

MSc in CRIMINOLOGY and CRIMINAL JUSTICE

REPORT OF THE EXAMINERS 2003

Structure of the Examination

The elements of the examination were as follows.

- **Option Essays** In each of Michaelmas and Hilary Terms, students were required to take *two* optional seminar courses (out of a choice of three in Michaelmas and four in Hilary). These were examined by essays, the titles of which were posted on Friday of 4th week, to be submitted by noon on Friday of ninth week. Each essay was to be no less than 3,500 and no more than 5,000 words, including footnotes, but excluding the bibliography. In Trinity Term, students were required to take *one* of three optional seminar courses; this course was assessed in the same way as the optional courses in Michaelmas and Hilary terms.
- **Examination** Students were required to take a Core Course, entitled ‘Analytical Criminology and Criminal Justice’, in Michaelmas and Hilary terms. This course was examined by a three-hour written paper on the first Monday of Trinity Term.
- **Dissertation** The students were also required to submit a Dissertation of no less than 12,000 and no longer than 15,000 words by noon on Friday of ninth week of Trinity Term.
- **To pass the Examination** as a whole, students had to achieve an average mark of 60% or above for the five option essays, and a mark of 60% or above for the Core Course Examination Paper and the Dissertation. Students who received a mark of 70% or over on more than half these papers were awarded a Distinction (for this purpose the Core Course Examination Paper and the Dissertation each counted as two papers).

Difficulties Experienced

New regulations were agreed at the start of the year 2002-2003, the chief changes being that the five assessed essays for optional courses are now regarded as one element of the examination for the purposes of achieving a pass mark. Candidates are now required to obtain an average of mark of at least 60% over all five essays, rather than at least 60% in each. This change obviated need for resubmission of failed essays and rendered it no longer necessary for a candidate to have passed four of these essays before being admitted to take the Core Course examination paper. This change has worked well.

A general problem remained concerning the timing of the publication of Option Essay Titles. These were posted on the Friday of 4th week, two weeks before the Option classes were finished. Several teachers reported a dropping off in attendance and/or preparation in the final two weeks of the Option Courses as students, not surprisingly, chose to concentrate their efforts on the assessed essays. It was therefore decided that next year the course will be front-loaded to allow all teaching in both Options and the Core Course to be completed before the essay titles are announced at the new time of the end of 6th week. The submission date remains the same, namely Friday of 9th week. This change to timing was approved by the Law Faculty and will come into effect in 2003-2004.

In respect of the Option Essays, one candidate was referred to the Proctors because of concerns that the work was plagiarised. The Proctors ruled that the candidate's essay should be disregarded and that, exceptionally, they should be permitted to submit a replacement essay the following term.

Marking

Each option essay, dissertation and core course examination paper was double blind marked by two Examiners, or an Examiner and an Assessor, who then met to see whether they could agree a mark. In nearly all cases there was no substantial difference between the marks given and so agreement was easily reached. In a few cases, where the paper was on the borderline of pass/fail or pass/distinction, the paper was marked by a third examiner or assessor.

All papers where a mark of 60% or below had been given were sent to the External Examiner, as were papers where a mark of 69% or 59% had been awarded, as well as a few papers where the mark had been between 60% and 70%, to ensure that the External was satisfied with the general level of marking. Altogether the External examiner read 3 of the 14 core course examination scripts, 12 of the 70 essays, and 1 of the 14 dissertations.

Design and Evaluation of Research Option (Michaelmas Term)

Nine students took this option. Their performance was more or less as expected, although some candidates confused or over-complicated some of the methodological concepts. Some did not refer adequately to the methodological literature, but on the whole candidates succeeded in illustrating their arguments with criminological or criminal justice examples when discussing 'quality' of research. In the weaker research proposals, candidates did not provide enough detail on the planned research design and data collection, and spent too long on introducing the topic or covering the literature. Only one candidate obtained a mark of distinction.

Three candidates chose the 'quality of research' question, while six decided to tackle the research proposal.

Policing Option (Michaelmas Term)

Nine candidates took this option. Seven candidates answered the question on the police complaints system; one candidate answered the question on the conceptual distinction between coercive and consensual policing; and one candidate answered on the distinction between the police and other regulatory agencies. There was one mark of distinction, one failing mark, and the remainder passed. Those essays that failed to reach distinction did so because they tended to pay too much attention to one or other of the issues in the question to the exclusion of the others or because they dealt with issues not strictly relevant to the question. Many of the papers contained drafting, typographical, or grammatical errors that should not occur at Master's level. Most would have benefited from better proof reading before submission to eliminate these errors. Some essays contained sentences that were opaque or poorly argued.

Psychology and Psychiatry in the Criminal Justice System Option (Michaelmas Term)

There were seven candidates in total, of whom three answered the question on whether mentally disordered persons are dangerous; three answered on the role of psychiatrists and psychologists in court; and one on the insanity defence. The average mark was 66%, indicating reasonable to good answers from the candidates. No candidate received less than 62%, and two marks of distinction were awarded. Frequently identified weaknesses included not using the exact wording of essay titles, adapting them for their essay and as a consequence failing to answer the question adequately; poor English style (disconnected sentences and repetition of arguments); poor referencing style (despite time spent in class on the importance of proper referencing); and lack of reading beyond provided lists. Frequently identified strengths included evidence of original thought and arguments; good 'signposting' of the essay structure; and good understanding and arrangement of relevant literature.

Community Penalties Option (Michaelmas Term)

Three candidates took this option. All answered the first question on the multiple objectives of community sentences for adults. Two of the essays were reasonably good and provided evidence of wide and up-to-date reading including knowledge of the White Paper 'Justice for All'. One candidate obtained a mark of distinction, one obtained a pass mark, and one obtained a mark of 58%.

Dilemmas of Custody Option (Hilary Term)

Nine candidates took this option and all passed. Two obtained a mark of distinction and the remaining seven were awarded marks between 67% and 60%. Four candidates answered the question on the maxim that prisoners are sent to prison as punishment not for punishment, four answered the question on changes in the size and nature of the prison population, and one candidate answered on parole. In general, far too little use was made of empirical research on the nature of the prison experience, on trends in the prison population, or on decision-making by prison authorities and parole boards respectively.

Human Rights and Criminal Justice Option (Hilary Term)

There were 12 candidates of whom 6 answered on evidence obtained in breach of Human Rights, 5 answered on the question of whether prisoners' rights are a contradiction in terms, and one answered on obstacles to the operation of the International Criminal Court. The standard of answers to all three questions was good. Four essays received marks at Distinction level. There was evidence of good familiarity with general principles, and of the use of sources well beyond the recommended texts. The reason why the third question attracted only one answer was probably that its subject matter arose out of the final seminar, some two weeks after the essay titles had been published, and most students would have wished to start work on their essays before that.

Restorative Justice Option (Hilary Term)

Seven candidates took this option. Question 1, on the use of restorative justice in cities in industrial societies, attracted two candidates; Question 2, on what restorative justice offers victims, attracted four candidates, and Question 3, on proportionality safeguards, was answered by just one candidate. There were some thoughtful, well-drafted answers, which responded critically to the question set and deployed persuasive arguments based on a close reading and deep understanding of the relevant literature. At the other end of the spectrum was a cluster of answers that tended towards the descriptive, contained many drafting errors, and were assertive rather than analytical. These essays tended to be rather disjointed. Three candidates were awarded marks of distinction and four were awarded pass marks.

International Perspectives on the Death Penalty Option (Trinity Term)

There were seven candidates: two answered the first question on the likelihood of abolition, three answered the second question on the arguments and evidence to be adduced in the case for abolition, and two answered the third on alternatives to capital punishment. Several answers were thorough and wide-ranging and the best was very intelligent and original. Identified weaknesses included repetition and insufficiently critical discussion of the issues.

Sentencing Option (Trinity Term)

There were 4 candidates: two answered Question 1 on previous convictions, and one each answered Question 2 on mitigation, and Question 3 on the Criminal Justice Bill 2003. The general standard was good, showing both a familiarity with relevant sources and some thought about the normative issues. One candidate was significantly weaker than the others, largely because the second part of that essay closely followed one of the textbooks. One candidate was significantly stronger than the others, and the first part of that essay is one of the best critical accounts of von Hirsch's work on previous convictions that the examiners had read.

Comparative Criminal Justice Option (Trinity Term)

There were three candidates. Two candidates answered on the issue of transplants, the other on the benefits and methodological problems of comparative research. The quality of the essays was reasonably good and at best they engaged effectively with the academic debates. There was, however, a common tendency to focus on theoretical issues at the expense of substantive comparisons.

Core Course Examination

Four candidates received a mark of distinction and all but one achieved the pass mark of 60% or above. The general quality of the scripts was good. The best candidates were careful to answer the question directly, to organise their arguments clearly, and to support their answers with ample reference to criminological research and academic debates. The weaker scripts tended to give inadequate regard to the question set and to rely overly on unsubstantiated assertion rather than reasoned argument or research. Among a number of unlikely observations noted were the claim that crime prevention had become a 'club of the good' (rather than a 'club good'); that Garland wrote about the 'culture of culture' (rather than the 'culture of control'); that '£100 was spent on CCTV between 1994 and 1997'; and that 'David Downes was a leading figure in the Chicago School'!

Twelve questions were set (one of them with an either/or option). All but three of the 13 questions were answered by at least one candidate. Those questions not answered were on organised crime, decision-making in the criminal justice process, and the move to actuarial justice. The most popular questions were on crime prevention (10 candidates), prison privatisation (8), and discrimination (6).

Dissertations

The range of topics chosen was wide and interesting. Some sat at the margins of the syllabus and, in general, these were not tackled as successfully as those clearly within the

range of reading set for the core course or options. All candidates kept within the word limit and most presented well-researched and well-written essays. All passed.

Three candidates were awarded a mark of distinction: all were characterised by extensive reading, effective engagement with the research literature, and a clear ability to mount, sustain, and substantiate a coherent argument. The remainder were of variable quality. The weaker dissertations tended to rely overly on the literature and suffered from poor structure or lack of clarity. The best were thorough, clear, gave evidence of wide reading and critical engagement with the literature.

Overall Results of the Examination

Fourteen students sat the examination. Thirteen candidates passed and one failed (but will have the opportunity to resit next year). Three candidates were awarded an overall mark of distinction. One of these gained distinction marks in every element of the course (option essays, core course examination and dissertation). Another gained distinction marks in everything bar two option essays. Overall the performance of the candidates was very creditable.

L.H. Zedner (Chair)

A.J.Ashworth

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