COVID-19: Important Information for Postgraduate Students
Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS)

Dear Students

Supporting our postgraduate students is key to the work of our Department, never more so than at this time. We know that this is a time of great uncertainty and the situation is moving rapidly so we wanted to write to you with some reassurances and an outline framework for your education going forward. You will appreciate that things can and may change, but we have been working hard on developing strategies that will allow you to continue your studies remotely from Cambridge and not disadvantage you in obtaining your Degrees, even if the format of your work may have to be adapted. We will do our best to keep in contact with you and would encourage you all to do the same and support each other while we are dispersed. You should of course keep in close contact with your supervisor. Different groups of students have different needs and concerns, many of which we hope to address below.

University Advice for students at the University and Colleges on novel coronavirus (COVID-19)
Further advice for all students is available on the University’s website. This is regularly updated to respond to changes as they take place, providing a really useful resource for students, including FAQs: https://www.cam.ac.uk/coronavirus/students. This covers lots of helpful topics such as fieldwork, financial hardship, thesis submission, etc.

MPhil:
Most of you will have arrived in October and will already have 5 months of study completed. Some of you will be undertaking a desk based study that can still be effectively completed from home, although in some cases accessing resources away from Cambridge may be an issue. Please talk to your supervisor or course director about your individual situations and how much you are able to carry on with “business as usual”.

Others of you may have planned to undertaken fieldwork, which now, unfortunately, may be very unlikely to take place. Please talk to your supervisor about alternative ways to complete your work. For example, your Dissertation may include one or a combination of an extended literature review, critical evaluation of related studies, a detailed and critical description of your research intentions. The exact nature of your Dissertation is likely to be dependent on your planned research and this will vary hugely across the Department.

Therefore, please work with your Supervisor to develop the form of your Dissertation and to make sure you have the resources you need to complete it. More details about the precise format and approvals etc. will be sent out in due course. However, it is important to begin discussing this now with your supervisor.

Assessments may be different and more flexible compared to normal, but we currently aim to keep examining as similar to the usual schedule as possible, including our timetable of submission and the possibility of on-line vivas etc. However, we understand that our students come from very different backgrounds and have different resources at home and we aim to accommodate this where we can on a case by case basis.
PhDs

Year 1:

First Year PhD students should proceed to prepare a first year report to be submitted by the usual deadline. However, we recognise that for those of you who are proposing to undertake fieldwork, the current uncertainty brings additional challenges. Please discuss this with your supervisor, who can help you plan the report to be as flexible as possible in its approach. We may need a little bit more time to confirm transition from 1st to 2nd year and we shall let you know as soon as possible how the mode of examination will be decided. However, in the overwhelming majority of cases, this will be straightforward and so should not be a cause to worry.

Years 2-3/4.

The issues related to PhD students will be many and varied but in almost all cases it is clear that several months working at home (or in College for those students who cannot go home) can be very productively used in writing a thesis-ready introduction, literature review, materials and methods, collating results, discussions etc. and undertaking additional online training in transferable or project-specific skills.

It would not be appropriate to intermit as you can be working at home very productively for a number of months whichever year you are in, and this seems to be the view of many of the funding agencies who do not recommend intermission at this time. You can be assured that submission date extensions will be possible in due course if required. However, in many cases extensions may not be required; examiners will be flexible and pragmatic when assessing dissertations and examining students who have been affected by these events. You will certainly be notified as soon as any decisions are made, so if you can hold off with too many questions at this time, that would be helpful.

In summary:

In all cases, if you are working outside Cambridge, you should apply for Leave to Work Away (LTWA) until the end of June. If you are unwell and unable to work for more than two weeks you should seek a medical intermission; if you are caring for sick loved ones, this can also apply. However, almost everyone else should be able to effectively work away from Cambridge for a few months as outlined above. More details about things like dissertation content, examining etc. will be put in place over the next few days and weeks; I can assure you that everyone in the University is working flat-out to devise new ways of working, supervising and examining.

We all recognise that the situation is far from ideal and those of you undertaking fieldwork will be particularly badly affected. This is an unprecedented situation and we will all work together to minimise the impact on your education. We also understand the stress that this is causing; please bear with us while we work hard to sort out alternative arrangements. Your College should be able to provide pastoral support, if necessary. There are further sources of support for your wellbeing on the University webpages and via the Graduate Union.

In the meantime, we have put together below some ideas to support students’ wellbeing that we hope will help – if you’ve any ideas for what else we could include, please let us know.
Wellbeing

How can I keep in touch with my cohort?
Your student reps HPS-Student-Reps@lists.cam.ac.uk are working hard to set-up lists in Zoom and MS teams so you can participate in discussions and social meetings via video conference. It is also possible to contact other students via Whatsapp groups, Facebook and the list addresses we have been using all year for each group (e.g. HPS-PhDs@lists.cam.ac.uk)

I am feeling very depressed by what is happening, where can I go for help?
If you are unable to find the support that you need you can also go to your supervisor and your department although we recognise this may not be possible or feel comfortable. If that is the case, then we suggest you go to this website as you will find all the services available to you in the University that can help you with your wellbeing: https://www.studentwellbeing.admin.cam.ac.uk/
We have also included a list of other sources below.

I’m not depressed but just feeling very lonely or dreading being alone for a period of time to come.
We are aware that this may be a period of self-isolation or minimized social interaction for some of us, and can bring feelings of loneliness. Though prioritizing your physical health is important, we wish to stress how important it is that your mental health is cared for in equal measure.

Please find below helpful resources:

https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/

The kindness and strength of our student community at Cambridge has led to the creation of a google sheet, which lists recommendations for books, songs, Netflix shows and more, which can help self-isolation feel a bit less isolating. Here is the link!
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TBee8JjeliCHep5jCsvrYdsefKsGKKD7MuKstb5Xc/mobilebasic#h.6whfznuu4vde

Professor Tim Lewens, Head of Department of HPS
Professor Nick Hopwood, Director of Postgraduate Education, Department of HPS
Professor Phil Allmendinger (Head of the School of the Humanities and the Social Sciences)
Dr Kristine Black-Hawkins (Deputy Head of the School of the Humanities and the Social Sciences)