

Academic & Student Support Services  
Academic Registrar  
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Sent by email to [mas58@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mas58@cam.ac.uk)

13 October 2015

Dear Ms Steane,

**Re: Institutional Response: External Examiner Annual Report 2014 – 2015**

I am writing further to the receipt of your External Examiner's Report for MArch Dissertations.

Your Report has been considered by the School in accordance with our approved procedures. I am, therefore, now in a position to respond on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor to the main points you had raised.

**Issue(s) Highlighted:**

1. your suggestion that students pursuing topics in the history/theory area might benefit from being offered an alternative thesis model to the one currently outlined;
2. your request for sight of a range of stronger, mid-range and weaker work to review and for digital copies of dissertations in future;
3. your indication that dissertation guidance offered to students should be updated with consideration of the support offered to students regarding focus and methodology.;

**The following response has been provided on behalf of the School:**

1. The School is looking at this in its revisions to its Dissertation Handbook for 2015-2016, a similar point having been made by another of its other External Examiners. In particular, the School will be looking at how the structure of the dissertation is set out in Handbook, with a view to presenting the scope for more variety in terms of asking questions, approach a subject and the structuring of a piece of writing;
2. This comment has arisen from the fact that dissertations selected for your review on the basis of subject matter were generally of a low standard by comparison to the year average. The dissertations had been posted before the internal examining process had been undertaken. The School's intention is to give each examiner a spread of dissertations in this coming year that

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reflect the range of marks awarded in the internal examining process. This will probably mean sending the dissertations out later than has been done previously. The School will in future make hard and digital copies available to its External Examiners.

3. The School will review the guidance when revising its Dissertation Handbook for 2015-2016. The matter will be included in the introductory session at the start of term and your advice will be drawn to the attention of dissertation tutors.

The School has commented that “There is somewhat of a suggestion here that students are expected to employ the Dissertation Handbook as a manual, without much guidance from the module leader and tutors in the research and writing process. This is far from the case, and weaker students are often given support at a level which considerably exceeds the stated requirements for staff input.

However, given that this examiner saw the weaker students, these comments are useful in alerting us to the need to do more to guide these in particular to reach a satisfactory level by helping to structure the process and identify the focus of research even more clearly”.

**The University is pleased to note your positive comments including:**

1. your positive indications regarding the programme structure, academic standards and assessment process.

I hope that you will find this response satisfactory and we thank you for your continued support of the programme.

In order to meet the expectations of the QAA Quality Code, both the External Examiner Annual Report and this Institutional Response will be published on the University website and will be available to all students and staff.

The University’s provision of the formal Institutional Response is not intended to constrain direct communication between schools and their External Examiners. Schools are encouraged to discuss with their External Examiners any matters of detail raised in their Reports and, more widely, any issues impacting on the quality and standards of awards, including possible changes to programmes.

We are most grateful for your comments and for your support in this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Mr Simon Wright  
Academic Registrar