

## **DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE**

### **M.Phil. in History, Sociology and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine**

#### **M PHIL SENIOR EXAMINER'S REPORT 2008-9**

The M Phil course was taken by 21 students, of whom 1 achieved Distinction (Starred First Class, 80 and above), 8 Distinction (First Class, 70-80), 9 achieved High Performance (65-69), 2 achieved Pass (60-64) and 1 candidate failed. (These figures are, as of this Report, provisional, since the Degree Committee has still to approve the final marks of 2 candidates.)

All three essays and the dissertation of the failing candidate were seen by the External Examiner.

The Jennifer Redhead Prize (for best overall essay performance) and the Rausing Prize (for best dissertation performance) were both awarded to Jonathan Burch.

#### **Word Limits**

In 2007-8, the Degree Committee approved a recommendation from the M.Phil. Examiners that

in order to ensure the equitable enforcing of the word limit laid down for M.Phil. Essays and Dissertations, the candidates will be required to submit their work as now, to the specified deadline, stating the word-count in the essay/dissertation, together with an electronic version of the essay/dissertation. At this specified time, the M.Phil. Senior Examiner will inspect each essay/dissertation to ensure that the word limit has been respected. If it has not, the work will be returned to the candidate who will be asked to revise the work so that it does conform to the word limit. Given that the inspection will take place at the time of the deadline, the rule governing penalties for late submission will be applied.

This rule was rigorously applied and there were no essays or dissertations submitted that were over the word-limit.

#### **Late Submissions**

This year the problem of late submission due to extenuating circumstances preoccupied the M.Phil. Manager, Examiners and Degree Committee.

#### *Unauthorised Late Submission*

- i. One candidate handed in work 1 day late this year without permission granted by the Degree Committee. 1 mark was deducted in accordance with the guidelines approved by the Degree Committee and the Examiners. The same

candidate handed in work 4 days' late and 4 marks were deducted. This candidate had already been granted permission to submit these essays late. The overall effect of these mark deductions was to change the candidate's performance on the Essays component from High Performance to Pass.

- ii. The Examiners reaffirmed that one mark is to be deducted for each day's delay in submission where such delay had not previously been agreed by the Degree Committee or its sub-Committee for this purpose (Chair, Secretary, M.Phil. Manager).

#### *Authorised late submission:*

One piece of work was granted an extension of 2 days  
One piece of work was granted an extension of 4 days  
Four pieces of work were granted extensions of 7 days  
Four pieces of work were granted extensions of 14 days  
One piece of work was granted an extension of 16 days  
Two pieces of work were granted an extension of 27 days  
Two pieces of work were granted an extension of 72 days

A total of 15 (18%) pieces of work were granted extensions.

Four candidates were granted permission to submit dissertations late. As a result, the M.Phil. Examiners' meeting was not in a position to consider these at its meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. Two of these dissertations were submitted between the date of the Examiners' Meeting and the meeting of the Degree Committee; Examiners (including the External) graciously marked these in very quick time so the Degree Committee could consider their reports at its meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> June. As of the time of writing, 2 dissertations have been marked but they and the candidates' other marks have yet to be considered by the Degree Committee.

#### **Other Exceptional Cases and Permissions Granted**

5 (24%) candidates were granted permission to write two essays in one area  
8 (38%) candidates were granted permission to submit Appendices to their dissertations  
10 (48%) candidates were granted permission to change the title of their dissertations

#### **Appeals**

On one occasion during the year the supervisor of an essay lodged an appeal on behalf of the candidate. After discussion between Senior M.Phil. Examiner, Secretary of the Degree Committee and the supervisor, it was agreed to refer the matter to the External Examiner. At the second Examiners' meeting in April, the External Examiner's view was accepted as providing a satisfactory resolution of the disputed mark.

## **Appointment of Examiners**

The second Examiners' meeting also noted that, when appointing examiners, experience of the Department's examination procedures, as well as teaching experience, should be taken into account. It was also noted that the Department should try to avoid using as examiners people who have not had any teaching experience as this can lead to problems with the calibration of marks.

The Degree Committee has in recent years adopted a policy of care in the appointment of Examiners, attempting to ensure that:

- i. one at least of two appointed Examiners be an 'internal' Examiner (a member of core staff) and/or be an experienced examiner who is also thoroughly familiar with the marking culture of the Department;
- ii. it has also adopted a policy of wishing to assist the gaining of experience by more junior Examiners by ensuring that, when a junior or inexperienced Examiner is appointed, they are matched with a more senior and experienced examiner.
- iii. The Degree Committee may wish to add this new rule of thumb, of familiarity with supervising M.Phil. essays (or equivalent teaching experience), when considering the appointment of Examiners.

## **External Examiner**

Dr Greg Radick, the External Examiner, saw a total of 26 pieces of work (including 6 dissertations, one of which was submitted late in the summer) out of 82 in total (32%). The reasons for referral varied considerably from: best and worst examples of essays and dissertations; borderline marks; wide variation between examiners' marks; failure of internal examiners to reach agreement; pieces of work deemed to fail; referral following appeal by a supervisor; and special circumstances. The Examiners were extremely grateful for the prompt, judicious and well argued interventions of the External Examiner.

Whilst the External Examiner did not make any comments on this high work-load, the Degree Committee may wish to reduce the Department's heavy reliance on the External Examiner's exceptional capacities for reading essays and dissertations by finding an efficient mechanism for appointing third Examiners to resolve some unresolved examining issues. (This point was also raised in last year's Report. In 2006-7, the External read 17 essays and 5 dissertations; in 2007-8, the External read 22 essays and 6 dissertations. The appointment of third Examiners, while recognized as a possibility by the Degree Committee, has not been made use of in any of the last three years.)

## **Recommendations**

### *Changes of Title*

Many candidates wish to change the titles of essays; nearly half of all dissertation titles were changed from the submission and formal approval by the Degree Committee at its

meeting in March to final submission of dissertation in early June. At a meeting in May, the Degree Committee approved the following:

While permission to change titles is not automatically granted, it does often happen that students need to refine their titles from those initially submitted. The following procedure for changing title must be followed: The title form which was originally submitted should be retrieved from the Departmental Office and a new title written beneath it, with the supervisor signing to indicate their approval of the change, and drawing attention to any need for change in examiners. No changes will be allowed less than a week before submission of the essay or dissertation.

The new policy is intended to strike a balance between administrative simplicity and recognition that flexibility is necessary given how research projects develop from inception to fruition. The Examiners and the Degree Committee will need to keep this policy under review in future years.

#### *Late Submissions*

At its meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009:

The [Degree] Committee commented that never before had it received so many applications for extensions to deadlines and the Department's policy on extensions has to be tightened up to make it clear that these are only granted in rare and exceptional cases. The Secretary of the Committee was asked to write to the Graduate Tutor's Committee asking for them to support the Department's authority to have deadlines which are enforceable.

The following is a proposal concerning new guidelines that the Degree Committee might consider in the light of the spate of late submissions:

- i. only medical conditions that prevent a student working for 7 days or more, as indicated by a doctor's letter in the keeping of the College Tutor will normally be taken into consideration when considering requests to delay submission on medical grounds;
- ii. only family or other unforeseen circumstances that require the student to leave Cambridge (e.g. to attend a funeral) will normally be taken into consideration in considering requests to delay submission on non-medical grounds; the number of days of permitted deferral will normally be the number of days the student was required to be absent from Cambridge.

If the Degree Committee agrees to this proposal, the Secretary should be asked to write to the Graduate Tutors' Committee and the Board of Graduate Studies requesting their immediate consideration of this change of policy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Forrester', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Prof. John Forrester  
Senior Examiner 2008-9, M.Phil. in History, Sociology and Philosophy of Science,  
Technology and Medicine

8<sup>th</sup> October 2009

## **Notes on possible changes to the Graduate Handbook**

At present the Graduate Handbook states:

“The Senior Examiner will advise the Examiners’ Meeting of any late submissions and, unless there are exceptional circumstances, this will normally entail the loss of one mark for each day’s lateness beyond the published deadline. Given that problems can and do occur (such as computers crashing and printers breaking), students are advised that their work should be ready almost a week in advance of the formal deadline. The Department adheres strictly to the rule that permission to submit essays or dissertations late will only be granted by the Degree Committee (or by the Degree Committee’s chair taking chair’s action) if a formal request is received from the candidate’s college, with medical or similar reasons given in documentary form.”

The Graduate Handbook’s advice could be amended as follows:

“The Senior Examiner will advise the Examiners’ Meeting of any late submissions and, unless there are exceptional circumstances, this will normally entail the loss of one mark for each day’s lateness beyond the published deadline. Given that problems can and do occur (such as computers crashing and printers breaking, or candidates falling ill with flu and other minor illnesses to which many if not most staff and students succumb at some point in the course of a year), students are advised that each piece of work should be planned to be ready almost a week in advance of the formal deadline. The Department adheres strictly to the rule that permission to submit essays or dissertations late will only be granted by the Degree Committee (or by the Degree Committee’s Chair taking Chair’s action) if a formal request is received from the candidate’s college, with medical or similar reasons given in documentary form. Only medical conditions which require time off work for 7 days or more normally receive a sympathetic hearing from the Degree Committee.”