

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

MPhil in Health, Medicine, and Society

Senior Examiner's Report 2021-22

Overall results

The HMS MPhil course ran for the fifth time this year. It was taken by 20 students. At the time of writing of this report, we were able to finalise 15 marks, 13 of which were First Class marks (70 or above) and one of these earned a First Class degree with distinction (75-79). Two candidates achieved overall High Performance marks (65-69). No students received a Pass (60-64) or Fail (0-59).

In line with the departmental agreement to monitor gender-based trends in student performance, we have considered the breakdown of results according to gender (female, male and other). The overall distribution is heavily influenced by the fact that this cohort is 75% female and by the fact that the students with disability statements have not yet all submitted. We should thus continue monitoring, though on the basis of existing data there are no worrying trends.

Challenges

This year we did not have mitigation measures due to the COVID-19 pandemic or the industrial action. Nevertheless we faced several challenges to our examining process. The first challenge was the severe shortage of assessors on all topics but especially history and sociology. Special thanks to colleagues who stepped up to assess essays repeatedly and not quite in their area. Mark Tonelli kindly made himself available despite the end of his visit to Cambridge – I would like to record special thanks to him. The second challenge were the extensions that students asked for their coursework. These applications were justified as many students faced genuine struggles and we granted them. (Students experiencing significant disadvantages (due to unexpected illness, for example) were encouraged to speak to their College tutors or the Course Manager according to University guidance.) The numbers of extensions meant the work of supervisors, assessors, and examiners extended outside the term and well into the summer. At the time of writing we still have not awarded the Forrester prize. Both of these challenges meant that James Livesey, the course administrator, was under a lot of pressure and had to work many more hours than he was contracted. His grace and commitment to our students has been admirable. The DC and the future SE should keep an eye on these underlying issues that are unlikely to improve next year.

Cohort equity: examiners ensured that the distribution of classes for the year was no less favourable than the average class distribution for the last two years before the pandemic (2017-18, 2018-19). That is, that the proportion of each class (First Class,

High Performance, etc.) was broadly in line with the proportions awarded during 2017-18 and 2018-19. The HMS MPhil first ran in 2017-18 and data for 2019-20 was not used due to emergency changes to assessment methods made that year. James Livesey also helpfully compiled data to ensure that the average mark and the range are comparable across all four topic areas of HMS: philosophy, history, sociology, and anthropology. They are indeed roughly in line which shows an equally high level of supervision across the three participating departments.

Prizes

The Benjamin Habib Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance in the MPhil essays was awarded to Ashley Cooper. The Forrester Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance on the dissertation will be awarded as soon as the dissertation marks have been finalised.

External Examiner

Professor Monica Greco served as External Examiner. This was her second year serving in this role. Professor Greco's principal role was to monitor the examination procedure. She also performed an adjudicatory function for certain essays and dissertations. Professor Greco stated that she was impressed by the range and quality of the work submitted by students, as well as the feedback provided by assessors which, "typically included a full justification of any reservations and constructive suggestions for improvement". She noted that according to the material she reviewed, the examination process was conducted appropriately, consistently, and fairly. Professor Greco also commented on the helpfulness of James Livesey, the Graduate Secretary of the HMS MPhil, for his prompt and effective responses to queries throughout the examination process. She noted that we should revisit our heavy reliance on borderline marks, which other institutions try to avoid, as well as the fairly narrow range in which our marks fall, especially once aggregated.

Recommendations

1. To pay special attention to the recommendations of the working group on extensions.
2. To continue to hold orientation sessions for new Assessors on an ad-hoc basis and to make sure that new Assessors understand how the HMS MPhil differs from other MPhil courses they may be teaching.
3. To ensure that essays supervised in a specific discipline are examined by at least one Assessor familiar with the conventions of that discipline and that Assessor assignments also reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the essay being assessed. The examiners should not, however, be overly strict in their selection of Assessors. To distribute examining workloads, a wide range of experts should be used for assessment, rather than only those having expertise on specific essay topics.

4. As in previous years, marks clustered in the range of 65-79. Assessors should continue to be encouraged to use the full range of marks.

I would like to record formal thanks to James Livesey, who is moving on to another job, for helping us to launch this programme and for ensuring its smooth running for five years. He will be greatly missed.

Anna Alexandrova

12 September 2022