

MPhil in Health, Medicine, and Society

Senior Examiner's Report 2022-23

Overall results

The HMS MPhil course was taken by 19 students. 12 of them were awarded First Class marks overall (70 or above) and one of these twelve earned a First Class degree with distinction (75-79). 5 candidates achieved overall High Performance marks (65-69). 2 students received a Pass (60-64). No students failed the course (0-59). This distribution of grades is very similar to others in recent years.

The department has a policy of monitoring gender-based trends in student performance. In the case of the HMS course this was made impossible this year because the cohort was 100% female. This is perhaps itself worth noting, and course managers and admissions officers may wish to review whether the presentation of course materials dissuades male applicants.

Prizes

The Benjamin Habib Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance in the MPhil essays was awarded to Charlotte Wade. The Forrester Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance on the dissertation was awarded to Michael Gasior.

Comments

Examiners noted the generally high quality of submitted coursework, with some genuinely memorable performances. The quality of feedback supplied to students was also high, and examiners often went into great detail in their reports. (Although see below for a more critical note on standardisation of amounts of feedback.)

The examining process itself was rendered especially challenging for both students and assessors by periods of industrial action throughout the year, and especially by the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB). This disrupted the meetings that would normally have been held in April and June, meaning that the business of both meetings was deferred to early October 2023. This put considerable strain on administrative resources as well as exposing the students themselves to great disruption. In addition to delaying student graduation, it also meant that they did not have access to feedback on Essay 3 until long after the dissertations had been submitted.

As always, all pieces of submitted coursework were independently assessed by two assessors, who then proposed mutually agreed marks based on their independent reports. The examiners' meetings then scrutinised all reports and marks. In cases of large divergences between assessors, or where marks straddled grade boundaries and the examiners agreed on the lower grade band, the external examiner also checked over the work and the proposed marks. This made for a robust process.

Specific comments

- A discrepancy was noted between the published examiners' guidelines for 2022-23 and what the examiners believe to be the formal situation with respect to grade descriptions. To be specific, while the examiners' guidelines claim that any mark between 70 and 79 is a 'distinction', the examiners' understanding is that in fact the HPS Degree Committee has only authorised that marks between 70 and 74 be described as 'distinctions' from 2023-24 onwards. Degree Committee minutes confirmed this interpretation. We therefore labelled marks between 70 and 74 as 'first class' rather than 'distinction', following previous practice. **The incoming examiners should be made aware of this change effective from October 2023.**
- A very large number of extensions were authorised for the dissertation element of the course. In total 9/19 of the candidates were given extensions. While serious medical conditions and other personal circumstances need to be taken into account, the examiners underline again the need for a better approach to deadlines. **Examiners and course managers should continue to find ways to encourage students to manage their work towards deadlines.**
- Unusually, several candidates (6/19) submitted their dissertations after the deadline, or after the revised deadline in the case of students with extensions. The penalty policy was applied in these cases, reducing the marks by 1 in the case of students who submitted a day late, 1+2=3 for students who submitted two days late etc. Fortunately, no candidate was penalised by more than three marks. The examiners took the view that there was no evidence that deliberate late submission worked as a strategy to increase the overall mark, and strongly encourage students to submit in advance of deadlines. **Course managers should stress the need to meet agreed deadlines at the beginning of the year.**
- There was considerable inconsistency in the lengths of examiners' reports. Some were much too long, others were below the minimum recommended word length. **Better communication with examiners in advance of their completion of reports is required to ensure equity here, and also to keep**

the workload of the examiners who must scrutinise these reports under control.

- As in previous years, there was difficulty in recruiting examiners. This was especially true for sociology, and to a lesser extent for anthropology. In summer 2023 the HPS HoD had a conversation with the Sociology HoD to highlight the need to ensure the proper resourcing of medical sociology examination capacity. The examiners also noted a more specific lack of expertise available to assess more quantitative pieces of work. **The provision of examiners, especially in sociology, should be monitored.**
- The examiners noted an occasional tendency on the part of assessors to question whether an essay was (for example) strictly 'anthropological', or whether it was in fact was more an instance of 'STS', or perhaps a different methodological approach again. **So long as the overall approach used is apt for the goals of the essay, students on this course should not be penalised for combining the methods of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, history and so forth. Examiners noted the desirability of continuing to have events through the year that are explicitly aimed at getting students and teachers to reflect on the relations between the different disciplines represented.**
- It seemed that this year, perhaps because of disruption due to industrial action, the course managers had not undertaken their usual practice of approving supervisors and titles of essays and dissertations. This would have helped to ensure adequate availability of examining expertise for all pieces of work. **The management committee should resume this practice in 2023-24.**

External Examiner

Professor Monica Greco served as External Examiner. This was her third year in this role, and she carried out her tasks in an exemplary manner. Her very broad-ranging expertise and experience were highly valued by the other examiners. Professor Greco's principal role was to monitor the examination procedure. She checked a sample of especially high and low scoring essays, as well as more typical essays, for calibration. There were no cases where assessors were unable to agree marks, even when their initial marks showed discrepancies, but Professor Greco was able to scrutinise how they had come to agreement. Professor Greco praised the students for the quality of their work, and the assessors for the quality of their feedback. She rightly noted that she had been given a very short turnaround for some material to review: this made her job difficult, and it was largely a consequence of the rush imposed by the ending of the MAB. She noted the sometimes unhelpful way in which students are labelled with their 'home' discipline throughout the year in examination documentation, even when this does not correspond to the topic they are writing on

for a particular element of the course. This can confuse the expectations of the assessors, who may be expecting work in one area, when they in fact end up reading work in another. **Care should be taken in future when attaching the home discipline label to examining materials.**

Tim Lewens
3rd October 2023