

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

MPhil in Health, Medicine, and Society

Senior Examiner's Report 2019-20

Overall results

The MPhil course—which ran for the third time this year—was taken by 17 students. Twelve students achieved overall First Class marks (70 or above) and four of these earned a First Class degree with distinction (75–79). Four candidates achieved overall High Performance marks (65–69) and one a Pass mark (60–64). No student failed the course (0–59).

Dealing with disruption

This year presented two challenges: the University and College Union industrial action and the COVID-19 pandemic. The industrial action affected mostly the supervision of Essay 3, while the pandemic affected the dissertation at all levels (research, writing, supervision, and examining). For the pandemic, along with moving teaching online, we introduced extensions for coursework and invited the candidates to supplement dissertations with statements describing the obstacles they faced. The examining process was further adjusted in two ways: 1) recalculating the essay marks to make sure the performance on Essay 3 could not undermine the overall mark, 2) differential weighting of dissertation (40% or 60%). The final mark approved was the highest each candidate could get. While this made a difference for some candidates, in general students improved their performance between essays and the dissertation, so the changes to the final marks from the adjustments were not significant. More significant were the creative ways in which supervisors and students undertaking fieldwork and archival research adjusted their plans. They were more affected by the pandemic (as compared to those writing primarily philosophical dissertations) and by all accounts everyone rose to the challenge. The students demonstrated that successful and sophisticated fieldwork is still possible even in a nine-month degree and even under lockdown. Assessors and examiners too stepped up to the challenge of a protracted and extended process that continued all through the summer and relied on frustratingly fickle technology.

In line with the departmental agreement to monitor gender-based trends in student performance, we should note the following breakdown of results. There are no particular concerns arising from this year's results, but we should continue monitoring.

| Class | Female | Male | Total |
|--------------------------------|--------|------|-------|
| First with distinction (75-79) | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| First (70-74) | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| High performance (65-69) | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Pass (60-64) | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 12 | 5 | 17 |

There are no significant trends that the Senior Examiner has detected on the basis of other demographic or disability categories.

Prizes

The Benyamin Habib Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance in the MPhil essays was awarded to Rachel Gerrard. The Forrester Prize for the HMS MPhil candidate with the best overall performance on the dissertation was awarded to Meir Yishai Barth.

External examiner

Dr Andrew Webster served as External Examiner, in his third year of three in this role. He managed to participate in all meetings even as technology didn't make it easy and generously responded to our requests often at unfortunately short notice. He noted a satisfying development of the programme which he has seen from its inception. While in the first year or two there were some teething problems with interdisciplinarity and overambitiousness, now students are navigating these challenges successfully. Concepts and methods they learn in the different options available to them percolate into their work. They produce genuinely unusual fresh work of high academic quality. Our feedback procedures run smoothly and consistently and he repeatedly agreed with the marks and the comments of our assessors.

Recommendations

1. To make sure that essays supervised in specific disciplines are assessed by at least one assessor familiar with conventions of this discipline and to continue to hold orientation sessions for new assessors on an ad-hoc basis to make sure that new Assessors understand how the HMS MPhil differs from other MPhil courses they may be teaching. Over the last two years we achieved convergence and consistency in marking and this should be preserved.
2. The dissertation workshops should continue to provide specific disciplinary guidance and emphasize the crafting of the dissertations (for example, whether or not a methods section is needed and how to justify methodological choices). The examiners noted progress on this front. While last year the top dissertation was philosophical, this year they were fieldwork-based. This diversity is healthy and shows that students make use and benefit from all four disciplines in the course.
3. Staffing: Securing assessors in medical anthropology continues to be a challenge and many colleagues go above and beyond to enable this element of MPhil to be taught and examined. We need support on this end. On the philosophy side we relied heavily on the work of our teaching associates who will not be here next year. That might be a problem.
4. The role of external examiner for a degree of this nature is absolutely crucial as marks need to be monitored across different fields of medical humanities.

Finally I would like to thank James Livesey, the Graduate Secretary of the HMS MPhil, for his support of the work of examiners over the course of this academic year and in preparation of this report.

Anna Alexandrova

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