

Examinations and Assessments 2020-21: Information for Students in the Faculty of History about Mitigation measures

Please note:

- this document applies to students on the History and History and Politics Triposes;
- a statement concerning mitigations for History and Modern Languages students will be released by the MMLL Faculty in the coming days;
- any of the following measures which relate specifically to classing are not applicable to students taking Prelim to Part I or Prelim to Part II History.

Following the meeting of General Board's Education Committee in early February, all students were sent information about changes agreed to the assessment framework to accommodate the impact of covid-19 during 2020-1.

On 15 February, the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education wrote to all students explaining this framework and drawing attention to a series of measures that will be applied to all programmes across the University. These constitute a form of 'safety net' and include:

(1) Cohort Equity

Examination boards are required to ensure cohort equity, namely that class distribution for this year's cohort of students will be no less favourable than the average class distribution for the last three years before the pandemic. In the Faculty of History, cohort equity will apply to students taking the Historical Tripos and to those taking the History and Politics Tripos. In the latter case, because this is a new programme and benchmarking results for the three years preceding the pandemic do not exist, we will be establishing appropriate proxy mechanisms for ensuring cohort equity. Cohort equity can only work to your advantage.

(2) Automatic Progression for First and Second Year Students

All first and second year students who take all of their required assessments will automatically progress to the next year of the Tripos, except where academic misconduct is found. Students who have been unable to take all of the required assessments must present a case to EAMC to allow them to proceed.

(3) Individual Mitigation

Students who consider that their performance in examinations or coursework has been adversely affected by the pandemic in acute and exceptional ways will be able to apply for examination allowances via EAMC. They should consult with their college Directors of Studies and Tutors about this process.

Faculties were invited to consider, in consultation with student representatives, whether additional adjustments might be needed to address forms of disruption and disadvantage that have not been sufficiently mitigated by either their existing assessment plans or by the mechanisms above. In the interests of equity across the University, GBEC established some parameters within which we are required to work. This includes the principle that no papers can be dropped from the assessment and that all assessments must be summative. In considering a set of further optional adjustments, Faculties have been enjoined to ensure that

the learning objectives of our Triposes are met, that the academic integrity of the degrees is maintained, and that unjustified levels of grade inflation are avoided.

The assessment plans which were communicated to students last term were drawn up both in the light of our experience last year and of the feedback we received from students, and in anticipation that the current academic year would pose particular challenges. Those plans already entailed several significant mitigations, including extended 6 hour time windows for examinations that would usually be three hours in duration, and the allowance that students can consult their notes and other resources in writing their answers, rather than the traditional closed book format. In other respects, the principle underpinning these plans was to make assessment as close as possible to normal practice, not least in order to prepare candidates in years 1 and 2 to write examinations following the conventional format in subsequent years.

As all students will be aware, the Faculty has discussed these matters extensively with student representatives, whose work in surveying and gathering opinion, conducting polls, and organising open meetings has greatly helped us to understand the anxieties, pressures and difficulties that students have experienced. We have received a number of separate letters and emails from individual students and groups of students, which we have considered. We have also consulted with the Chairs of Examiners and Directors of Studies, as well as with the departments with whom we share Triposes, namely POLIS and MMLL. There remains a very wide range of opinions on what forms of mitigation are most appropriate. Unfortunately, this means that no single mitigation strategy will be optimal for every student.

We have also consulted with the external examiners of our programmes, who are responsible for ensuring that our degrees maintain parity and uphold standards in keeping with other universities in the sector, and especially the Russell Group. Our external examiners have warmly commended the Faculty's approach to this matter, and our willingness to engage with and accommodate the difficulties students are currently facing, while avoiding unsettling changes to the forms of examination for which students have been preparing since the start of the year, which may not be in students' best interests at this stage. Their experience of the arrangements in place at their own institutions, which include Oxford, has also helped to guide our deliberations. At Oxford, the University has decreed that no other mitigating measures beyond cohort equity can be applied.

In reaching conclusions, we have had to balance many competing factors and imperatives. We have also sought to ensure that all students are treated equitably. This includes both Part II students who are taking dissertations and those who are not.

The outcomes of these careful deliberations, which have been approved by the Faculty Board, are as follows. In combination with the blanket measures for cohort equity and progression and the usual procedures managed by EAMC described above, we believe that these provide appropriate mitigation for the difficult and stressful circumstances students have faced this year while ensuring that the degrees that are vital for your future employment and for admission to postgraduate study retain their value. We also want to reassure you that all universities, including Cambridge, are aware of the circumstances in which students seeking to continue to Masters degrees are writing examinations.

(1) The weakest paper will be excluded from the calculation of the class for each student in Part I and Part II.

In History Part I, students will therefore be classified on 10 out of 12 marks. In History Part II, students will be classified on 8 out of 10 marks.

In History and Politics Parts IA, IB and II, students will be classified on 6 out of 8 marks.

The weakest paper will be identified as the one which impacts most unfavourably on classing, regardless of whether it is a long essay, dissertation, or exam script. It will make no difference whether the paper has been set by History, or another Faculty or Department.

The marks for the paper discounted for classification purposes will nevertheless appear on each student's transcript in both History and History and Politics.

(2) The 6-hour window for examination will be maintained.

The University's examination office will schedule examinations to start between 11am and 1.30pm to take account of international students sitting in different time zones. The timetable will be released at the start of Easter term. The examination period is likely to be extended, perhaps as late as 2 July, but examinations for final year students will be prioritised for scheduling to enable them to graduate. Students should expect some examinations to be scheduled on consecutive days. This is one reason why the Faculty has opted against 24 hour examination windows: two 24 hour exams in succession would be extremely stressful. The University allows only 6 and 24 hour windows, nothing in between.

(3) The format of examination papers will not be altered.

There will be no reduction in the number of questions students are required to answer; nor will there be an increase in the number of questions on the examination paper. Past papers will thus remain an accurate guide to the format of the papers you will sit this year.

(4) Students submitting dissertations and assessed essays may choose to include an impact statement with their work.

This should detail how the pandemic and lockdown has negatively affected your research, e.g. by limiting access to study materials or archives. These statements should **not** refer to personal circumstances or health issues. Examiners will be asked to take account of the impact of this disruption in evaluating the dissertation or essay.

Examiners of scripts will also be asked not to penalise students for failing to refer to material which they may not have been able to access due to remote working and library constraints.

(5) Students who need an extension of up to 14 days on a Dissertation or Long Essay may apply for this directly via the Faculty. They will not be expected to supply medical evidence. In deciding whether to seek an extension, they should consider the knock-on effects that this may have on preparation and revision for other assessments. Applications for longer than 14 days should be made in the usual way, via EAMC.

(6) Measures for students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD)

Robust processes will be put in place by the Faculty and University for flagging scripts, essays and dissertations written by students with Specific Learning Difficulties to the attention of examiners. Examiners are obliged to take account of these in assessing the work, to the extent that they should not penalise minor spelling or grammatical errors.

Students taking History papers in 2021 can see a summary of this information on our [‘Frequently Asked Questions’](#). More detailed guidance about the practicalities of the assessment, including how to apply for extensions, will be circulated by the Director of Undergraduate Studies shortly.

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