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Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford
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External Examiner's Report on MPhil and MSt in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology, 2013

Dear Vice-chancellor,

This is my first report as external examiner for the MPhil and MSt in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology for the Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics. I was responsible for looking at all examination papers and theses for candidates undertaking the MPhil and MSt degrees. The papers were set at an appropriate level and they were of a comparable standard to those that are set by other institutions with which I am familiar (including SOAS, University of London where I have taught and examined on the MA programme for 10 years, and University of Manchester where I was external examiner for 4 years).

Overall the examination process at Oxford is efficiently and clearly organised, and the scrutiny of examination papers which I carried out in March and the examination meetings in July were very well run. I suggested some changes in the form and content of some of the examination papers and these were duly accepted. The one and a half days set aside for reviewing exam scripts and theses and the examiners board meeting itself, chaired by Professor Aditi Lahiri on 2nd July, were efficiently organised and rigorously fair in accordance with the regulations and guidance to examiners.

I reviewed all examination scripts but spent most of my time on a few problem cases. For Paper A Question 3 there was wide disagreement on the marks given by the two examiners for MPhil candidates 715508, 700522 and MSt candidate 964893. The Department had assigned a third marker to these scripts and on review I agreed with the mark given by the third examiner (which agreed with the first marker in two cases). MPhil candidate 294571 failed to submit one of two pass/fail exercises for the Semantics course, while candidate 715508 failed to submit one of two pass/fail exercises for the Syntax course. These are problem-solving exercises and the examinable aspect of the course that candidates have to pass is an extended essay. Failure to submit exercises had never happened before in the Department so I was asked for advice by Prof Lahiri. I recommended we viva these two students to ascertain the reasons for their failure to submit required work (which is required however the students cannot fail the course overall by failing the exercises provided that they pass the other examination requirements). The students duly attended for a viva and we

ascertained that the Semantics essay mark for candidate 294571 should be remarked at 60% and hence that she pass the course overall. The viva for candidate 715508 resulted in identification of a problematic issue that the Department needs to address. She explained that although she had made her best efforts to attempt to solve a question on the Syntax exercise she was unable to successfully use the corpus and computer program required by the exercise to identify materials to answer the exercise question. This suggests that the question may not be solvable and further suggests that Exercises, as well as Exam scripts, should be vetted by the internal and external examiners. The members of the examination board agree that this should be done in future.

The overall quality of MPhil and MSt theses submitted by the 2013 cohort was high, with the thesis by MPhil candidate 190416 being exceptionally good and of almost publishable quality. The thesis submitted by MPhil candidate 635452 was problematic in my view as it had no clear research question, no methodology or method for data collection and analysis, no discussion of the reasons data sources were selected and no clear outcomes, or final summary and conclusions. It contained numerous errors of grammar and expression, and the internal examiners had proposed failing marks. The examination board proposed to viva the student, and an oral examination was duly carried out, which the student failed. The student also failed several examination papers and will be permitted to resit these and rewrite the thesis for examination in 2014.

The overall spread of results for both the MPhil and Mst is good, with all candidates except one passing, and 9 achieving Distinction results. I am impressed by the range and quality of work that postgraduate students in General Linguistics and Comparative Philology at Oxford produce. Students are expected to demonstrate a broad and expert knowledge of general linguistics (tested by Paper A in particular) and/or its application to particular languages or language families. The examination papers and theses I read showed a high level of engagement with complex Linguistic topics, an ability to carry out independent research and to write in a sophisticated manner. The level of performance of the 2013 students suggests that they receive very high quality teaching and supervision at Oxford and is a strong recommendation for the breadth and depth of the curriculum and the individual subjects offered by the staff in the Faculty.

In closing let me thank for their courteous efficiency and assistance Kate Dobson, secretary of the Centre for Linguistics and Philology and Prof Aditi Lahiri, Chair of Examiners.

If you have any questions about this letter please let me know.

Yours sincerely,



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