

University of Oxford External Examiner Report - 2024/25

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EXTERNAL EXAMINER REPORT for the academic year 2024/25

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

Eric

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

Schneider

5. Please enter the name of your home institution

London School of Economics and Political Science

6. Please check the course level of the course(s) you acted as external examiner for is correct, and select another option if needed

Postgraduate

7. Please check the Division(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for comes under are correct, and amend if needed

Humanities Division; Social Sciences Division

8. Please check the Faculty/Department(s) responsible for that the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for comes under are correct, and amend if needed

Department of Economics; Faculty of History

9. Please check the course(s) that you acted as external examiner for are correct, and amend if needed

JESH: Master of Science in Economic & Social History; JSMT: Master of Science in History of Science, Medicine & Technology; HESA: Master of Philosophy in Economic & Social History Year 1; HESH: Master of Philosophy in Economic and Social History (Year 2); HSMT: Master of Philosophy in History of Science, Medicine & Technology; TSMT: Master of Philosophy in History of Science, Medicine & Technology

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

First 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 latest Examination Board meeting is showing, and amend if needed.

18 September 2025

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

Yes

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

No response

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 are conservative relative to standards at LSE where I work. This year there may be only one or two students who end up with a distinction overall in the ESH programme. This is far lower than at LSE where 25-30% received distinctions on our MSc programme.

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 was excellent. The dissertations that I read were of a high standard, though many seemed to have some significant shortcomings that examiners used to give them relatively low marks.

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.

The assessment methods are very good with detailed comments provided to justify marks. There is however some inconsistency in marking across advanced papers with some advanced papers showing a mark ceiling in the low 70s and others giving a much wider range of marks.

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.

There were three issues that I think need to be taken forward:

1) It seems that Oxford's relatively lenient extension policy is creating a lot of work for examiners and exam boards. It was strange to conduct an exam board with so many missing marks and candidates who could not be classified. LSE has really restricted access to extensions since the permissive days of the pandemic, and this has helped us to establish clear rules about submission and to manage the marking workload effectively. I think that the faculty should consider something similar.

2) There seemed to be considerable heterogeneity in the marks across advanced papers this year. With this being my first year as external examiner, it is hard to know whether this is just statistical noise or a pattern, but the share of students getting distinctions on some advanced papers was very high and very low in others. In addition, the range of marks employed varied a lot with some examiners agreeing marks in the high 70s and others capped around 70. This creates inequality across students, especially since their average mark counts toward their classification. It would be good to have a discussion among markers about standards and encourage markers reticent to give marks above 70 to be more generous.

3) This year, there will likely be only one or two students in the entire MSc/MPhil ESH cohort to receive a distinction, and these will only be achieved because the exam board overruled the normal classification scheme. The highest dissertation mark (of those considered at the exam boards) was a 70, making it extremely difficult for candidates to get a distinction overall. Having looked at some of these dissertations, I can say at LSE we would have been more generous. This seems like a problem to me. It could potentially be explained by three factors: a) relatively poor students were admitted; b) students did not receive adequate support in developing their dissertations and other coursework; or c) the marking was too harsh, making it difficult for students to achieve high marks. I cannot say for sure which of the three (or combination of the three) is most valid, but I think the ESH group needs to consider this carefully and ensure that in the future there are opportunities for students to achieve their best work and be fairly assessed on it.

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.

See point 1 on question B3, but otherwise I think things are working well.

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.

Nothing to add.

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

No response

Thank you for completing your 2024/25 external examiner report for the University of Oxford