

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

Both courses aim to provide students with the opportunity to acquire and develop research skills and develop a critical understanding of the methods and 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, reflecting the high entry requirements, but also indicating that both courses continue to achieve their 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, and marking criteria were frequently referred to in assessors' reports. Double marking continues to work very well, with now only very few strong disagreements in preliminary marks, in which cases confidential comments explained how reconciliation was reached (e.g. 302 Dissertation). I take this to be the result of explicit endorsement of marking criteria and 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 good practice, given that both courses are entry points for a PhD at Cambridge, depending on results achieved. I also commend the meticulous proofreading of reports, because it is a sign of respect towards students to produce flawless reports. The distribution of marks is even, perhaps with exception of little use made of the 65 to 69 range for MPhil dissertations. Marks also often showed clear progression over the course of the year, in marked contrast to 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 24.

Marking was conscientious, written feedback substantive, occasionally even plentiful, and above all constructive, providing detailed advice on how to improve. I second-marked representative coursework as well as boundaries and disagreed marks (all in all 41 pieces, i.e. c. 20%), and comments for each piece of coursework have been made available to the department. There were five instances in which I recommended slight adjustments to the marks.

Of the 195 pieces submitted, 29 (or 15%) showed differences of more than five points in suggested marks, but there were only a handful of cases where agreement seems to have been difficult or was not reached. More explicit references to the marking criteria laid down in the mark scheme for the MPhil and Part III programmes than in previous years seems to have helped avoid irreconcilable disagreements.

MPhil Coursework

The examination structure (three essays on independently developed themes) fits very well with the stated aims of the course. Marks were generally in excellent accordance with marking criteria. In a few cases (e.g. 437, Essay 3) I noticed that some markers focus on criticizing content at the expense of execution, resulting in strong disagreement with the other marker. A good number of students showed progress over the year, although there were also quite a few cases where marks dropped considerably (401, 402, 407, 408, 417, 424, 426, 435). Marks for each student were much more consistent than last year.

Part III Coursework

Two years ago, I noted in my report that students seemed to have difficulties to understand what a critical literature review is, and markers did not always mark their work *as* reviews. As a consequence, this piece of coursework has been replaced by another research paper. I agree that a literature review outside the context of a piece of actual research is a rather formal exercise, and may therefore be of limited pedagogical value.

As with MPhil coursework, marks were in excellent accordance with marking criteria. Marks for each student were largely consistent, and a clear majority of students showed distinct progress from Research Paper 1 to 2. I interpret this as a clear sign for the effectiveness of feedback given on coursework and the new examination structure.

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. There seems to be a tendency this year for marks on excellent MPhil dissertations to cluster at the high end of the first class range (78 to 80), while little use is made of the 65 to 69 range. 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. In 9 out of 58 dissertations, markers disagreed by more than 5 points, but there was no case in

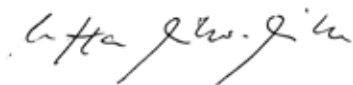
which these disagreements could not be reconciled. I was asked to look at these cases in particular, in addition to highest and lowest, and second-marked all in all 16 dissertations.

Examiners' Meetings

I attended examiners' meetings on April 24 (for coursework) and June 20 (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 detailed 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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