

MPhil and Part III programmes, HPS

External examiner's report 2023

General comments

I enjoyed looking through the diverse and stimulating work produced by students, and am grateful for the patient guidance and support of Mary Brazelton and David Thompson in navigating all the work and documentation. I was part of the discussions about how students were supported through the Marking and Assessment Boycott and thought that this was handled very well – I could not see any evidence of adverse impact on student learning or outcomes. I was happy with the way that difficult and anomalous cases were discussed at the exam board.

Quality

This was a truly impressive selection of work. The level of originality and primary research in many of the essays was so high that they verged on mini-dissertations.

The differences between grade boundaries in the different programmes confused me (and, hence, apologies if any of the following is based on an incorrect understanding). Why is there a pass mark for 60 in the MPhil but 50 in the Part III? Although the essays for Part III are a more directed form of assessment than the research essays for the MPhil, I did not sense that marking was more lenient or more stringent in either programme, so the discrepancy of pass mark was puzzling. When it came to the dissertations, I definitely did not see a distinction in quality evaluation, again making the difference of pass mark difficult to justify. Relatedly, I would like to understand better the rationale for, and meaning of, a pass mark of 60, given that 50 is a pass mark for most masters programmes. Would a (for example) UCL pass of 55 be considered a fail at Cambridge? Or should one apply a sort of exchange-rate calculation to the number?

- Consider harmonising the mark schemes and grade boundaries for the two programmes
- Consider lowering the pass mark for the MPhil to 50

I found the criterion 'shows potential for PhD work' unhelpful as a descriptor for marks in the 70+ range. Many of the sub-70 essays met this criterion; potential includes, by definition, some distance to go. By all means keep a 70+ result as a condition for acceptance to undertake a PhD, but ...

- Consider deleting the 'PhD potential' quality descriptor

Marking

The marking was stringent. My personal sense was that similar work would receive perhaps as much as 5 marks more in other universities. Marks are tightly bunched between about 65 and 75.

- Consider more generous marking
- If a pass mark of 50 is adopted for the MPhil, consider a wider marking range at the lower end of the scale
- Consider better use of 80+ range (with perhaps more nuanced descriptors for upper range, e.g. outstanding vs publishable with minor changes)

I was called in as adjudicator for divergent marks in rather too many instances. In general markers should be able to agree – need for a third opinion should be exceptional. Relatedly, not all markers

explained how they reconciled their divergent marks. It is important that markers do this, not just for the purpose of quality control, but also so that students can understand how their mark was agreed. This need only be a sentence or two, explaining why, for instance, positive features were agreed to outweigh negatives, or vice versa.

- Consider adding an 'explanation of mark reconciliation' box to the primary marker's marking form (keep 'confidential comments' for separate use)
- Consider obliging markers to explain their reconciliation if their individual marks diverge by 4 or more marks, or across a grade boundary

Guidance

I would like to know more about the different teaching arrangements for MPhil and Part III, and the essay guidance/assessment instructions that are given to each. My sense is that Part IIIs attend some classes – do the MPhils? (One assumes that they too would have something to learn from these). Some essays are criticised for omitting crucial secondary literature; I could not always work out how fair this criticism was. Was there a list provided in the classes? Did supervisors provide this in one-to-one meetings? (It would depend how far developed the student's project was at that meeting, I suppose). In the case of essays (as opposed to dissertations, where it's more fair), I wondered whether markers were sometimes too critical of students for not having a complete grasp of a field and its literature.

- Consider discussing the connection between, and possible hybridisation of, teaching in Part III and MPhil
- Consider discussing how assessment format and expectations maps onto similarities or differences in teaching delivery
- Consider discussing ways in which subject area teaching is conceived, e.g. as 'things to be learned' or as opening up of certain questions
- Consider standardising the subject area syllabi to include learning outcomes

Amongst the Pt III essays, some (e.g. the pandemics one) seemed to have a tighter expectation of what students were supposed to write about, perhaps because this had been more directly discussed in class. Other questions seemed to provoke more diverse responses.

- Consider having subject area leaders meet to discuss and compare notes on how precisely they expect Part III students to follow the lecture/discussion notes, and/or reflect a core bibliography

One or two essays/dissertations were not obviously within the purview of HPS (e.g. one dissertation about whether AI art could constitute IP within a legal framework). I was not sure in what sense their degree could really be considered as demonstrating expertise in HPS.

- Consider advising staff to check if they are not sure whether a topic is appropriate for HPS

Finally, AI is evolving fast. It runs a spectrum from grammar correction, to sentence construction, concept explanation, content generation, planning, references and bibliography, and research. Adoption by students is high and there's no reason to believe Cambridge students are any different. It is also difficult to prove positively. Student guidance will need to be detailed and explicit – which tools are permitted, and which are not – including the obligation to acknowledge when and how AI has been used (if it is permitted at all). In future years, I would expect to see more curiosity amongst

markers as regards the originality of what they are marking. At UCL we are moving to viva all undergraduate dissertations as a means of checking intellectual ownership of the material.

- Consider detailed guidance to students regarding AI in assessment guidance documentation
- Consider an amplified system for checking originality of essays and/or dissertations

Charlotte Sleigh, 5 October 2023