

External Examiner's Report for MPhil in History and Philosophy of Science and Medicine and Part III History and Philosophy of Science

Both courses aim to provide students with the opportunity to acquire and develop research skills and develop a critical understanding of the role of the sciences in society. The emphasis is on letting students follow their own research interests in this. From the high quality of coursework and dissertations it appears that both courses achieve these aims extremely well through a mixture of staff lectures, the topics of which students can choose to follow up in seminar and reading groups, and weekly research seminars in which students can present their work.

The structure of both courses is clear, although I would recommend to introduce a unit specifically dedicated to literature research and referencing at the start of the year rather than at the end of Lent Term. There is good guidance on lecture topics, reading groups and seminars available online. 80% of contact hours consist in direct supervision, which is highly recommended for a course that caters to individual research interests of students. Students also have ample time to interact with each other in reading groups and seminars where they have the opportunity to present their work. At the Examiner's Meeting on June 15, we discussed whether online tools available on Moodle should be used more, but agreed that this should not be done at the expense of personal interaction. For next year, it was suggested to introduce a general discussion forum that students on the courses could use for online discussion and communication, and I recommend following up this suggestion.

Coursework

Coursework produced by students on the MPhil and Part III programme was generally of very high quality, and I welcomed the opportunity to have a separate Examiners Meeting for agreeing marks and providing feedback on assessments and marking on April 26. Marking was conscientious, written feedback substantive, occasionally even plentiful, and above all constructive, providing detailed advice on how to improve. Not having supervisors mark work of their supervisees is good practice since it helps in providing unbiased feedback. One very minor complaint I have is that few markers only comment on formal issues (presentation, referencing style). Since this is a mark of professionalism, I think it is worth, even if tedious, to provide such comments (and perhaps even include quality of presentation in the marking criteria). Second marking is working very well, with only a few strong disagreements in preliminary marks, and only two cases in which this disagreement could not be resolved and the mark had to be decided by the External. I second-marked representative coursework as well as boundaries and disagreed marks, and comments for each piece of coursework have been made available to the department.

MPhil Coursework

The examination structure (three essay on independently developed themes) fits very well with the stated aims of the course. A good number of students show progress in their essay marks over the year, so the training seems to work well. It should be noted, though, that there are quite a few also which seem to be

“stuck”, and a couple with very uneven marks. Marks were generally in very good accordance with marking criteria. There was only one case where I suggested to raise an agreed 69 to 70, because I felt the essay showed clear potential for PhD Work.

Part III

I think, again, that the examination structure works very well, with a variety of “genres” (Critical Literature Review, Research Papers, Set Essays) targeted at developing specific research skills. For the same reason, though, progress over the year cannot be gleaned from the marks. I wondered about the order of assessments, however: Set Essays first, then Critical Literature Review, and then Research Paper seems more intuitive. In addition, there were two problems I noticed:

1) Part III, Set Essays: There was one question, Q01 (about medical scepticism), which some students very narrowly interpreted as being focussed on the work of the lecturer (an unpublished book on the same subject), and in one case this led to a rather poor mark (which I actually lowered from the agreed). I don’t think this was intended, but such possible misunderstandings should be avoided in the future. It is good practice to keep questions broad in meaning.

2) Part III, Critical Literature Review: There were a number of students who did not quite seem to understand what a literature review is, and markers did not always mark their work *as* reviews. There was one case of excellent work which did cover the relevant literature extensively and critically, but which was not written as a review, but rather as an essay. I think the nature of the exercise needs to be made clearer by supervisors.

A second problem is that there were indications that students did not have the necessary practical skills to search literature. Students should be warned, I think, of taking on subjects with a substantial amount of literature they can’t access because they lack the relevant language skills, and they should receive *practical* lessons that teach them how to search literature using databases like the university library catalogue, obviously, but also WorldCat. I emphasize practical, because I know from my own experience that presentations by librarians do not do the job.

Dissertations

Many dissertations were of excellent quality, and could easily be thought of as the basis for a publication. This is true especially in terms of own research completed by the students, another indication that both programmes succeed well in their pedagogic goals. I was especially, and seriously, impressed by the great diversity in approaches and themes. Both courses undoubtedly bring out individual research talents in students, and supervisors are able to flexibly further these individual talents.

Feedback was consistently detailed, productive and articulate. I like the fact that there is no set format for assessment, for example by breaking up assessment into categories. It allows markers to assess dissertations on their individual

merits. In some cases it seemed to me that a large spread of marks arose from valuing different aspects very differently.

Marks and feedback for dissertations in both courses were made available on quite short notice, leaving me little time for having a look at low, boundary, spread and high marks, as well as three cases of non-agreed marks. Moderating these was manageable, but very tight. We discussed the contingencies that had led to this situation this year, and agreed that, if possible, such a tight turn-around should be avoided next year.

Summary

Processes for assessment and the determination of awards were sound and fairly conducted, and I especially appreciated the meticulous though easily navigated documentation of marks, feedback and comments on how agreements were reached. Both courses provide excellent training in the field of History and Philosophy of Science and standards for examination and qualification excel those of similar programmes in other UK institutions. What is more, discussion at the two Examiners' Meetings showed that lecturers and course managers deeply care about how to teach their field best. It is no wonder that the Department of History and Philosophy of Science produces world-leading PhD research.

Staffan Müller-Wille
University of Exeter