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Professor Jan Saxl
Chair
Faculty Board of Mathematics

Dear Jan

In October 2002 the Faculty Board established a Committee on the Structure of Part II. After extensive consultation and discussion the new Part II was introduced in the academic year 2004/5. The Faculty Board asked the Part II Committee to hold a final meeting after the statistics had become available from the first examination under the new arrangements. I write to report on this final meeting, which took place on 11 July 2005.

The Part II Committee had available the Mark List for the 2005 Part II examination, the draft Part II Examiners' report, and the results from student questionnaires. I append to this letter a spreadsheet and charts based on the Mark List, also available at `http://www.statslab.cam.ac.uk/∼frank/PartII/` .

The Committee was pleased to note that on the whole the new arrangements had worked well, and that the C courses had been taken seriously by a wide range of students, as intended. The first year had been an impressive effort involving nearly all the Faculty. The only serious cause of concern was the two C courses which did not (in different ways) fulfil their role.

The Part II Committee noted the small numbers of attempts on the C course 'Geometry of group actions'. This course should be easier, and we recommend that its title be changed to 'Geometry and groups'. It is important that C courses fulfil their role, to be of general interest, straightforward and accessible, and the Committee was reassured that DPMMS have this clearly in mind for next year. The Committee also noted the small number of alphas on the C course 'Mathematical biology', and was reassured that DAMTP plan to make the course more straightforward next year.

Several further points were discussed concerning other courses, but we expect these points to arise naturally when the Faculty Board, Departments, the Curriculum Committee and the Teaching Committee study the data from examinations and questionnaires, which we strongly urge that they do. An obvious general point, that may nevertheless bear reiteration by the Faculty Board, is that Section I questions should be shorter and more straightforward than those in Section II.

There is a limited number of lecture timetable slots, and we hope that the Faculty Board, advised by the Curriculum Committee, will seriously consider the occasional termination of an unsuccessful course, to leave room for new developments.

The Committee welcomed the Examiners' exploration of different merit marks. The merit mark is, of course, intended to follow the Examiners' judgements, and not the other way around. The Committee echo the Examiners' commendation of David Harris for his work on the spreadsheet for input of marks.

A key issue for Examiners is comparability of questions. The Committee strongly recommend that the Faculty Board commission Dr Altham to perform a two-way analysis of variance of the Mark Book. The aim of this analysis will be to identify whether some courses had Section II questions which were significantly harder, after taking into account the varying ability of different candidates. Each year, the Chair of Examiners should be able to let Examiners know which courses had questions which were significantly too hard in the previous year.

Yours sincerely

c.c. Professor Geoffrey Grimmett, Head DPMMS
Professor Tim Pedley, Head DAMTP