



UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

Centre of African Studies



# MPhil in African Studies

# Supervision Guide

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## **Introduction**

The production of a substantial and original dissertation is a core element of the MPhil in African Studies, and thus a close working relationship between students and their supervisors is at the heart of the course. Although the final dissertation must be the student's independent work, it is the supervisor who offers advice on refining the topic (if necessary), on appropriate academic literature, on research resources and techniques, and on writing the final dissertation. Supervisors and their students meet frequently throughout the year, and the supervisor is normally the student's primary contact for academic advice and support.

On the other hand, it is also important to understand the limits of the supervisor's role. The purpose of close supervision is to prepare the student to work independently. The supervisor is concerned with helping students to clarify their own ideas, not to impose the supervisor's own interests on the student. Students should not expect to be 'spoon fed' by their supervisors; the supervisor is not an all-purpose teacher but someone who guides the student's own independent efforts. Graduate students in Cambridge are expected to have the capacity and enthusiasm for organising their own research and to work largely on their own initiative.

Supervisors also have an important role in relation to the Centre of African Studies Graduate Education Committee (GEC) and ultimately, the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Human, Social and Political Science. Supervisors are urged to inform the GEC of any serious concerns about students and their progress. Such concerns can be conveyed to the MPhil Academic Secretary (Dr Adam Branch) or to the Graduate Administrator (Ms Victoria Jones) at the Centre of African Studies.

This guide attempts to define and summarise what is expected of supervisors (and students in relation to their supervisors) through the course of the MPhil in African Studies. It is hoped that all supervisors and their students will find it a useful document for reference. Further guidance is available on the Student Registry 'Information for Supervisors' website at:

<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/students/studentregistry/staff/grad/supervisors/>

## 1. The supervisor's responsibilities directly to the student

As a supervisor you will have agreed to supervise the student on the basis of the research proposal submitted with the application for admission. You will, therefore, be familiar with the proposed area of research. Incoming students will generally need to refine and define their areas of research, and the supervisors should advise them about this. On the other hand, in a nine-month MPhil course it is undesirable that a student should change their research topic too dramatically, and any such change should only be contemplated in the first weeks of the MPhil. If in such exceptional circumstances a student does wish to change the focus of his or her research to the extent that you are no longer able to supervise him or her, you should make this clear to the student and contact the MPhil office immediately.

Important information on the University's expectations of graduate supervisors, their students and others in the University concerned with graduate studies is contained within the Code of Practice. Much of this document applies specifically to PhD students, but it also offers useful guidance to MPhil students and their supervisors:

<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/students/studentregistry/current/graduate/policy/quality/cop/>

The supervisor's role is to give advice, encouragement and constructive criticism to MPhil students.

The supervisor should:

- Guide the student in planning, focusing and developing the study by encouraging the student to make a written timetable and plan at a very early stage to ensure that a manageable piece of work is undertaken;
- Establish an effective means of communication with the student; for example making clear the frequency and timings of meetings, making sure that the student knows how to make contact at other times;
- Respond promptly and appropriately to requests from students to meet and comment on work at various stages of development;
- Ensure the student's project is appropriate to the resources available;
- Advise the student on relevant literature, methodology and academic conventions pertaining in the field (in particular, how to avoid plagiarism);
- Ensure that the student is aware of relevant training programmes in transferable skills and in other academic courses as appropriate;
- Make the student aware of relevant lectures and seminars in the field;
- Introduce the student to academic contacts working in similar research fields;

- Encourage the student to keep systematic records of their research, including back-up copies of electronically stored material;
- Discuss the research in person and offer constructive written comments and criticism;
- Consistently monitor progress and time management against the agreed time table and work plan and contact the student and the Academic Secretary if there is a lack of contact or if progress is poor;
- Report termly on the student's progress in reports submitted to CGSRS and comment formally if there are serious concerns about the student's academic performance, which suggest that failure in part or all of the MPhil examination is a possibility;
- Serious concerns about academic progress should also be reported to the Academic Secretary and to the student's college.
- Students should also be provided with adequate an indication of his/her progress in regular supervision meetings;
- Encourage the student to present his/her work at graduate workshops and seminars;
- Advise on ethical and safety issues and/or fieldwork techniques as appropriate;
- Advise on the writing up and presentation of the dissertation;
- If appropriate, advise on publication of the research and offer advice on further study or careers in the specific research area.

Supervisors normally also play a major role in assisting students with career development, by giving advice and writing references, especially if the student is contemplating an academic career.

## **2. The student's responsibilities and expectations**

It is important to remember that academic supervision is a relationship between supervisor and student with mutual responsibilities and expectations.

The supervisor can expect the student to be responsible for:

- Initiating supervisions by making appointments and also keeping the supervisor informed of progress via email if appropriate;
- Keeping and being punctual for supervisions;
- Taking full advantage of the facilities, teaching and supervision offered, and keeping his or her supervisor informed of any circumstances affecting his or her academic performance or participation in any part of the course;

- Managing submission of written work/drafts according to an agreed timetable and normally submitting work at least one week before the supervision;
- Respecting the extent of the supervisor's availability outside term-time;
- Managing his or her CamSIS account, making timely applications for administrative requests when required;
- Accessing supervision reports via CamSIS and seek discussion of them if appropriate;
- Seeking advice and help from the sources identified in the MPhil Handbook and elsewhere, should problems arise;
- Informing his or her College and supervisor promptly if he or she ceases to attend through ill health or other grave cause, or withdraws from the course;
- Taking responsibility for the final quality of all his or her academic work submitted for examination.

The student can expect the supervisor to:

- Give clear instructions on the best method of contact to make an appointment;
- Keep and be punctual for supervisions;
- Read and comment on work/drafts submitted according to a timetable agreed at an early stage of the research, so that any feedback can be incorporated into subsequent writing;
- Inform him or her when they will be absent from Cambridge for any prolonged period and of any arrangements made to cover this absence;
- Inform the student about his/her availability during and out of term time;
- Arrange uninterrupted supervisions in a quiet room and a non-threatening atmosphere;
- Offer around 8-10 hours of supervision over the year. This is a guideline rather than a 'rule'. Nevertheless, a commonly adopted schedule is 2 supervisions in Michaelmas Term (at the beginning and end of term), and 3-4 supervisions during Lent and Easter Term (approximately every fortnight).

### 3. Supervisor's specific responsibilities relating to supervisions and written work

The supervisor should aim to see the student as soon as possible after the student's arrival. Contact with the student should be made through the college pigeonhole or by e-mail. At the first meeting a viable research programme should be discussed. At this stage the supervisor should ensure that the student:

- Has received, read and understood the course handbook (distributed as part of the welcome pack by the Centre of African Studies)
- Is directed to library and other facilities
- Is aware of appropriate academic literature and research material

Supervisors should on average meet with the MPhil at least 8-10 times over the academic year. But it is important to remember that this represents guidance about the average number of meetings over the year rather than a mechanical pattern of a particular number of meetings month by month. It is quite normal and appropriate, for example, that there should be more frequent meetings at the beginning of the MPhil (when the research project is being refined) and at the end (when the dissertation is being written) than during the middle (when students are busy doing research). All supervisors are strongly advised to urge their supervisees to forward a final complete draft of their MPhil dissertation at least a fortnight before the final submission date to enable a week for suggested revisions and redrafting.

### 4. Submission of written work

In the course of the MPhil each student is required to submit a practice essay, a dissertation proposal, a core course essay, an option course essay, and the MPhil dissertation. The practice essay and the dissertation proposal do not form part of the final degree assessment, but they are compulsory. The coursework essays count for 20% each in the final degree assessment while the dissertation counts for 60%.

The **practice essay** must be on the student's dissertation research, and should be submitted to the MPhil administrator (for submission dates please check the administrative timetable or the CAS website: <http://www.african.cam.ac.uk/mphilintro/current/dates>). The precise form of the essay is agreed between supervisor and student, but an essay of between 4000 and 5000 words is recommended. The piece should introduce some of the key ideas and debates of the dissertation, and may take the form of a literature review; it should give an indication of the work completed towards the dissertation during Michaelmas Term. Supervisors are requested to offer their students at least one hour of supervision on this essay. It is intended that this essay will provide a useful body of work for the student when they write up their



formal **dissertation proposal** (for submission dates please check the administrative timetable or the CAS website: <http://www.african.cam.ac.uk/mphilintro/current/dates>).

The **coursework (Core course and Option course) essays** must be submitted in Lent Term and the **dissertation** is due at the end of Easter Term (for submission dates please check the administrative timetable or the CAS website:

<http://www.african.cam.ac.uk/mphilintro/current/dates>). The supervisor is expected to offer advice on the dissertation and its presentation. In addition, the supervisor is asked to assist with the assessment of coursework essays and dissertations. Coursework essays and dissertations are double-marked. The supervisor cannot act as an examiner. The GEC consults with the supervisor before naming dissertation examiners.

## **5. Feedback to students**

Supervisors are expected to convey feedback to students through supervisions and via written comments. Students are entitled to a one-hour supervision to discuss their 'practice essay' submitted at the end of Michaelmas Term. After examination of the coursework essays, copies of examiners' reports are anonymised and forwarded to students along with unconfirmed marks early in Easter term. Students are invited to discuss these comments with their supervisor or with the Academic Secretary if they wish. The main objective is offering feedback is to pass on, in a constructive manner, criticisms and comments that might be helpful to the student in pursuing further research.

## **6. Supervision reports**

Supervisors of MPhil students are required to send termly reports on their students using the Cambridge Graduate Supervision Reporting System: CGSRS. These reports provide an important indication of the student's progress. Students are able to view their reports electronically and supervisors are requested to discuss the content with them.

Supervisors may also be asked to complete reports required by outside funding bodies about students who receive public or private funding. It is important that these should be completed by the required dates.

At the final Examiner's Meeting the CAS Graduate Education Committee will make a recommendation as to which students should be allowed to continue on to the PhD, as students sometimes delay applying for leave to continue to the PhD until considerable time has elapsed after the completion of the MPhil. Supervisors can be requested to provide recommendations about their students even if they have not applied for leave to continue at the time.

## **7. Leave to continue as a graduate student**

The supervisor is expected to advise students who are considering continuing to the PhD, and if a student decides to apply for a PhD degree at Cambridge, the supervisor should assist with the application procedure for 'leave to continue'. It should be noted that applications for funding will have to be made separately and will have their own deadlines. Please advise your students to check dates of these deadlines as soon as possible.

## **8. Academic Problems**

Often the supervisor is the first person to become aware of any academic or other problems the student may experience. The supervisor should seek support as soon as possible.

- The supervisor must inform the Academic Secretary of the CAS Graduate Education Committee of any serious academic problems that occur.
- The supervisor must also inform the Academic Secretary of the GEC if the student's work patterns are seriously interrupted. If it is necessary on medical or other good grounds it may be possible to allow the student extra time before the submission of the dissertation. In a few exceptional cases it may be desirable for the student to intermit.
- If the student experiences personal or financial difficulties the supervisor should ensure that he/she sees his/her college graduate tutor.
- The Academic Secretary and the college graduate tutor should also be informed if the student is absent from supervisions for any length of time.
- Students experiencing stress or other personal difficulties should be referred to the University Counselling Service.
- Students need training in particular skills they should be referred to the transferrable skills training offered by the University: <http://www.skills.cam.ac.uk/postgrads/>

## **9. Number of graduate students**

The Centre of African Studies has decided that each academic staff member cannot be expected to supervise more than five MPhil candidates at any one time (since not all candidates will take up their places this means that supervisors should not accept more than seven potential candidates). Because the MPhil in African Studies takes only nine months to complete, students should not be accepted by supervisors who intend to take more than two terms of sabbatical leave during an academic year. In particular, a supervisor who intends to

be on leave during Easter Term (when dissertations are prepared and submitted) should not accept students except in exceptional circumstances, and a supervisor who intends to be on leave during Michaelmas Term should make careful and clear arrangements with an alternative supervisor for that term, which must be approved by the GEC.