtually all cases were very close; indeed, in the two cases where students were close to a borderline and where I was asked to scrutinise the work, I fully concurred with the marks awarded.

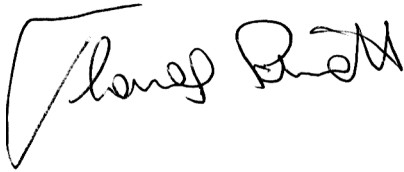
The committee discussed whether to extend the practice of returning only a single mark to students for dissertations as well, but it was agreed (and I concurred) that it was helpful to the students to receive both viewpoints from the examiners for such a substantial piece of work, while for the coursework assignments a single mark was deemed sufficient, indeed possibly only a single report by the first marker as well (to avoid duplication of effort or, what was deemed even less desirable, an amalgamation of both original reports into a single document which would mean even more work for the markers with little added value). The feedback was invariably copious, clear and matched the marking criteria as set out in the documentation.

In contrast to last year, there was no sense of a downward trajectory of marks from the coursework to the dissertations, so the former must have been a blip.

A positive development to be noted is that the MPhil is now looked after by a proper examinations board rather than just the Senior Internal Examiner; in fact, we had a very productive discussion as a result. The documentation continues to improve year-on-year; this year, it became clear that there was insufficient clarity of guidance on the question of award where the weighted average is near a borderline, of the rounding up of final averages, and on the regulations governing vivas. We were reassured that these matters would be resolved or clarified as necessary for the next cohort of students.

All in all, the Faculty is to be congratulated, as in the past two years, on a cohort of such quality which is evidence both of the high reputation it deservedly enjoys and of the quality of its teaching staff.

Manchester, 22 September 2017



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