

MSc in CRIMINOLOGY and CRIMINAL JUSTICE

REPORT OF THE EXAMINERS 2004

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 6th 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 two 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).

New Regulations

A small but significant change in the regulations approved by the Law Faculty and displayed in the Regulations came into effect in 2003-2004. This has meant that the essay titles for the optional courses have been displayed on the Friday of week 6 of each term, rather than week 4 as before. This has had the beneficial effect of ensuring that participation in the optional courses does not fall off after the fourth week, and it does not appear to have adversely affected the quality of the essays. To compensate for the shortening of the time period in which student must write their essays under the new

regulations, the teaching of the core course now concludes at the end of week six of each of the first two terms, two weeks earlier than in previous years.

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.

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. Altogether the External examiner read 13 of the 55 essays, one Core Course examination script and one Dissertation.

Methods 1 Option (Michaelmas Term)

Five candidates took this option. For the essay two candidates chose to discuss Brown (1995) and three chose to examine Graham and Bowling (1995); none chose Chin (1996), the only book-length study. There were four passes and one failing mark (confirmed by the external examiner). Two of the four passes were high passes. The essay that failed did so because it did not discuss in sufficient depth the research design of the study under scrutiny. Some essays were better presented and more carefully argued than others, but overall the candidates engaged with the methodological shortcomings and merits of the studies under analysis, in particular in respect of validity, reliability and survey design.

Students taking Methods 1 (and also Methods 2, below) were also required to answer weekly a series of questions set by the course instructor. This assignment allowed candidates to put into practice ideas and techniques discussed in class. The weekly assignments were set on a pass/fail basis. If failed, candidates were allowed to resubmit the work a week later. In two instances, candidates were asked to resubmit. All candidates passed this requirement.

British Policing Option (Michaelmas Term)

Of the nine students who took this option, 7 elected to answer question 1 on the implications of the rise of proactive and intelligence-led policing for the public's perception of police accountability and the effectiveness of the police complaints system. Whilst none of the candidate failed, most would have benefited from better integration of the two parts of the question. Many produced rather unbalanced answers, most spending too much time on policing and too little on the complaints process and not fully integrating the two discussions. Furthermore, most candidates focused on intelligence-

led policing, paying little attention to other forms of proactive policing (indeed only one candidate made it clear that many investigations involved both proactive and reactive elements). Overall, there was too little on the effectiveness of the current system and the likely effectiveness of the future system.

Two candidates tackled question 3 on the persuasiveness of the legalistic-bureaucratic conception of the relationship between policing and legal rules. Both passed, with one distinction. Both described the literature very well, using Chan's work predominantly to explore the limitations of the conception, but only one essay was sufficiently critical/analytical to justify a Distinction.

No candidate answered question 2 on community policing. In many essays there were errors of grammar and syntax, although most were otherwise quite well written.

Sentencing Option (Michaelmas Term)

Seven of the eight candidates chose to attempt the second essay, on whether the courts ought to take account, when sentencing, of the effects of the offence on the particular victim. The seminar on this and related issues was by far the most lively of the term. However, when it came to writing the assessed essay, some candidates failed to focus properly on the question asked, which was both normative and specific. Some gave little attention to the normative aspects, and kept close to judicial decisions on the point. Some treated the essay as a general invitation to range over victim-related issues in sentencing. The better candidates, however, showed a range of reading and a willingness to engage with the theoretical literature and to bring it to bear on the precise point.

One candidate answered the question on the future of sentencing guidelines under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, and produced an essay that showed considerable reading and an awareness of some of the problematic issues.

The quality of writing and of referencing was variable, but in most cases adequate.

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

Four of the six candidates elected to answer question 2, on dangerous people with severe personality disorders, and two elected to answer question 3 on legal animosity towards expert testimony. No candidate answered the question on investigatory psychology.

Both assessors were impressed with the general standard of the answers this year. Three Distinctions were awarded, and the external examiner recommended a fourth. The essays were generally well argued, displayed evidence of original thought and critical analysis, and were well 'signposted' in order to answer the question. Only one essay fell short of these generally high standards, but it still gained a pass.

Methods 2 Option (Hilary Term)

Five candidates took this option. Three candidates chose question 3, while one each of the other candidates chose question 1 and question 2. There was no failing mark. Among the five essays, two were excellent, two obtained a high pass and one a low pass. As stated in the Handbook, ‘candidates were expected to present a research proposal of their own.’ Some essays were more comprehensive and better argued than others, but overall they all included the main elements a research proposal needs to contain.

Desistance Option (Hilary Term)

All five candidates answered the same question, perhaps because it was the shortest to read and appeared to relate to only one of the six seminars in the course. In answering this question it was particularly important to consider the effects of imprisonment in relation to desistance research and ‘what works’ research. Some of the candidates only barely made these links. Some did not attend to the precise wording of the question, and one candidate only began to address the question half way through the essay. All candidates demonstrated that they had covered at least some of the key texts, but the best answers, one in particular, were distinguished by their use of additional material. The essays were, generally, well structured and the points clearly expressed, but one was distinguished by an unusual grasp of most of the issues and by its skilful integration of material from across the course. The external examiner agreed that this essay merited a Distinction.

Human Rights and Criminal Justice Option (Hilary Term)

Five candidates took this option. Four of the five chose to attempt the essay on the privilege against self-incrimination (Q.2), and the other tackled the question of police powers (Q.1), leaving the third question on prisoners’ rights unanswered. The general standard was good, with a willingness to engage with the key decisions (both majority and minority judgments) and to comment on the main issues. Only one Distinction mark was given, and this reflects the other candidates’ imperfect structuring of essays, inability to develop a coherent argument, and some inaccuracies of observation.

Restorative Justice Option (Trinity Term)

Seven candidates took this option. Three answered a question on rehabilitation, three a question on the use of restorative justice for offences with a racial or gendered dimension, and one on the use of restorative justice in post-conflict societies. The essays were of variable quality. The best essays, achieving a Distinction mark, were those that tackled questions head-on, showed a clear grasp of the obvious sources as well as some

less obvious ones, used the literature in order to advance their own arguments (rather than merely describing the views of others), provided proper citations in support of any empirical claims or quotations, and showed a fine attention to detail (including in the footnotes and bibliography). The weaker essays had sufficient strength to achieve a pass mark but exhibited a wide variety of defects in organisation, drafting, coverage and understanding of the literature, and in argumentation. It was particularly disappointing to find that most of the essays were marred by errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, and some had disorganised or incomplete footnotes or bibliographies. On the plus side, the candidates demonstrated a good level of understanding of key debates in restorative justice.

Mafias Option (Trinity Term)

Four candidates took this option, and a fifth student from the sociology department was allowed to visit the course. Two candidates chose question 2, and two candidates chose question 3. The written work produced for this option showed that the students have engaged extensively with the material they read and discussed in class, and went beyond class readings substantially. In addition, they showed a quite significant degree of original thinking. Although it is unusual to award a distinction to all papers, papers are graded against objective standards of excellence and the candidates fully deserve the grades they obtained.

Core Course Examination

The twelve candidates generally wrote very solid answers to each question, showing not only a familiarity with the key literature and issues, but also an ability to use the literature to advance a viewpoint in a coherent manner. As a result most of the marks were in the mid- to high 60s range, with some in the low 70s. While candidates referenced ideas and authors quite well, they often failed to pay detailed attention to relevant empirical research literature to support their answers. Five candidates reached the Distinction level, but none offered answers that were original enough to merit a mark of high distinction.

Twelve questions were set. All but three of the questions were answered by at least one candidate. Those questions not answered were on organised crime, discrimination in the criminal justice process, and the insurance industry. The most popular questions were on victims of crime (9 candidates), deterrence (8), prisons and public protection (6) and prison privatisation (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.

Four 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. Two of the dissertations were outstanding.

Overall Results of the Examination

Twelve students sat the examination, one of them re-sitting the core course examination in order to complete the examination from 2002-03 (when the candidate failed the examination). All candidates passed, and three candidates were awarded an overall mark of distinction. One of these gained distinction marks in all but one element of the course (i.e. one option essay). This candidate is to be the first recipient of the Roger Hood prize, designed to recognise the best performance on the MSc at Distinction level. Overall the performance of the candidates was very creditable.

A.J.Ashworth (Chair)
R.V. Ericson
A.F.Rutherford (External)
F.Varese
R.P.Young

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