

Preliminary Examination in Human Sciences Examination Conventions Academic Year 2025-2026

1. Introduction

Examination conventions are the formal record of the specific assessment standards for the course or courses to which they apply. They set out how examined work will be marked and how the resulting marks will be used to arrive at a final result and classification of an award.

The supervisory body responsible for approving the examination conventions is the Social Sciences Board's Quality Assurance Committee (approved 5 March 2026).

2. Rubrics for individual papers

Candidates will be required to sit five written examinations in Trinity Term. Each examination will be three hours long. The five examinations are:

Paper 1: Ecology and Evolution

Paper 2: Physiology and Genetics

Paper 3: Society, Culture and the Environment

Paper 4: Sociology and Demography

Paper 5: Quantitative Methods for the Human Sciences

Papers 1, 2, 3 and 4 are examined by a three hour in-person typed examination. For Paper 3 you will type your answers to these exams on a computer provide by the University. For papers 1, 2 and 4 you will primarily type your answers to these exams, on a computer provided by the University. Where hand-drawn diagrams or graphs are required, and it is not possible to complete these on-screen using a stylus, paper will be provided alongside the computer, collected at the end of the examination and added to your exam response.

Paper 5 is examined by an on-line, open book examination. Candidates will have three hours and thirty minutes for this examination. **This is inclusive of the time it takes to upload the answers.** This examination uses the 'uploaded answers only' method of completion. The examination expects data analysis with answers provided in Jupyter Notebook, that includes the code, the analytic output, and the written answers interpreting the analysis. The Jupyter Notebook(s) should be uploaded to Inspera within the allotted time.

Paper 1: Ecology and Evolution

The paper is divided into Section A, 'Short Answers', and Section B, 'Essay Questions: Ecology' and Section C: 'Essay Questions: Evolution'. Candidates must answer **all ten questions from Section A and three questions from Sections B and C with at least one question out of five from Section B and at least one question out of five from Section C.**

Paper 2: Physiology and Genetics

The paper is divided into Section A 'Short Answers', Section B: 'Essay Questions: Physiology' and Section C: 'Essay Questions: Genetics' Candidates must answer **all ten questions from Section A and three questions from Sections B and C with at least one question out of five from Section B and at least one question out of five from Section C.**

Candidates must complete exercises on Canvas relating to their genetics practical work.

These are graded by the convener as Excellent (E), Satisfactory (S) or Not Satisfactory (NS). In the event that a candidate receives a grade of NS or does not complete the exercises, they will be required to (re)submit. These practical grades shall be available to the examiners at any time after the end of the first week of the term in which the examination is held, and may be taken into consideration by the examiners in cases where a candidate's mark for Paper 2 falls on the pass/distinction borderline (69 marks).

Paper 3: Society, Culture and the Environment

The paper will be divided into two sections: (A) Social and Cultural Anthropology and (B) Human Geography. Candidates will be required to display knowledge of both sections, and will be required to answer **four questions in total with at least two questions out of eight from section (A) and at least one question out of four from section (B).**

Paper 4: Sociology and Demography

The paper will be divided into two sections: (A) Sociology and (B) Demography. Candidates will be required to display knowledge of both sections, and will be required to **answer four questions in total: two questions out of six from section A and two questions out of six from section B.**

Paper 5: Quantitative Methods for the Human Sciences

One three-hour and thirty-minute paper will be set. The paper will comprise two questions and candidates will be required to answer both questions. Each question will be worth 50% of the paper mark with component marks for each sub question noted in the margins. Note that candidates are not permitted to use artificial intelligence (AI) systems (e.g., ChatGPTedu) to answer their questions in this summative assessment. Answers to the online open book exam must be the independent work of the candidate.

The examiners will permit the use of any hand-held pocket calculator subject to the conditions set out under the heading 'Use of calculators in examinations' in the *Special Regulations concerning the Examinations* only for Paper 2: Physiology and Genetics.

3. Marking conventions

3.1 University scale for standardised expression of agreed final marks

Agreed final marks for individual papers will be expressed using the following scale:

70 – 100	Distinction
40 – 69	Pass
0 – 39	Fail

3.2 Qualitative criteria for different types of assessment

Papers 1 and 2

a) Short Answers

This part of Papers 1 and 2 carries a possible 40 marks. There being ten questions, all of which must be attempted, each question is allocated up to four marks. The following marking scheme is applied for this part of each paper:

0	no answer or a wrong answer
1	a poor answer
2	an average answer
3	a good, substantially accurate answer
4	an excellent answer

Examiners may award intermediate marks (e.g. 1.5, 2.5) to allow greater precision.

b) Essay Questions

The remaining part of each paper carries a possible 60 marks. Candidates must attempt three questions, to each of which 20 marks are allocated. The following marking scheme has been adopted for this part of Papers 1 and 2.

The equivalent % score for each mark are indicated and markers are expected to use the indicative descriptions in making their judgments on which mark to award.

The criteria should be viewed in a cumulative manner, and the majority of positive criteria within a mark band (and those below it) should be satisfied in order for a mark in that band to be awarded.

Markers may allocate a score that falls between the stated bands (e.g. 13.5 marks, equivalent to 67.5%) if the work fulfils some but not all of the criteria for the mark band below.

0 (0%)	no answer.
1 (5%)	barely an answer.
2 (10%)	a very poor answer with little of relevance in the answer and/or wrong.
3 (15%)	very poor answer, with perhaps one relevant point mentioned.
4 (20%)	a poor answer, with little relevance, and typically with substantial errors.

- 5 (25%) a poor answer, but showing some knowledge and relevant facts, although possibly with substantial errors.
- 6 (30%) an unsatisfactory answer, but showing some knowledge and containing some relevant material but lacking detail or with errors.
- 7 (35%) a weak answer, not judged worthy to have passed, but close.
- 8 (40%) **Threshold for a Pass.** A just adequate answer, showing some knowledge but with several omissions, lacking detail and/or carrying much superfluous material, and/or some errors.
- 9 (45%) an adequate answer, demonstrating some knowledge but with clear, important or numerous omissions, and lacking much breadth (scope of the material in question) or depth (e.g. citing literature).
- 10 (50%) a weakly satisfactory answer, demonstrating some knowledge but with a few omissions and lacking much breadth or depth.
- 11 (55%) a satisfactory answer demonstrating knowledge but lacking breadth and depth.
- 12 (60%) a clearly satisfactory answer, demonstrating knowledge with some awareness of the scope of the issues in question, including citation of relevant sources. Arguments are sustained and presented within a logical framework.
- 13 (65%) a good answer, substantially complete and correct, showing breadth and depth but not quite first class, e.g. lacking citation of some essential literature, or with one or two minor errors. Arguments are well supported by evidence.
- 14 (70%) **Threshold for a Distinction.** A very good answer deemed equivalent to a first within the context of the Preliminary Examination. Substantially complete and correct, arguments are well supported by evidence and citation of relevant sources, demonstrating critical thinking, knowledge of literature, and with no substantial errors.
- 15 (75%) a very good answer deemed equivalent to a first within the context of the Preliminary Examination. E.g. substantially complete and correct, demonstrating knowledge of literature, and featuring no errors.
- 16 (80%) an excellent answer, complete and correct and e.g. demonstrating novel thinking and/or showing knowledge of the history of thought on the subject and/or excellent critical synthesis.
- 17 (85%) an excellent answer, complete and correct and e.g. demonstrating novel thinking and/or showing knowledge of the history of thought on the subject and/or excellent and deep critical synthesis.

- 18 (90%) an exceptionally good answer, showing knowledge of the subject beyond that expected for a first-year student, as above and showing originality leading to publishable or near publishable quality.
- 19 (95%) a truly exceptional piece of work of publishable quality, showing evidence of novel thought and/or originality of approach, deep and critical analysis.
- 20 (100%) a perfect answer (very rare).

The final mark for the paper (Papers 1 and 2) is the total of the marks awarded for the Short Answers section (out of a possible 40) and for the Essay Questions section (out of a possible 60), giving a final total mark out of 100.

Papers 3 and 4

Each of these papers requires four answers to be attempted. Each answer is marked out of a possible maximum of 25 marks, giving a total for each paper of a possible 100 marks. The marking scheme for these papers is as follows.

The equivalent % score for each mark are indicated and markers are expected to use the indicative descriptions in making their judgments on which mark to award.

The criteria should be viewed in a cumulative manner, and the majority of positive criteria within a mark band (and those below it) should be satisfied in order for a mark in that band to be awarded.

Markers may allocate a score that falls between the stated bands (e.g. 16.5 marks, equivalent to 66%) if the work fulfils some but not all of the criteria for the mark band above.

- 0 (0%) no answer
- 1-2 (4-8%) barely an answer
- 3 (12%) a very poor answer with little of relevance in the answer and/or wrong
- 4 (16%) very poor answer, with perhaps one relevant point mentioned
- 5 (20%) a poor answer, with little relevance, and typically with substantial errors
- 6 (24%) a poor answer, but showing some knowledge and relevant facts, although possibly with substantial errors
- 7 (28%) an unsatisfactory answer, but showing some knowledge and containing some relevant material but lacking detail or with substantial errors
- 8 (32%) an unsatisfactory answer, but showing some knowledge and containing relevant material but lacking detail or with errors
- 9 (36%) a weak answer, not judged worthy to have passed, but close.

- 10 (40%) **Threshold for a Pass.** A just adequate answer, showing some knowledge but with several omissions, lacking detail and/or carrying much superfluous material, and/or some errors.
- 11 (44%) an adequate answer, demonstrating some knowledge but with clear, important or numerous omissions, and lacking much breadth (scope of the material in question) or depth (e.g. citing literature).
- 12 (48%) a better than adequate answer, demonstrating some knowledge but with some omissions, and lacking much breadth (scope of the material in question) or depth (e.g. citing literature).
- 13 (52%) a weakly satisfactory answer, demonstrating some knowledge but with a few omissions and lacking much breadth or depth.
- 14 (56%) a satisfactory answer demonstrating knowledge but lacking breadth and depth.
- 15 (60%) a clearly satisfactory answer, demonstrating knowledge with some awareness of the scope of the issues in question, including citation of relevant sources. Arguments are sustained and presented within a logical framework.
- 16 (64%) a good answer, substantially complete and correct, showing breadth and depth but not quite first class, e.g. lacking citation of some essential literature, or with one or two minor errors. Arguments are well supported by evidence.
- 17 (68%) a good to very good answer bordering first class, substantially complete and correct, showing breadth and depth but not quite first class, e.g. lacking citation of some essential literature, or with one or two minor errors. Arguments are well supported by evidence.
- 17.5 (70%) **Threshold for a Distinction.**
- 18 (72%) a very good answer deemed equivalent to a first within the context of the Preliminary Examination. Substantially complete and correct, Arguments are well supported by evidence and citation of relevant sources, demonstrating critical thinking, knowledge of literature, and with no substantial errors.
- 19 (76%) a very good answer deemed equivalent to a first within the context of the Preliminary Examination. E.g. substantially complete and correct, demonstrating knowledge of literature, and featuring no errors.
- 20 (80%) an excellent answer, complete and correct and e.g. demonstrating novel thinking and/or showing knowledge of the history of thought on the subject and/or excellent critical synthesis.
- 23 (92%) an exceptionally good answer, showing knowledge of the subject beyond that expected for a first-year student, as above and showing originality leading to publishable or near publishable quality.

- 24 (96%) a truly exceptional piece of work of publishable quality, showing evidence of novel thought and/or originality of approach, deep and critical analysis.
- 25 (100%) a perfect answer (very rare)

Paper 5

Candidates must answer two questions (out of two) on the paper. The marks allocation for each individual part of a question is given on the examination paper and the answer to each question is awarded a maximum of 50 marks. The marks from the two questions answered will be summed to provide a total mark for the paper out of 100.

3.3 Verification and reconciliation of marks

Each paper is marked out of 100. Candidates are anonymous. Scripts are single-marked. The Examiner gives special scrutiny to each mark in pass/distinction borderline cases (69 marks). In a case where a candidate is on the borderline of a pass (39 marks) on a re-sit of an examination a second Examiner may scrutinize the paper in addition, with a mark subsequently being agreed between the Examiners.

3.4 Scaling

The Examiners may choose to scale marks where in their academic judgement:

- a. a paper was more difficult or easy than in previous years, and/or
- b. a paper has generated a spread of marks which are not a fair reflection of student performance on the University's standard scale for the expression of agreed final marks, i.e. the marks do not reflect the qualitative marks descriptors.

Such scaling is used to ensure that candidates' marks are not advantaged or disadvantaged by any of these situations. In each case, examiners will establish if they have sufficient evidence for scaling. Scaling will only be considered and undertaken after moderation of a paper has been completed, and a complete run of marks for all papers is available.

If it is decided that it is appropriate to use scaling, the examiners will review a sample of papers either side of the classification borderlines to ensure that the outcome of scaling is consistent with academic views of what constitutes an appropriate performance within in each class.

Detailed information about why scaling was necessary and how it was applied will be included in the Examiners' report and the algorithms used will be published for the information of all examiners and students.

3.5 Short-weight convention and departure from rubric

Candidates are reminded that in every paper they must observe the rubric at its head in relation to the number of questions to be answered and to compulsory questions (e.g. the requirement in the Physiology and Genetics paper to answer all questions from section A and three questions from sections B and C with at least one question from section B and one question from section C). Failure to complete the required number of questions will result in a mark of zero being awarded for the questions not attempted; since the final mark for each paper is the total of the marks awarded for each question attempted, this will have the effect of reducing a candidate's mark on the paper. In the case of a candidate answering *more* questions than are required by the rubric, only those up to and including the number required to adhere to the rubric will be marked (in order of completion), others being awarded a mark of zero.

3.6 Penalties for late or non-submission

Not applicable

3.7 Penalties for over-length work and departure from approved titles or subject-matter

Not applicable

3.8 Penalties for poor academic practice

Where assessment includes open-book examinations, candidates will be required to sign up to the University's honour code. While it not permissible to submit work which has been submitted either partially or in full, either for their current Honour School of qualification, or for another qualification of this University (except where the Special Regulations for the subject permit this), or for a qualification at any other institution, it is permissible to use work that has been written during the course of a candidate's studies (e.g. collections, tutorial essays)

Turnitin may be used for online open-book and in-person typed exam submissions.

The Examination Board shall deal wholly with cases of poor academic practice in submitted work and open-book online examinations where the material under review is small and does not exceed 10% of the whole.

Assessors should mark work on its academic merit with the board responsible for deducting marks for derivative or poor referencing.

Determined by the extent of poor academic practice, the board shall deduct between 1% and 10% of the marks available for cases of poor referencing where material is widely available factual information or a technical description that could not be paraphrased easily; where passage(s) draw on a variety of sources, either verbatim or derivative, in patchwork fashion (and examiners consider that this represents poor academic practice rather than an attempt to deceive); where some attempt has been made to provide references, however incomplete (e.g. footnotes but no quotation marks, Harvard-style references at the end of a paragraph, inclusion in bibliography); or where passage(s) are 'grey literature' i.e. a web source with no clear owner.

In addition, any more serious cases of poor academic practice than described above should always be referred to the Proctors.

Where assessment includes open-book examinations, candidates will be required to sign up to the University's [honour code](#). Whilst it is not permissible to submit work which has been submitted, either partly or in full, either for their current Honour School or qualification, or for another Honour School or qualification of this University, or for a qualification at another institution, it is permissible to use work that has been written during the course of a candidate's studies (e.g. collections, tutorial essays). Candidates should note that copying and pasting large sections of work that has been written for collections or tutorials (or similar), whilst permissible, may not fully address the question asked in the examination. Candidates are reminded that the marking criteria penalise work where the answer lacks focus and/or does not adequately address the question asked and/or for not supporting the main argument.

3.9 Penalties for non-attendance at an examination

Failure to submit an examination will result in the failure of the assessment. The mark for any resit of the assessment will be capped at the pass mark.

3.10 Penalties for late submission of open-book examination scripts

For online exams using an Upload mode of completion candidates should upload their exam response within the time allowed for their online examination (which includes an allowance for candidates to scan and upload their answers). If candidates do not upload their exam response within the time allowed, they may make an application via the online help form to have their exam response considered as in time at the point they upload their late response. The application will be considered by Student Assessments Team under delegated authority from the Proctors.

When a candidate wishes to upload any elements completed outside of Inspira after the end of their exam duration, they can do so and apply to have it accepted as if in time by the Proctors using the online help form. For file types not accepted on the online help form, candidates should still submit the on-line form but also follow the instructions provided on the form about responding to the acknowledgement e-mail and attaching the files to that response.

Where the entire script is uploaded after the end of their exam duration, and it is not accepted as if in time, the penalty of a mark of 0 shall be applied by the Exam Board. The penalty applies to the paper as a whole even if the examination is only one part of the assessment of that paper.

Where part of the script is uploaded after the end of their exam duration, and is not accepted as if in time, only the portion of the script that was uploaded within the time allowed for the online examination will be marked.

4. Progression rules and classification conventions

4.1 Qualitative descriptors of Distinction, Pass, Fail

Qualitative descriptor for a *Fail*: An overall standard of work exhibiting inadequate levels of knowledge and understanding; work that features a combination of significant omissions and/or errors and/or lack of detail and/or superfluity.

Qualitative descriptor for *Pass*: An overall standard of work showing adequate levels of relevant knowledge and understanding; work that is substantially correct and relevant but which features some omissions, shortcomings in detail and/or superfluity and/or errors, the latter traits being increasingly evident towards the lower end of the mark range.

Qualitative descriptor for *Distinction*: An overall standard of work deemed equivalent to a First Class within the context of the Preliminary Examination; work that is substantially complete and correct, showing well-supported evidence-based arguments, critical thinking, demonstrating knowledge of literature, and typically without errors.

4.2 Final outcome rules

Distinctions are awarded to those candidates who, normally only on the first sitting of the examinations, have achieved:

- a) a mean mark of 70 or above **and**
- b) at least 70 on two papers **and** not less than 55 on any of the remaining paper(s)

4.3 Progression rules

The pass mark for each paper is 40. Candidates must pass all five papers in Prelims to continue into the Final Honour School (the second year of the Human Sciences degree).

4.4 Use of vivas

Not applicable

5. Resits

Candidates must pass all five papers in Prelims to continue into the second year of the Human Sciences degree. Candidates who fail one, or two papers may resit just the paper(s) failed. A candidate who fails three or more papers must retake all five papers. Resits are usually held in early September and scripts are marked and results published on Student Self Service within two weeks of the exam.

Where a candidate has failed an assessment unit owing to a technical fail (non-attendance), the mark for the resit of the assessment will be capped at the pass mark. Where a candidate has failed an assessment unit owing to an academic fail, the mark for the resit will awarded based on the merits of the work. Candidates who have initially failed any element of the First Public Examination will not be eligible for an overall award of Distinction.

6. Mitigating circumstances notices to examiners

A candidate's final outcome will be considered using the final outcome rules as described above in section 4. The exam board will then consider any further information they have on individual circumstances.

Where a candidate or candidates have made a submission, under Part 13 of the Regulations for Conduct of University Examinations, that unforeseen circumstances may have had an impact on their performance in an examination, a subset of the board (the 'Mitigating Circumstances Panel') will meet to discuss the individual applications. The Panel will evaluate, on the basis of the information provided to it, the relevance of the circumstances to examinations and assessment, and the strength of the evidence provided in support. Examiners will also note whether all or a subset of papers were affected, being aware that it is possible for circumstances to have different levels of impact on different papers. The information will be used at the final board of examiners meeting to decide whether and how to adjust a candidate's results. Further information on the procedure is provided in the *Examinations and Assessment Framework, Annex E* and information for students is provided at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/problems-completing-your-assessment>

7. Details of examiners and rules on communicating with examiners

The internal examiners for the Preliminary Examination in Human Sciences for the 2025–26 academic year are:

Dr Lindsay Richards (Chair)
Professor Andrew Gosler
Dr Rosalie Allain
Dr Amanda Palmer
Dr Teresa Street

Questions pertaining to examination procedure should be addressed to the Chair of Examiners.

Candidates are not under any circumstances permitted to seek to make contact with individual internal or external examiners during or after the examination process regarding specifics of the examination of their own or others' work.

Candidates who are unhappy with an aspect of their assessment may make a complaint or appeal to the Proctors via their college.