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07 December 2017

Vice-Chancellor
University of Cambridge

Dear Vice-Chancellor

Music Tripos Part IB, 2017: Moderating External Examiner's Report

I was pleased to be able to stand in at short notice for an indisposed external examiner in order to attend the Exam Board meeting in Cambridge on 14 June 2017, and to moderate samples of students' work across a wide range of papers. Owing to the timing of my appointment, I had of course not been previously involved in the approval of draft question papers, and assume that this process had already been carried out by the original examiner at the appropriate time. Having served as external examiner for this same part of the Music Tripos in 2009–12, I was already familiar with its essential characteristics, but nevertheless received all necessary documentation and briefings in good time.

The standards of the Part IB examination remain appropriate for the relevant level of study, and are comparable to those of similar programmes in other UK institutions. Procedures for assessment and the determination of awards were sound, and conducted with consistent fairness and attention to detail throughout the examination process. The conduct of the Exam Board meeting, as always, combined a scrupulous attention to procedure with efficacious common sense. The distribution of final classifications, including a relatively high number of Firsts, closely corresponds to the pattern routinely encountered in other comparable UK institutions in recent years.

In addition to inspecting work from both essay-based and composition-based papers, I was also requested to adjudicate on two dissertations and one exam script in which the internal marks were in different class bands, and to moderate a number of borderline cases. These instances were straightforward to resolve.

Last year's external examiner's report and the Faculty's response contain no ongoing issues which need to be revisited here.

There are two general areas on which I hope an external viewpoint may prove helpful to the Faculty Board:

1. Moderation

It remains evident that internal examiners, who double-mark everything, are under an enormous strain to complete what seems to be an increasingly unjustifiable workload in a relatively short period of time. It is standard practice in all other HEI institutions where I have worked or served as external examiner that first- and second-year work is single-marked and internally moderated, and only final-year projects and recital examinations are blind marked by more than one examiner. Since concern was expressed about this situation at this year's Exam Board meeting, I have consulted the reports I submitted in 2009–12 and have been disappointed to find that the situation has evidently not improved since I first raised this issue in 2010. On that occasion I wrote: 'The quantity of double marking undertaken at Part IB is truly formidable, and no longer in line with assessment procedures in comparable institutions where (for example) double marking might typically be reserved for substantial final-year projects such as Dissertation and Composition portfolios, but other modules are routinely marked only by the relevant subject specialist before the batch of scripts is moderated by another examiner.' In my 2011 report, I recorded that I had been assured 'that a greater degree of moderation (as opposed to double marking) will soon be introduced, following a trial in Part IA, and this development is welcomed.' If the Part IA trial did indeed take place, the practice has still not been extended to Part IB.

2. Penalisation

At present, late-submission penalties are applied at the discretion of the Exam Board, on the basis of rather vague written guidelines (which do not, for example, state whether lateness is only calculated on the basis of working days rather than weekends, nor give precise numerical quantities for different degrees of lateness). Whilst I am satisfied that the penalties applied this year were arrived at fairly, and were agreed unanimously, this is of course no guarantee that different Exam Boards will apply the same quantity and level of penalties consistently in different years, and this is an important quality-and-standards issue that needs to continue to be addressed. Good practice elsewhere shows that it is perfectly possible to have simple and watertight formulae covering late-submission penalties, which are clearly understood by both students and staff, and which are applied with scrupulous fairness and consistency.

In closing, I should like to extend my sincere thanks to both the Chair of Examiners and Faculty administrator, Libby Jones, for making sure the Exam Board and its associated paperwork ran smoothly, and to all colleagues on the Board for their professionalism and collegiality.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mervyn Cooke', with a horizontal line underneath.

Professor Mervyn Cooke