MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Educational Aims of Programme

The course is intended for students who have a substantial background in geography or a related discipline with a good first degree. It aims to provide:
(i) broad-based training in geographical research, its philosophical backgrounds and debates, and interpretation of geographical literature,
(ii) comprehensive training in research methods in human geography and the social sciences as a whole, and
(iii) the opportunity to develop large scale research management skills by completing a research dissertation under academic supervision and guidance. The course aims to develop general transferable skills for research employment in a wide range of walks of life, or as the first stage of a PhD thesis.

The course is intended to give students a broad-based advanced training and critical awareness of geographical research and its methods, including awareness of the research methods of related disciplines. The course is offered to all students hoping to undertake a PhD in Human Geography. Hence the thesis often forms a 'pilot' for a larger scale PhD proposal and will include a review of the relevant literature, research questions, an outline and evaluation of appropriate research methods, and an assessment of the initial findings and their significance.

The course aims to develop further the students’ understanding of the relationship between society, nature and space, emphasising both global and local processes and connections. They develop further their skills of assessing the merits of contrasting theories, explanations and policies; collecting and critically judging, evaluating and interpreting varied forms of evidence; preparing maps and diagrams; employing various methods of collecting and analysing spatial and environmental information; combining and interpreting different types of evidence to tackle specific problems; recognising the ethical and moral dimensions of study.

Programme Outcomes

The outcomes of the course are achieved both through focused study of selected specialised aspects of geographical research, and through development of more general research skills and methods. Eight outcomes of student learning are sought:
1. that students are familiar with an appropriate range of intellectual and methodological traditions within geographical research and the social sciences, and understand the significance of alternative epistemological positions that provide the context for research. This is achieved through exposure of the students to different substantive areas of geography, and within each to assess and understand the application of different epistemological approaches to Geography as a whole. The main delivery is through lectures with discussions, seminars, and directed reading, to allow exchange and debate both with experienced researchers and with peers. The outcome is also expected to be reflected in the thesis and guided by the supervisor;

2. that students become critical and skilled readers of geographical and other research publications. This is achieved through structured reading to support outcome 1, determined through discussions and through detailed supervisor guidance on the dissertation;

3. that students develop in-depth knowledge of some substantive area(s) of geography and geographical research. This is achieved through a study of two ‘geographical modules’ and the dissertation. It is delivered partly through the taught elements (via lectures, seminars, directed reading and discussions) and partly through the thesis and supervision guidance;

4. that students develop their capacity to frame research questions, to derive appropriate research designs, and develop awareness of alternative approaches. This is achieved through a mixture of geography-specific research training, an interdepartmental social science research methods course, and the preparation of the dissertation. Lectures with discussions form a large part of the formal training, with practical sessions to support the gaining of alternative research design experiences. There is also discussion of research design issues in seminars, and through one-to-one supervisor guidance on the specific topic of the dissertation;

5. that students develop a competence and confidence in using a range of both qualitative and quantitative methods for gathering, analysing and interpreting evidence. This is achieved through specific lectures, practicals, discussions and seminars in geography and partly through lectures, discussions and practicals in an interdepartmental social science course (chiefly database analysis, survey design and execution, statistical methods, qualitative and ethnographic methods).

6. that students develop their skills in presentation of research-based evidence and argument. The taught programme requires presentation of an interim report, completion of written assignments and practicals.

7. that students develop a capability to manage research, including data management, conducting and disseminating research, working in a team, and understanding codes of research practice and research ethics. There are taught elements in each of these aspects, delivered through lectures and discussion, which give a broad awareness of different approaches and difficulties. The dissertation provides a major means by which students develop their research management capability and understanding of the ethical demands of research;

8. that students gain practical experience of geographical research through conducting small-scale research project(s), chiefly through their thesis.

Requirements for the Award of the Degree

The scheme of examination for the one-year course of study in Geographical Research for the degree of Master of Philosophy shall consist of:
(a) two essays each of not more than 4,000 words in length, on subjects of Geographical Research chosen by the candidate, approved by the Degree Committee for the Faculty of Earth Science and Geography;
(b) one essay of not more than 4,000 words and one workbook of assessment of materials on research methods on topics approved by the Degree Committee; and
(c) a dissertation of not more than 20,000 words in length, including footnotes, but excluding tables, appendices and bibliography, on a subject approved by the Degree Committee.

The examination may include, at the discretion of the Examiners, an oral examination on the thesis and on the general field of knowledge within which it falls.

The University overall result in the MPhil is Pass, Fail, or Distinction.

Learning Support

All students are members of a College as well as the Department and have access to learning support from both College and University. Each student has an overall supervisor who gives advice on planning the year’s work. Individual specialists may also help with preparation for essays and progress is monitored through the submission of essays. The College Tutor for graduates will also play a role in induction, support and guidance.

A course Handbook is available for all MPhil students. The Department's learning resources include a library which constitutes the main working collection for MPhil students; computer facilities with a full range of software for graduate students, laboratories, and a cartographic office.

All students in Cambridge enjoy access to the exceptional bibliographic resources of University and Departmental libraries. The Department of Geography itself contains one of the country’s largest Geography libraries in addition to an extensive map collection. Additionally, the Departmental physical geography laboratories permit a wide range of physical and chemical measurements that can support dissertation work.

Management of teaching quality and standards

The Department of Geography participates in the University’s quality assurance and enhancement system:

1. External Examining: The MPhil in Geographical Research has an external examiner who submits a report which is considered by the Degree Committee (responsible for graduate matters). Action in response to reports includes, where appropriate, revisions or adjustments to the programme and its delivery.
2. Course approval: the Department through the Faculty is required to obtain the approval of the Board of Graduate Studies and the General Board’s Education Committee before any significant changes to courses are made.
3. General Board Internal Review: the Faculty undergoes a reflective, centrally co-ordinated Learning and Teaching Review every six years, and completes a yearly Annual Quality
Update to enable central overview of provision and to assist in dissemination of good practice.

4. A representative from the Geographical Research MPhil students is a member of the Department’s Graduate Student Committee where students can raise any issues of concern and improvements to facilities and the course can be considered and acted on.

Graduate Employability and Career Destinations

The Careers Service maintains links with relevant employers and takes into account employer needs and opinions in the services which it provides for students. The Careers Service also allocates a Careers Adviser to each College, Faculty and Department to act as a point of contact.

Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information in this programme specification. At the time of publication, the programme specification has been approved by the relevant Faculty Board (or equivalent). Programme specifications are reviewed annually, however, during the course of the academical year, any approved changes to the programme will be communicated to enrolled students through email notification or publication in the Reporter. The relevant faculty or department will endeavour to update the programme specification accordingly, and prior to the start of the next academical year.

Further information about specifications and an archive of programme specifications for all awards of the University is available online at: https://www.camdata.admin.cam.ac.uk/