

Examination Conventions 2025/26

Preliminary Examination in Materials Science

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 progression decision and/or classification of an award.

These conventions apply to the Preliminary Examination in Materials Science for the academic year 2025/26. The Department of Materials' Academic (Undergraduate) Committee (DMAC) is responsible for approving the Conventions and considers these annually, in consultation with the examiners. The formal procedures determining the conduct of examinations are established and enforced by the University Proctors. These Conventions are a guide to the examiners and candidates but the regulations set out in the Examination Regulations have precedence.

The Examination Regulations may be found at: <https://examregs.admin.ox.ac.uk/>

- General Regulations for the First and Second Public Examinations
- Special Regulation "Preliminary Examination in Materials Science"

"Examination Regulations" in the following refers to the Special Regulation "Preliminary Examination in Materials Science", unless otherwise stated.

The paragraphs below indicate the conventions to which the examiners usually adhere, subject to the guidance of other bodies such as the Academic Committee in the Department, the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, the Education Committee of the University and the Proctors who may offer advice or make recommendations to examiners.

The examiners are nominated by the Nominating Committee* in the Department and those nominations are submitted for approval by the Vice-Chancellor and the Proctors. In Prelims the examiners are called "moderators". Formally, moderators act on behalf of the University and in this role are independent of the Department, the colleges and of those who teach the MS M.Eng. programme.

2. RUBRICS AND STRUCTURE FOR INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Each of the five papers in Prelims, comprising the three Materials Science papers (MS1, MS2 & MS3), the Maths for Materials Science paper, and the Coursework Paper, are weighted equally towards the overall total for the Preliminary Examination. The moderators set the papers but are advised to consult the course lecturers. The course lecturers are required to provide draft questions and exemplar answers if so requested by the moderators. There are no external examiners for Prelims. The assessed work for the practicals, the crystallography classes and the project work for Computing in Materials Science (CMS) together constitute the Coursework Paper.

Written Paper Format

The Materials Science papers 1 - 3 comprise eight questions from which candidates must attempt five. Each question is worth 20 marks. The maximum marks available for each of these papers are 100. There is no strict rule about how many questions are set on each lecture course in the Materials Science papers 1 - 3. As a result, (i) it should not be assumed that a question will be set on every lecture course and (ii) some questions may require knowledge from across the entire year.

The Mathematics for Materials Science paper consists of two sections, candidates are required to answer all questions in Part A and 4 from Part B. The total marks available for this paper are 180; the mark achieved then being weighted by a factor of 0.555* such that the paper contributes a maximum of 100 marks to the Preliminary Examination.

Examiners proofread the final 'camera-ready' pdf version of each examination paper. Great care is taken to minimise the occurrence of errors or ambiguities. Despite this care, on occasion an error does remain in a paper presented to candidates: if a candidate thinks there is an error or mistake in the paper, then they must state what they believe the error to be at the start of their answer to that question and if necessary, state their understanding of the question.

* for the 2025-26 examinations the Nominating Committee comprised Prof Nellist, Prof Marrow & Prof. Assender.

Coursework paper

The Coursework Paper comprises three examined elements of coursework: (i) for the Practical Course two full reports as specified in the MS Prelims Handbook, together with assessment of the student's laboratory notebook entries for each of the eight specified practicals also as detailed in the MS Prelims Handbook (normally these reports and notebook entries have been marked already as the practical course progresses); (ii) a set of reports for crystallography (completed under the class schedule); and (iii) project work for Computing in Materials Science.

The Prelims Examination Regulations stipulate that all elements of coursework submitted to the University approved online assessment platform must be accompanied by a declaration indicating that it is the candidate's own work. As described in the MS Prelims Handbook, candidates are also required to submit the Materials Practical Class reports and laboratory notebooks to the Chair of Moderators by no later than 10 am on Friday of the sixth week of Trinity full Term.

The only types of calculators that may be used in examinations are from the following series:

CASIO fx-83
CASIO fx-85
SHARP EL-531

Candidates are not permitted calculators in the Mathematics for Materials Science examination. A basic periodic table is provided in all Preliminary examinations and some Maths definitions and formulae are provided for the Mathematics for Materials Science examination.

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: 0-100

3.2 Qualitative criteria for different types of assessment

Qualitative descriptors, based on those used across the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, are detailed below:

70-100	The candidate shows excellent problem-solving skills and excellent knowledge of the material over a wide range of topics, and is able to use that knowledge innovatively and/or in unfamiliar contexts. The higher the mark in this band the greater will be the extent to which these criteria are fulfilled; for marks in the 90-100 range there will be no more than a very small fraction, circa 5-10%, of the piece of work being examined that does not fully meet all of the criteria that are applicable to the type of work under consideration. The 'piece of work' might be, for example, an individual practical report, a question on a written paper, or a whole written paper.
60-69	The candidate shows good or very good problem-solving skills, and good or very good knowledge of much of the material over a wide range of topics.
50-59	The candidate shows basic problem-solving skills and adequate knowledge of most of the material.
40-49	The candidate shows reasonable understanding of at least part of the basic material and some problem solving skills. Although there may be a few good answers, the majority of answers will contain errors in calculations and/or show incomplete understanding of the topics.
30-39	The candidate shows some limited grasp of basic material over a restricted range of topics, but with large gaps in understanding. There need not be any good quality answers, but there will be indications of some competence.
0-29	The candidate shows inadequate grasp of the basic material. The work is likely to show major misunderstanding and confusion, and/or inaccurate calculations; the answers to most of the questions attempted are likely to be fragmentary

3.3 Verification and reconciliation of marks

During the marking process the scripts of all written papers remain anonymous to the markers. Each written paper is marked by a single moderator. The moderators must ensure that every page of the script has been fully marked. Those papers identified by the moderator as having marks close to the boundaries of pass/fail

and distinction/pass will be fully marked by a second moderator, who has sight of the first moderator's marks, but arrives at a formal independent mark. If the difference in these marks is small (~10% of the total available for the question, 2-3 marks for most questions), the two marks are averaged, with no rounding applied. Otherwise the moderators identify the discrepancy and read the answer again, either in whole or in part, to reconcile the differences. If after this process the moderators still cannot agree, they seek the help of the Chair, or another moderator as appropriate, to adjudicate. For all other papers, the second moderator checks that the overall mark for each question is consistent with one of three sets of descriptor(s), namely those for <40, 40 to 69, or ≥ 70 as appropriate. An integer total mark for each paper is awarded, where necessary rounding up to achieve this.

In the event that a possible error in the paper has been identified, the first moderator will consider the validity of the error and assess the impact of the error on candidates' choice of questions and on the answers written by those who attempted a question that contained an error, and will take this impact into account when marking the paper and prior to agreeing a final mark for all candidates.

First year practicals are assessed on a continual basis by the senior demonstrators. The work for the six crystallography classes is assessed by the Crystallography Class senior demonstrators and reviewed by the Crystallography Class Organiser, the first of these classes being assessed formatively only. The project work for the Computing in Materials Science is assessed by the CMS senior demonstrator. Satisfactory performance in the practical work, in the crystallography classes, and in the CMS project work is defined in the MS Prelims Handbook. The Practical Courses Organiser reviews the marks for the practicals before they are considered by the moderators, drawing to their attention (i) any anomalously low or high average marks for particular practicals and (ii) any factors that impacted on the practical course, such as breakdown of a critical piece of equipment. The moderators review the practical, crystallography and project marks.

3.4 Scaling

Adjustment to marks, known as scaling, normally is not necessary for prelims.

3.5 Short-weight convention and departure from rubric

The rubric on each paper indicates a prescribed number of answers required (e.g. "candidates are required to submit answers to no more than five questions"). Candidates will be asked to indicate on the cover sheet which questions, up to the prescribed number, they are submitting for marking. Excepting section A of the Mathematics for Materials Science paper, for which all questions are compulsory, if this information is not provided then the examiners will mark the questions in numerical order by question number.

If the candidate lists more than the prescribed number of questions then questions will be marked in the order listed until the prescribed number has been reached. The examiners will NOT mark questions in excess of the prescribed number. If fewer questions than the prescribed number are attempted, (i) each missing attempt will be assigned a mark of zero, (ii) for those questions that are attempted **no** marks beyond the maximum per question indicated under section 2 above will be awarded and (iii) the mark for the paper will still be calculated out of 100 for MS1, MS2 & MS3 and out of 180 for the Mathematics for Materials Science paper (MS4).

3.6 Late- or non-submission of elements of coursework

Including action to be taken if submission has been or will be affected by illness or other urgent cause, and circumstances in which academic penalties may be applied.

The Examination Regulations prescribe the submission of the required elements of coursework to the Examiners (1. A set of five reports of crystallography coursework as specified in the MS Prelims Handbook (normally each individual report within the set has been marked already as the crystallography classes progress - penalties for late submission of an individual crystallography report are prescribed in the MS Prelims Handbook and are applied prior to any additional penalties incurred under the provision of the present Conventions.); 2. Two full reports of practical work as specified in the MS Prelims Handbook plus the student's laboratory notebook entries for the Prelims Practical Course (normally each individual report and laboratory notebook entries for each of the specified practical classes have been marked already as the Practical Course progresses - penalties for late submission of an individual practical report are prescribed in the MS Prelims Handbook and are applied prior to any additional penalties incurred under the provision of the present Conventions); 3. Project work for Computing in Materials Science as specified in the MS Prelims Handbook.). The deadlines for the coursework elements are prescribed in the MS Prelims Handbook.

A candidate who fails to submit an element of coursework by a prescribed date and time will be notified of this by means of an email sent on behalf of the Chair of Moderators.

Rules governing late submission of these elements of coursework and any consequent penalties are set out in the 'Late submission and non-submission of a thesis or other written exercise' clause of the 'Regulations for the Conduct of University Examinations' section of the Examination Regulations (Part 14, 'Late Submission, Non-submission, Non-appearance and Withdrawal').

Under the provisions permitted by the regulation, late submission of an element of coursework, as defined above, for Materials Science examinations will normally result in one of the following:

- a) Under paras 14.3 to 14.6. In a case where illness or other urgent cause has prevented or will prevent a candidate from submitting an element of coursework at the prescribed date, time and place the candidate may, through their college, request the Proctors to accept an application to this effect. In such circumstances the candidate is strongly advised to (i) carefully read paras 14.3 to 14.6 of the aforesaid Part 14, where the mandatory contents of such an application to the Proctors are outlined and the several possible actions open to the Proctors are set out, and (ii) both seek the guidance of their college Senior Tutor and inform at least one of their college Materials Tutorial Fellows. Some, but not all, of the actions open to the Proctors may result in the work being assessed as though it had been submitted on time (and hence with no late submission penalty applied).
- b) Under para 14.7. In the case of submission on or after the prescribed date for the submission and within 14 calendar days of notification of non-submission and without prior permission from the Proctors: subject to leave from the Proctors to impose an academic penalty, for the first day or part of the first day that the work is late a penalty of a reduction in the mark for the coursework in question of up to 10% of the maximum mark available for the piece of work and for each subsequent day or part of a day that the work is late a further penalty of up to 5% of the maximum mark available for the piece of work; the exact penalty to be set by the Moderators with due consideration given to the circumstances as advised by the Proctors. The reduction may not take the mark below 40%.
- c) Under Para 14.3(5). In the case of failure to submit within 14 calendar days of the notification of non-submission and without prior permission from the Proctors: a mark of zero shall be recorded for the element of coursework and normally the candidate will have failed that element. As stated in the Examination Regulations, failure of the coursework will normally constitute failure of the Preliminary Examination.

If a candidate is unable to submit by the required date and time for any reason other than for acute illness their college may make an application to the Proctors for permission for late submission. An extended deadline may be approved, or late submission excused where there are grounds of 'illness or other urgent cause'. Applications may be made in advance of a deadline, or up to 14 days from when the candidate is notified that they have not submitted. In all cases, the applications will be considered on the basis of the evidence provided to support the additional time sought.

Elements of coursework comprising more than one individual piece of assessed coursework

Penalties for late submission of individual practical reports and individual crystallography class reports are set out in the MS Prelims Handbook and are separate to the provisions described above.

The consequences of failure to submit individual practical reports or individual crystallography reports are set out in the MS Prelims Handbook and are separate to the provisions described above.

To pass the coursework 'paper' candidates must normally demonstrate a satisfactory performance in each of the three elements: the Practical Work, the Crystallography Classes and the project work for the Computing in Materials Science.

- For their practical coursework to be judged as satisfactory candidates must have achieved at least 40% overall on this practical coursework and have submitted a report for marking on each practical listed in the course handbook.
- For their crystallography coursework to be judged as satisfactory candidates must have achieved at least 40% overall on this crystallography coursework and have submitted a report on each of the crystallography classes.
- For their Computing in Materials Science project work to be judged as satisfactory candidates must have achieved at least 40% on this coursework.

In short, normally failure to complete satisfactorily a relevant element of Materials Coursework will therefore constitute failure of the coursework 'paper' and of the Preliminary Examination as a whole, as stated in the Examination Regulations.

Where an individual practical report or individual crystallography report is not submitted or is proffered so late that it would be impractical to accept it for assessment the Proctors may, exceptionally, under their general authority, and after (i) making due enquiries into the circumstances and (ii) consultation with the Chair of the Moderators, permit the candidate to remain in the examination. In this case for the individual piece of coursework in question (i) the Moderators will award a mark of zero and (ii) dispensation will be granted from the Regulation that requires submission/delivery of every individual piece of assessed coursework if the candidate is not to fail the examination as a whole.

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

This is not applicable to the Prelims examination.

3.8 Penalties for poor academic practice

Substantial guidance is available to candidates on what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid committing plagiarism (see Appendix B of the Materials Prelims Handbook and <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>)

If plagiarism is suspected, the evidence will be considered by the Chair of the Moderators (or a deputy). They will make one of three decisions (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>):

- (a) No evidence, or insufficient evidence, of plagiarism – no case to answer.
- (b) Evidence suggestive of more than a limited amount of low-level plagiarism – referred to the Proctors for investigation and possible disciplinary action.
- (c) Evidence proving beyond reasonable doubt that a limited amount of low-level plagiarism has taken place – in this case the Board of Moderators will consider the case and if they endorse the Chair's judgement that a limited amount of low-level plagiarism has taken place will select one of two actions:
 - (i) Impose a penalty of 10% of the maximum mark available for the piece of work in question and a warning letter to be issued to the candidate explaining the offence and that the present incident will be taken into account should there be a further incidence of plagiarism. For a student who remains on course in addition there will be a requirement to demonstrate to their college Materials Tutorial Fellow that in the period between the present offence and the next submission of work for summative assessment they have followed to completion the University's on-line course on plagiarism (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>).
 - (ii) No penalty, but a warning letter to be issued to the candidate explaining the offence, indicating that on this occasion it has been treated as a formative learning experience, and that the present incident will be taken into account should there be a further incidence of plagiarism. For a student who remains on course in addition there will be a requirement to demonstrate to their college Materials Tutorial Fellow that in the period between the present offence and the next submission of work for summative assessment they have followed to completion the University's on-line course on plagiarism (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>).

3.9 Penalties for non-attendance

Unless the Proctors have accepted a submission requesting absence from an examination, as detailed in [Section 14 of the Regulations for the Conduct of University Examinations](#), failure to attend an examination will result in the failure of the assessment. The mark for any resit of the assessment will be capped at a pass.

4. PROGRESSION RULES AND CLASSIFICATION CONVENTIONS

4.1 Qualitative descriptors

Qualitative descriptors, based on those used across the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences Division, are given below:

70-100	The candidate shows excellent problem-solving skills and excellent knowledge of the material over a wide range of topics, and is able to use that knowledge innovatively and/or in unfamiliar contexts.
60-69	The candidate shows good or very good problem-solving skills, and good or very good knowledge of much of the material over a wide range of topics.
50-59	The candidate shows basic problem-solving skills and adequate knowledge of most of the material.
40-49	The candidate shows reasonable understanding of at least part of the basic material and some problem solving skills. Although there may be a few good answers, the majority of answers will contain errors in calculations and/or show incomplete understanding of the topics.
30-39	The candidate shows some limited grasp of basic material over a restricted range of topics, but with large gaps in understanding. There need not be any good quality answers, but there will be indications of some competence.

0-29	The candidate shows inadequate grasp of the basic material. The work is likely to show major misunderstanding and confusion, and/or inaccurate calculations; the answers to most of the questions attempted are likely to be fragmentary
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4.2 Final outcome rules (Distinction, Pass, Fail)

The pass/fail border is at 40%.

The Moderators may award a distinction to recognise especially strong overall performance at the first attempt. Normally (i) at their discretion, the moderators may specify a mark in the range 70% to 79% such that candidates with an overall mark greater than or equal to this specified mark are awarded a distinction and (ii) a distinction will be awarded to all candidates with an overall mark of 80% or greater.

4.3 Progression rules

To pass the examination and progress to Part I, candidates are required to satisfy the moderators in all five papers, either at a single examination or at two examinations in accordance with the re-sit arrangements detailed below.

Where compensation is permitted, only those marks in excess of 40 on a passed paper may be used towards compensation and normally this shall be at a rate of 3 marks to every deficit mark to be compensated. Only paper can be compensated.

For example, if three written papers are passed and a mark of 36% is obtained in the failed written paper then the total for the four written papers must be at least 168 marks $\{36 + 3 \times 40 + 3 \times (40-36)\}$ for the failure to be compensated. This is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Minimum total mark required over 4 written papers to normally compensate for one failed paper.

Mark on Failed Paper	Minimum Total Mark (4 papers)
39	162
38	164
37	166
36	168
35	170

The Moderators have the authority to use their discretion and consider each case on its merit.

Failure of the coursework paper will normally constitute failure of the Preliminary Examination. Materials coursework cannot normally be retaken. Exceptionally a candidate who has failed the coursework may be permitted jointly by the Moderators and the candidate's college to retake the entire academic year.

4.4 Use of Vivas

There are no vivas in Prelims.

5. RESITS

Candidates who pass the coursework paper and fail one or two written papers will be asked to resit only those written papers.

Candidates who pass the coursework paper and fail more than two written papers will be asked to resit all four written papers.

The resits usually take place in September. To pass a resit paper the candidate must obtain at least 40%, and normally no compensation is allowed. There is only one opportunity to resit the examination, and failure to pass a resit examination normally results in the candidate being prohibited from progressing to Part I. Exceptionally, a college may allow a student to suspend studies for a year and take Prelims a second time the following June.

The Moderators have the authority to use their discretion and consider each case on its merit. In such cases they will take into account a candidate's profile across all elements of assessment together with, subject to guidance from the Proctors where appropriate, any other factors they deem to be relevant.

The mark for any resit required due to non-attendance will be capped at a pass.

6. MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES NOTICES TO EXAMINERS (MCE)

[For **late- or non-submission** of elements of coursework, including cases due to illness or other urgent cause, see section 3.6 of the present Conventions.]

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

There are two applicable sections of the University's *Examination Regulations*.

- **Part 13 Mitigating Circumstances: Notices to Examiners** relates to unforeseen circumstances which may have an impact on a candidate's performance.
- **Part 12 Candidates with Special Examination Needs** relates to students with some form of disability.

Whether under Part 12 or Part 13, a mitigating circumstances notice to examiners should be submitted by the candidate through student self-service/eVision, or by the college on behalf of the candidate as soon as circumstances come to light. Candidates with alternative arrangements under Part 12 will not be considered under this mitigating circumstances process if they do not submit a separate mitigating circumstances notice.

Where a candidate or candidates have made a submission, under Part 12 or Part 13, that unforeseen factors may have had an impact on their performance in an examination, the moderators will meet to discuss the individual notice and band the seriousness of each notice on a scale of 1-3 with 1 indicating minor impact, 2 indicating moderate impact, and 3 indicating very serious impact.

Normally, this MCE meeting comprises two parts: Part A and Part B. Part A will take place before the meeting of the moderators at which the examination results are reviewed. When reaching these decisions on MCE impact level, the moderators will take into consideration, on the basis of the information provided to it, the severity and relevance of the circumstances, and the strength of the evidence. Moderators will also note whether all or a subset of written papers and/or elements of coursework were affected, being aware that it is possible for circumstances to have different levels of impact on different written papers and elements of coursework. The banding information is used at Part B of the MCE meeting: in Part B a candidate's results are discussed in the light of the impact of each MCE and recommendations formulated regarding any action(s) to be taken in respect of each MCE.

Further information on the procedure is provided in the [Examination and Assessment Framework, Annex E](#) and information for students is provided at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/problems-completing-your-assessment>. It is very important that a candidate's MCE submission is adequately evidenced and, where appropriate, verified by their college; the University forbids the Board of Moderators from seeking any additional information or evidence.

7. DETAILS OF EXAMINERS AND RULES ON COMMUNICATING WITH EXAMINERS

The Moderators in Trinity 2026 are: Professor Martin Castell, Dr Chiheb ben Mahmoud, Professor Angus Wilkinson and Professor Jonathan Yates (Chair). It must be stressed that to preserve the independence of the Moderators, candidates are not allowed to make contact directly about matters relating to the content or marking of papers. Any communication must be via your college, who will, if the matter is deemed of importance, contact the Proctors. The Proctors in turn communicate with the Chair of Prelims. Candidates should not under any circumstances seek to make contact with individual Moderators.

ANNEX

Summary of maximum marks available to be awarded for different components of the MS Preliminary Examination in 2026:

Component	Mark
Materials Science 1: Physical Foundations of Materials	100
Materials Science 2: Structure and Mechanical Properties of Materials	100
Materials Science 3: Transforming Materials	100
Mathematics for Materials Science	100
Coursework Paper:	
Crystallography Classes	25
Practicals	50
Computing in Materials Science	25

<i>Total</i>	<i>500</i>
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