

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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

M PHIL SENIOR EXAMINER'S REPORT 2011-12

The MPhil course was taken by 19 students, of whom 11 achieved First Class (1st Class; final mark above 70), 1 with Distinction (75 and over); 6 achieved High Performance (final mark between 65-69) and 2 achieved a Pass Mark (60-64). No candidate achieved Distinction Starred First (mark 80 and above) and no candidate failed (either overall, or on individual pieces of work).

Prizes

The *Jennifer Redhead Prize (University Prize)*, for best overall essay performance, was awarded to Sebastian Falk. The *8th Annual Rausing Prize (non-University Prize)*, for best dissertation performance, was awarded to Florian Ganzinger.

Number of students enrolled in the program

As in the previous year, the number of students has increased from the dip to 13 in 2009-10 when the Part III was introduced close to the target figure.

Late submissions

Two candidates submitted work (Essays) late and had the appropriate number of marks docked (3 in one instance, 1 in the other).

External examiner

Dr Serafina Cuomo (Department of History, Classics and Archaeology, Birkbeck College, London), the External Examiner, saw a total of 24 pieces of work (including 8 dissertations) out of 76 (32%) – the same proportion as in the previous year. The reasons for referral were diverse. Dr Cuomo saw: the best and worst essays, borderline marks, those essays or dissertations for which there was a wide variation between the examiners' marks and those for which the internal examiners failed to reach an agreement. The Examiners wish to thank Dr Cuomo for her careful reading of the work and her constructive contributions to the discussion.

In a development that is connected with the problem of non-written materials (see below), the External Examiner had noted that some of the most enterprising work by candidates was in the 'cutting edge' area of work on the history of objects.

Recommendations

1. **Deadline and Word Limits**

The rules for deadlines and word limits, backed by the sanction of losing marks according to explicit rules, has now bedded down well and is not a cause for concern. This year, the

system appeared to be well understood by both supervisors and students. Nonetheless there are still students who submit work late; it takes all sorts, one is tempted to conclude.

2. Guidelines on Examinations

At the Examiners' Meeting held in April 2012, the Examiners approved a document, entitled "Guidelines on Examinations", which the Secretary of the Degree Committee had prepared, based on extensive revision of the previous guidelines. The document covers a wide range of issues connected to examining; whilst primarily designed for use by examiners, the Guidelines will be available on the Departmental website for consultation by a wider audience, including supervisors and students. The Guidelines were approved by the HPS Degree Committee at its meeting on 14 May 2012.

3. Overlap of Topics in Essays and Dissertation

The Guidelines concerning overlap were discussed at the 2nd M.Phil. Essay Meeting in April and the policy was re-affirmed: students are advised that it is permissible to build on work done in an essay in preparing the dissertation, as long as the original piece is appropriately referenced. It was noted that in the case under discussion, while the topics in question may have appeared similar, care had been taken to establish that the work was in fact quite different. It was also noted that the Department knowingly has two guidelines that are in tension with each other: firstly, that students are encouraged to choose topics which demonstrate wide spread across a range of topics and secondly, that students are informed that building a dissertation on the preliminary work completed in an essay is perfectly acceptable and often wise.

4. Feedback to Students

In response to a case in which extensively critical examiners' reports had been transmitted to a candidate, it was reiterated, at the M.Phil. Examiners' Meeting in April, that Examiner's Reports are drafted principally for the Examiners' Meeting (and thence the Degree Committee) and the addressee of each report is the Chair of the Examiners' Meeting. The reports are only secondarily for the eyes of the candidates. It was agreed that, since the non-confidential parts of the Examiners' Reports are the principal feedback students receive on their progress, the comments therein should convey an accurate and balanced sense of the quality of the work. It was agreed that the M.Phil. Manager is able to assist with this by editing the versions of reports that are transmitted to students; via the individual feedback meetings, the M.Phil. Manager is able to interpret the content of individual examiner's reports for the students.

5. Candidates who are Non-Native Speakers

Issues relating to essay writing by non-native speakers were discussed and it was agreed that supervisors should be alert to any problems they identify and act early in the year, in the best interests of the student. The Department, as does the University, has a policy concerning such students which the M.Phil. Manager is able to implement. It should also, however, be noted that one of the candidates whose writing style was discussed earlier in

the examining year produced a very fine dissertation with no writing problems at all – quite the reverse.

6. Submission of visual materials as part of an examinable piece of work

The Degree Committee approved the application of a candidate to submit a film, made by the candidate as an integral part of the work of dissertation preparation, as an Appendix to the dissertation. It turned out that the film, which was an extended piece of work, formed an integral part of the submitted dissertation. The Examiners therefore had difficulty evaluating the work. After a lengthy discussion, the Examiners agreed that the HPS Degree Committee should be asked to draw up detailed guidelines concerning the submission of non-written materials to the Examiners.

Subsequent to the examination process, it emerged that film materials (and possibly other non-written materials) present problems relating to copyright which are not unambiguously covered by existing University rules and guidelines. It is recommended that the Degree Committee and the HPS Board develop policies to deal with such eventualities, since it is likely that research projects involving such materials are likely to become more frequent as the full range of digital technologies is developed further.

Prof John Forrester

M.Phil. Senior Examiner 2011-12

3 October 2012