

MATHEMATICAL, PHYSICAL AND LIFE SCIENCES BOARD

Guidance on Examination Conventions

The Divisional Board is the ‘supervisory body’ for the examinations, as defined in the Examination Regulations. The Divisional Board became responsible for monitoring of examination reports, and approval of conventions, when its role was defined in 2000-1.

The drafting and revision of conventions is in practice delegated to departmental academic committees, which are expected to meet Education Committee’s policy and guidance on conventions (as described in the Education Committee's Policy and Guidance for Examiners at <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgexaminers/>).

The MPLS Division also issues the following guidance to departmental academic committees on Examination Conventions.

A full description of the process by which the Division approves the Examination Conventions on an annual basis is appended.

Divisional Guidance on the content of Examination Conventions for Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) courses

Content		Further detail
1. Marking criteria		
1.1	Qualitative descriptors of classes (UG)/ Qualitative descriptors of Distinction, Pass, Fail (PGT)	Conventions must give the qualitative descriptors for classes. There are two versions of qualitative descriptors for undergraduate examinations in MPLS – one for mathematical sciences and one for all other subjects – these are published at http://www.mpls.ox.ac.uk/taught-course-examination-procedures . PGT programmes must give qualitative descriptors for Distinction, Pass and Fail.
1.2	University scale for standardised expression of agreed final marks	The relevant scale must be given (for Prelims, FHS or PGT – see - http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgexaminers/12scriptsmarkingadjudication/#d.en.175209 This can be mapped to the descriptors under 1.1).
1.3	Qualitative criteria for different types of assessment	It is recommended that qualitative criteria are given for different bands of marks for different types of assessment item. E.g. a set of qualitative criteria might be given for answers to exam questions, and another for answers to essay questions, and another for extended research projects – each would give a qualitative description of the type of answer expected to obtain a mark in the range 90-100, 80-89, 70-79, etc. (mark ranges should be chosen as judged most appropriate). An example from Earth Sciences is appended. This is indicative only: criteria will need to be developed which are specific to the academic discipline concerned.

2. Marking procedures		
2.1	Clear statement demonstrating that University guidance on verifying marking is being followed for papers for which there <i>is</i> a model solution and marking scheme.	For papers for which there is a model solution and marking scheme approved by the examiners there should be a statement that each script is marked by an examiner or assessor and is checked independently to ensure that all parts have been marked and the marks and part-marks have been correctly totalled and recorded.
2.2	Clear statement demonstrating that University guidance on verifying marking is being followed for papers <i>without</i> a model solution and marking scheme.	For papers without a model solution there should be a statement that each script/item of work is marked independently by two examiners or assessors (sometimes referred to as 'double-blind marking').
2.3	Clear statement on reconciliation procedures for papers under 2.2 above, demonstrating that University and Divisional guidance is being followed	There should be a clear statement on reconciliation procedures. The Divisional minimum requirement is that marks may be averaged if they are less than or equal to 10 per cent apart, with a third marker arbitrating if they are more than 10 percent apart and the markers cannot agree.
3. Final Award, Progression and Classification		
3.1	Final Award	There should be a statement of the degree that is awarded.
3.2	Progression Rules	There should be a clear explanation of any rules for progression - for example from Prelims to FHS, or from one 'Part' to another within the FHS. It should be clear what happens if the student is not able to successfully progress.
3.3	Classification rules	There should be a clear explanation of the classification rules: how the marks aggregate to produce the classification. For example, papers may be weighted and an average taken, and/or there may be preponderance rules (e.g. a 'strong paper' rule).
4. Other		
4.1	Scaling and moderation	Where scaling is used a clear description should be given of the circumstances in which it will be used and the methodology which will be used (detailed algorithms should be included as an appendix rather than forming the main part of the examination conventions, and further detail should be given in examiners' reports). It should be conveyed that scaling is not a mechanistic process, but one in which the examiners will use their academic judgement to ensure that appropriate classifications are awarded.
4.2	Short-weight convention	There should be a statement that 'A mark of zero shall be awarded for any part of parts of questions that have not been answered by a candidate, but which should have been answered.' Even if this seems obvious it should be stated – otherwise if there are alternative arrangements (for 'compensation') these should be described.

4.3	Penalties	<p>There should be a clear statement of penalties for late or non-submission of items, or non-completion of practical work. [In 2013 the University issued guidance that a progressive tariff for work submitted late should be included in Examination Conventions. The Division recommended the following for a standard submission deadline of <i>Monday at noon</i>.</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="801 248 1608 504"> <thead> <tr> <th data-bbox="801 248 1368 312">Lateness</th> <th data-bbox="1368 248 1608 312">Cumulative penalty</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 312 1368 344">Up to 4 hours, i.e. up to Monday 4pm</td> <td data-bbox="1368 312 1608 344">1%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 344 1368 376">4 - 24 hours i.e. up to Tues 12 noon</td> <td data-bbox="1368 344 1608 376">10%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 376 1368 408">24 – 48 hours i.e. up to Weds 12 noon</td> <td data-bbox="1368 376 1608 408">20%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 408 1368 440">48 – 72 hours i.e. up to Thurs 12 noon</td> <td data-bbox="1368 408 1608 440">30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 440 1368 472">72 – 96 hours i.e. up to Fri 12 noon</td> <td data-bbox="1368 440 1608 472">40%</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="801 472 1368 504">96 – 101 hours i.e. up to Fri 5pm</td> <td data-bbox="1368 472 1608 504">50%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Lateness	Cumulative penalty	Up to 4 hours, i.e. up to Monday 4pm	1%	4 - 24 hours i.e. up to Tues 12 noon	10%	24 – 48 hours i.e. up to Weds 12 noon	20%	48 – 72 hours i.e. up to Thurs 12 noon	30%	72 – 96 hours i.e. up to Fri 12 noon	40%	96 – 101 hours i.e. up to Fri 5pm	50%
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4.4	Details of Examiners and rules on communicating with examiners ¹	The conventions should give the name, position, and institution of the external examiner(s) as well as the names of all internal examiners. In conjunction with this however, the conventions should underline the fact that candidates must not under any circumstances contact examiners directly.														
5. PGT conventions only – These points need to be included only in PGT examination conventions only.																
5.1	Usage of formative feedback early in the course	Education Committee guidance requires that PGT students receive written feedback on at least one designated piece of formative assessment during the course of the first term. It has been clarified that students completing problem sheets for classes will meet this requirement so long as each problem on a problem sheet is marked, and it is made clear where students have lost marks, and the problems are of the sort that they will be required to complete for their exams. Departments should articulate in the conventions when and how such formative feedback is being given and the purpose of it.														
5.2	Retakes and Distinctions	Education Committee guidance states that for PGT programmes where an element, or elements, of an examination have been failed at the first attempt, students are entitled to one further attempt. Unless otherwise specified by the special regulations for a course, marks for any element that has been successfully completed at the first attempt may be carried forward, and therefore it will only be necessary for students to re-sit the failed element(s). Candidates who have initially failed any element of assessment will not normally be eligible for the award of distinction. This should be made clear in the examination conventions.														
6. Comprehensibility																
6.1	Conventions should be clear and comprehensible and written <i>for students</i>	<p>There should be a clear introduction to outline what the purpose of the examination conventions is – i.e. to help the student understand how their work will be marked and how those marks will be used to arrive at a final classification/result. Tables, bulleted lists, etc. should be used to aid clarity.</p> <p>The use of a document separate to the Handbook is recommended, although examination conventions should be included within/referenced from Handbooks.</p> <p>A different version should not be produced for examiners: the examiners should use the same version to ensure consistency (with more detailed information appended if necessary).</p>														

¹ NB: this has been newly added to the Divisional guidance, to bring it into line with Education Committee guidance which requires the names of all examiners, and requires candidates to be reminded that they should not communicate directly with examiners.

Annex A – Procedures for Divisional approval of Examination Conventions within MPLS

The Division approves the conventions on a rolling basis, making recommendations to departments where necessary.

The Division's role is undertaken by the Academic Audit Committee.

- The Committee receives the examination conventions for the coming year's examinations (or where they are not available those for the previous year) at the same time as the examination reports for the examinations in question and the comments of the departmental academic committees on the reports and the conventions.
- The Academic Audit Committee may then comment on the conventions, either directly, or on the basis of the outcome of the examinations.
- By Trinity Term the Academic Audit Committee will review the examination conventions in detail against the Divisional guidance for examination conventions.
- Departmental academic committees might be asked to make some changes, or to incorporate changes arising from new policy initiatives. The Division will ask departments by Trinity Term to make such changes, and Departmental academic committees will then have the responsibility for implementing these changes for the following year's examinations. The Division will monitor this retrospectively, in that it will expect to see these changes in place in the conventions when it comes to look at them after the next set of examinations.
- Exceptionally, where significant problems are identified, or where particular issues have to be addressed in certain areas or across the board, the departmental academic committee(s) concerned could be asked to report back to the Academic Audit Committee on the changes made to the conventions ahead of them being issued to candidates for the subsequent year's examinations.
- When a departmental academic committee proposes a significant change to conventions, including for a new or substantially revised course, the draft conventions should be forwarded to the Divisional Office for approval by the Associate Head of Division (Academic).

Annex B – Example of Qualitative Criteria for marking individual units of assessment – Earth Sciences

[This is indicative only: criteria will be specific to the academic discipline concerned.]

Marks	Descriptor for WRITTEN ANSWERS	Descriptor for PROBLEMS	Descriptor for PROJECT ESSAYS
90% - 100%	Outstanding: full of insight; exceptional command of material; well organized with introduction, critical discussion and conclusions.	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show complete understanding; all assumptions and logical steps are clearly explained. Algebraic manipulation and/or calculations are without error.	Outstanding and original; well organized with clearly stated aims that are wholly realized; logical; critical analysis of wide range of data and literature; excellently presented and illustrated.
80% - 90%	Excellent answer; well structured and sound; evidence for both a wide knowledge and understanding of subject; goes well beyond lectures; effective grasp of literature and debate, effective critical analysis.	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show excellent understanding; nearly all assumptions and logical steps are clearly explained. Algebraic manipulation and/or calculations have little or no error.	Original; very well written and illustrated; thorough review of own data and thorough command of published literature; effective critical analysis; logical; strong intellectual input.
70% - 80%	Good to very good understanding of the issues; well written and well illustrated; evidence for integration of outside reading into course material; clear ability to make connections across the course; some critical analysis.	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show good to very good understanding; the principal assumptions and logical steps are clearly explained. Algebraic manipulation and/or calculations are without substantial error.	Well written and clearly structured; shows a good to very good understanding of the arguments; efficient use of data and relevant literature; some critical analysis; good intellectual input into design and course of project.
70% - 60% +	Competent; sound to good understanding of presented course material; coherent and reasonably illustrated; limited ability to make connections across the course. Small factual errors and /or omissions may be present.	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show sound to good understanding; the principal assumptions and logical steps are explained. There may be small errors in algebraic manipulation and/or calculations.	Competent; database and literature base adequate to good; coherent writing and good presentation; some input into design and course project. Some omissions in discussion and/or minor errors in understanding.

60% - 50%+	Answer based largely on lecture material; should be presented within an adequate framework. May not make connections across the coursework. Little detail or signs of originality. Large and small factual errors	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show adequate understanding; some assumptions are not stated, and there are gaps in the logic of the calculation. Errors in algebraic manipulation and/or calculation lead to incorrect or incomplete answers.	Pedestrian treatment of wide literature or data; or inadequate treatment of incomplete literature or data. Little or no intellectual input. Writing competent but lacks critical appraisal.
50%- 40%+	Based entirely on lecture material. Unstructured. Numerous errors. No connections made across coursework. Concepts disordered or flawed; many factual errors.	Formulation of the problem and choice (or derivation) of relevant equations show inadequate understanding. Assumptions are not stated, and there is little or no logic of the calculation. Errors in algebraic manipulation and/or calculation lead to unrealistic answers, or to no answer.	Approach basic, shallow, narrow. Poorly presented. Lack of understanding. Misguided selection of material. Lack of background material. Flawed arguments. Conclusions flawed or lacking.
40%- 0%	Significant inability to tackle the question. May answer an imaginary question.	Significant inability to tackle the question. May answer an imaginary question. Problem formulation non-existent. Incorrect or irrelevant formulae used; little or no calculation.	No adherence to project or essay outline or title. Little evidence of understanding the topic.