

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. As last year, the quality of coursework and dissertations was very high, indicating that both courses continue to 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. 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.

Marks were generally in excellent accordance with marking criteria. Double marking continues to work very well, with only a few strong disagreements in preliminary marks, in which cases confidential comments explained how reconciliation was reached. There was only one case in which this disagreement could not be resolved and the mark had to be decided by the External Examiner. I take this to be the result of the exceptional detail and rigour with which colleagues in the department provide feedback.

Summarizing achievements of the individual piece of work at the start clearly, and then discussing strengths and weaknesses point by point, and with frequent explicit references to the essay or dissertation in question, results in very well-balanced decisions. This is laborious for markers, and this was discussed at the April examiners' meeting, but good practice, given that both courses are entry points for a PhD at Cambridge, depending on results achieved.

Some lectures and seminars were affected by the strike this year, with potential to directly affect the outcome of essay 3 of the MPhil course. Actions taken to mitigate negative effects included providing students with teaching materials from last year via moodle and advising students to seek supervision from their colleges. In addition, a decision was taken by the department to ensure that no mark was brought down by poor performance on essay 3. I am convinced that the department did everything it could to minimize the effects of the strike. The distribution of marks conforms well with that of last year.

Coursework

Like last year, 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 25. 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. My minor complaint from last year — that few markers only comment on formal issues (presentation, referencing style) —

seems to have been addressed. 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. There were only four instances in which I recommended slight adjustments to the marks.

MPhil

The examination structure (three essays on independently developed themes) fits very well with the stated aims of the course. In contrast to last year, when a good number of students showed progress in their essay marks over the year, there were considerable anomalies regarding individual achievements of students in essay 3, where marks dropped from first or high performance to pass or even fail. I suspect that this has in part to do with the strike affecting supervision (see my remarks above about how the department dealt with this problem). I should also point out, however, that there are cases in which students performed much better in their third essay, and that the overall distribution of marks did not differ significantly from last year's.

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.

Last year, I noted in my report that 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 literature reviews. From the five papers I looked at this year it seems that this problem has been addressed. Students now seem to have a good understanding of what is expected from them in a literature review. Likewise, there was no direct evidence, unlike last year, for a lack of skills with regard to literature research.

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. Like last year, I was especially 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. At the same time, comments cover all aspects raised by the marking criteria. Last year, an issue with one dissertation was raised at the meeting where the author had developed an innovative model to work with data on research funding, but where this was not appreciated in the feedback given by both assessors. This year again there were examples of use of digital humanities tools and this was appreciated by both markers.

In contrast to last year, marks and feedback for dissertations were made available to me in good time for having a look at low, boundary, spread and high marks, as well as three cases of non-agreed marks.

Examiners' Meetings

I attended examiners' meetings on April 25 (for coursework) and June 21 (Dissertation and final marks). Papers for these works were prepared meticulously, allowing us to scrutinize reports and marks for each individual student, and allowing ample time for me to comment on papers that had been referred to me for consideration. Difficult cases were scrutinized in great detail, with all examiners' present contributing with their views. I am therefore assured that the final marks we decided upon at these meetings truly reflect the achievements of the students.

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 their students and how to teach them best.



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