University of Oxford External Examiner Report - 2025/26

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EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT for the academic year 2025/26

1. Please check your title is correct, and select another option if needed

Professor

2. If you entered other, please specify

No response

3. Please check your first name(s) is correct, and amend if needed

Willem

4. Please check your last name is correct, and amend if needed

Hollmann

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

University of Edinburgh

6. Please note the course level of the course(s) you acted as external examiner for (The response to this question is pre-populated and should not be amended, the information is shown for your reference)

Postgraduate

7. Please note the Division(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for comes under (The response to this question is pre-populated and should not be amended, the information is shown for your reference)

Humanities Division

8. Please note the Faculty/Department/School(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner (The response to this question is pre-populated and should not be amended, the information is shown for your reference)

Faculty of Linguistics, Philology, and Phonetics

9. Please note the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for (The response to this question is pre-populated and should not be amended, the information is shown for your reference)

HLPO: Master of Philosophy in Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics (Year 1); HLPP: Master of Philosophy in Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics (Year 2); KLPP: Master of Studies in Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics

10. Please select whether you have just completed your first year of your term of office as external examiner, whether you have now completed your entire term of office, or whether you are in another year of your term of office

Other year of term of office

11. Please check the date the final Examination Board took place is correct, and amend if needed. If you acted at external examiner for multiple courses which had separate Examination Board meetings, please check the correct date for the last of the final Examination Board meetings that you were scheduled to attend is showing, and amend if needed.

07 July 2026

Part A

12. Are the academic standards and the achievements of students comparable with those in other UK higher education institutions of which you have experience? (Please refer to paragraph 15 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

12.1 A1. i) Academic standards of students

Yes

12.2 A1. ii) Academic achievements of students

Yes

13. Do the threshold standards for the programme appropriately reflect: (Please refer to paragraph 16 of the Guidelines for External Examiner Reports)

13.1 A2. i) The frameworks for higher education qualifications?

Yes

13.2 A2. ii) Any applicable subject benchmark statement?

Yes

14. In relation to the academic process:

14.1 A3. Does it measure student achievement rigorously and fairly against the intended outcomes of the programme(s)?

Yes

14.2 A4. Is it conducted in line with the University's policies and regulations?

Yes

15. In relation to the information and evidence provided to you:

15.1 A5. i) Did you receive it in a timely manner to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

15.2 A5. ii) Did you receive sufficient information to be able to carry out the role of External Examiner effectively?

Yes

16. Regarding your previous report, please indicate whether you:

16.1 A6. Received a written response to your previous report?

Yes

16.2 A7. Are satisfied that comments in your previous report have been properly considered, and where applicable, acted upon?

Yes

Part B

17. B1. 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?

The academic standards achieved continue to be excellent, being fully comparable with and in some respects/cases especially strong relative to those I have encountered at other HEIs in the UK. The work generally certainly demonstrates an appropriate level of conceptual, theoretical and methodological sophistication for the award. For the sake of completeness I would point to the law of small numbers: the size of the cohort is such that one needs to be careful in making generalisations too confidently.

18. B1. 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).

Student performance across the programmes was generally strong, with an appropriate spread of achievement across Pass, Merit and Distinction levels. The strongest work showed considerable theoretical and methodological sophistication, including some ambitious and original empirical research, while work at lower levels exhibited the kinds of limitations in analysis, scholarship or execution that would be expected to differentiate the relevant classification bands. I was satisfied that the overall profile of achievement was credible and broadly comparable with that which I have encountered on similar postgraduate programmes at other UK HEIs. Given the small size of some cohorts, particularly the MPhil, I would not attach significance to year-on-year variation in the proportions of Merits and Distinctions. My consideration of a number of borderline cases, including participation in two vivas, also gave me confidence that the final outcomes appropriately reflected the level of achievement demonstrated by the candidates.

19. B2. 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.

I was satisfied that the assessment process was rigorous, careful and equitable, and that the Examination Board conducted its business fairly and with appropriate regard to the University's regulations and guidance. In particular:

1. Draft examination questions were shared with me in good time, and the team was responsive to my comments.
2. The assessments were generally appropriate in scope and level, and the marking and moderation process was undertaken carefully.
3. Where particular issues arose — including discrepancies between markers, borderline cases and assessment irregularities — these were identified, discussed transparently and resolved with close attention to fairness and the relevant conventions.
4. Students' work was made available to me sufficiently in advance, with additional material available in person where necessary, enabling thorough scrutiny of individual cases.
5. Deliberations at the Examination Board were collegial, thoughtful and appropriately sensitive to individual circumstances. I was particularly reassured by the care taken over mitigating circumstances and by the use of vivas in two borderline cases where further evidence of students' attainment was judged appropriate.

Overall, I was confident that students were treated equitably and that decisions were reached through a robust and appropriately documented process.

20. B3. Are there any issues which you feel should be brought to the attention of supervising committees in the faculty/department, division or wider University? If you acted as external examiner for multiple courses, please indicate whether the issues related to all or selected courses.

I would again like to commend colleagues in Linguistics — academic and Professional Services — for the care and professionalism with which the examination process was conducted. I have the following observations which may merit consideration at Faculty and, in some cases, Divisional level:

1. Examination rubrics. One candidate misinterpreted the rubric for the General Paper in Linguistic Theory ("Candidates should answer THREE questions from THREE different sections") as requiring three questions from each of three sections rather than three questions in total. The Board dealt with the case carefully and fairly, but I recommend revising the wording for future sittings so that the intended requirement is entirely explicit — for example, "Candidates should answer three questions in total, choosing one question from each of three different sections." It may also be useful to check the wording against the equivalent Prelims rubric and align the two where appropriate.
2. Examination materials. In one MPhil Greek examination the texts set did not fully correspond to those approved in advance. The Board considered the resulting circumstances very carefully and reached what I regarded as a fair and proportionate resolution.
3. Extensions. I raised the volume of extensions last year, and this remains a concern. It was noted at the Examination Board that more than 70% of papers had received an extension, with only a minority submitted by the original deadline. I recognise both the legitimate reasons for many extensions and the constraints imposed by graduation timetables, and note that the issue is by no means unique to Oxford. That said, the scale now has implications for staff workload and for the smooth operation of examining. I therefore welcome the Faculty's intention to consider the issue further through GSC and think it may also merit attention at Divisional level.

These observations relate to particular assessment processes rather than to concerns about the overall integrity of the examination system, in which I continue to have full confidence.

21. B4. 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.

Good practice: I was particularly impressed by the care taken with borderline and otherwise difficult cases. Decisions were not made mechanically from numerical profiles. Instead, where appropriate, additional evidence was considered, and in two borderline MSt cases the Board used vivas to establish more securely the level of understanding demonstrated by the candidates. I participated in both vivas and found them a rigorous and valuable means of informing the final academic judgement. More generally, the open and detailed discussion of difficult cases at the Examination Board was an example of very good assessment practice.

The breadth and intellectual depth of the postgraduate provision in Linguistics also remain a considerable strength, ranging from historical and philological work through the core areas of linguistic theory to experimental, computational, psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic approaches.

Enhancement opportunities: In one section of the General Paper there were several fairly substantial differences between first and second markers. Although only a minority of scripts were affected and the discrepancies were ultimately reconciled, it may be worth considering a brief calibration exercise before full marking begins — for example, independent marking and discussion of a small sample of scripts — where substantial marker divergence has occurred previously.

I would also support the suggestion arising from the Board discussion that invitations to viva should, where possible, make very explicit the purpose of the viva — for example, whether it concerns the pass/fail boundary or a possible higher classification. Greater transparency here may help reduce unnecessary anxiety for candidates.

22. B5. a) 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.

I would again like to record my particular thanks to Ms Camilla Rock for the excellent organisation and communication surrounding the examination process, to Ms Liberty Brown for her support during my visit, and to Professor Colin Phillips and the other members of the Board for the openness and collegiality of our discussions. I was especially grateful for the opportunity to participate fully in the consideration of difficult and borderline cases, including the two vivas held on the day of the Board.

I also appreciated the detailed response to my previous External Examiner's report. It was helpful to learn of the Faculty's subsequent work on generative AI guidance, to have the position regarding access to marker comments clarified, and to understand more fully the existing provision in Research Methods and Quantitative Methods. My second year as External Examiner has again been an extremely positive experience.

23. B5. b) Now that your term of office is concluded, please provide an overview here.

No response

Thank you for completing your 2025/26 external examiner report for the University of Oxford