

Unofficial Guide to MPhil

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Disclaimer, Acknowledgement

- The responsibility for any opinions or errors rests with the author, and none of the views expressed in this talk reflects those of the faculty.
- This guide is inspired by “An Unofficial Guide To Part III” by Professor Thomas Körner of Trinity Hall (available from <http://www.maths.cam.ac.uk/postgrad/mathiii/current.html>), which has been the bible of Part III maths tripos and helped lift the standard of the program for many years. Since I have greatly benefited from the wisdoms of Professor Körner and Dr Tadashi Tokieda (also of Trinity Hall) throughout my time in Cambridge, I felt obliged to pass on their wisdoms to our students who can also benefit from hearing them.

Aim of this talk

- Give guidance to baffled new students about what (not) to expect from your MPhil
- Help continuing students do better than last year
- Lift all students from bottom up - to raise grades distribution and minimize unnecessary failures of those who miss basic advice
- Given all available information, you decide what to do

Description of MPhil

- This is a one-year taught master's course in economics
- No interim assessment or assignments during the year except the January exams and the final exams in the Easter term
- The faculty expects a lot from students (i.e. most modules have very high workload, so when they are combined, work can become extremely overwhelming towards Easter)
- Average standard of students is very high
- This year will pass very fast so don't waste time.

The most basic and important fact

MPhil is not fair. Some courses are harder than others or marked harsher than others. Some students are better prepared than others. Some colleges provide better mentoring and various form of support for their students than others. **Despite this, hard work is always rewarded appropriately.**

The most basic and important fact (ctd.)

- The fact that you entered MPhil means you are very intelligent, although you may or may not be a genius
- You do NOT need to be a genius to do well or to get a high distinction in MPhil
- Not all very smart/genius people pass or do well in MPhil

i.e. there is little to no correlation between how much of a genius you are and how well you do in MPhil

- Hard-working people do very well and can get very high distinction, even if they are not well prepared at the start of Michaelmas
- People with good work strategy (correct prioritization) often do very well
- People who work steadily throughout the year until the end do better than otherwise (note many students freak out before exams, which is counter-productive)

i.e. high correlation between hard work and final performance

What are colleges?

- Colleges provide academic support, emotional support, accommodation, study environment, social occasions for networking and relaxation, and financial support in some cases.
- **Colleges are where academics and students meet, eat and live together, play sports, and discuss academic as well as non-academic matters.** New students usually live in college.
- Your college and especially your Director of Studies (DoS) look after your overall welfare. DoS is usually one of the main point of contact in your college.
- **DoS can do a number of things for you:** mentor you, oversee your academic progress, give guidance on your career prospect, approve (or disapprove) any college funding application you might make, write you references. Some DoS are more hands-on than others. **Keep in touch with your DoS!**

What are colleges? (ctd.)

- **Look out for college financial support:** some colleges can give you money for extra private tutoring (some rich ones even give out money for your violin lessons to non-music students (!) etc.)
- College libraries may have books the Marshall library doesn't. **College library's lending terms can be more lenient and longer than the Marshall library.**

Importance of January exams

- If you want to do PhD here, you will be ranked based on the **January exams** and be given funding accordingly. Nothing else matters as much when faculty ranks MPhil students for this purpose. (Although you need to satisfy any conditions of your offer, which would be linked to May exams etc.)
- **Even if you don't intend to do PhD here, you are highly recommended to do January exams to know roughly where you are in the ranking and rehearse for May exams (because life gets very tough come May exams)**

Dealing with lecture material: set correct priorities

The order of priorities:

- 1 **Mastery of lecture notes AND problem sets** is a given and will take you very far
- 2 **Past exam papers** will take you even further
 - **IMPORTANT:** prioritize years with the same lecturer as the current one because course material changes dramatically with lecturer. The list of lectures and lecturers for previous years is found in Cambridge Reporter Special Issues (www.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/)
- 3 Recommended readings (unless explicitly stated by lecturer that this is of high priority and highly examinable): use recommended readings to complement the above whenever you don't understand anything in them. Don't prioritise recommended readings and pore over them before you master Items 1-2.

A common uncertainty: where am I in the MPhil ranking?

- This is a very common source of uncertainty and anxiety among new students (it can drive them nuts before exams). Not so much for continuing students.
- Best answer for new students = you could be anywhere in the distribution at the beginning of Michaelmas
- Best answer for continuing students = at the beginning of Michaelmas, you're probably near where you were ranked last year, could be worse or better
- Best answer for all students = in the end, none of the above matters. If you work hard, you can make a significant ascent. If you slack off, you can make steep descent.
- January exam can really help benchmark yourself against others and remove some of this uncertainty

A common question: what will score me a pass, merit, or distinction in exams

Best answer = no simple answer to this question. But I have a vague (and pretty good) guideline:

- Try past papers and see how well you do in them. Most exams have 3 or more BIG questions, and each BIG question contains smaller questions labelled something like (a) to (d).
- Most exams usually have at least one give-away straightforward questions to distinguish the passing and failing students. Then questions become harder to distinguish between the passing and average students, or average and the best students, and so on.
- Thus, if you can give excellent answers to all questions, you are more likely to get a distinction. If you can answer the give-away questions but not so sure about others, you might score a pass but can't be sure about scoring any better. And so on.

- “Give-away questions” are ones that relate VERY closely to (or can be straight out of) lecture notes or problem sets. Thus mastery of lecture notes and problem sets is vital to securing give-away questions.
- Then questions may become more creative, but as long as you have mastered lecture notes and problem sets, you should be able to answer well.
- **Good understanding of lecture notes and problem sets is a given, and may not be enough to get distinction.** To get a distinction, you must practice both **accuracy** and **speed** in answering questions, since exam time is limited. (You are more likely to find it too short rather than long.) **Thus revise all material many times over so that it becomes second nature to you.**
- **Beware: some best students have enough time to do all questions and revise all answers**

Some obvious exam techniques: efficiency (I)

- **Don't write answers in too much detail at first, because you don't know how much time you will have left.** You don't know how difficult the rest of the questions are.
- **Write only absolutely essential details first, leave spaces between some lines** for not-so-necessary details whenever you're unsure, and **fill smaller details later when you have time.**
- **No need to redefine the obvious** (e.g. commonly used notations from lectures. Like K_t for aggregate capital in M200, then don't need to restate its definition in M200 exam because it's obvious - do it only if you have so much time left to waste)

Some obvious exam techniques: efficiency (II)

- **Divide exam time evenly** by the number of questions you have to answer. **Take into account some revision time at the end assuming we ALWAYS make at least one mistake.** Don't spend excessive time on one small question if you get stuck - think hard, but then leave it before too late, attempt other questions, and get back to it later.
- Going to toilet is a big waste of time. Minimize this risk.

You should practice these basic techniques in your mock exams.

IMPORTANT: Always practice as if it's an exam. Do exams just like you practiced it.

Choosing courses: focus and prioritize

- For optional modules, you should take the course taught by your potential supervisor or on your potential PhD topic - even if it's known to be difficult - it will help your PhD.
- Determine your course choices fast and focus on them. Don't sit through irrelevant lectures too much if you're not going to claim for credit because:
 - You won't understand MPhil lectures just by sitting in them - you actually have to do problems to really understand.
 - It takes too long to get to conclusions in lectures because there is too much technical detail.
 - If you just want good shallow knowledge of some economic concept, just read the Economist.
- Highly recommended to take at least one "easier module" you know you can handle well for credit. May exams are extremely intense, and so this one module becomes a very nice haven in Easter.

Aside: **PhD Maths Analysis** is a non-examinable step-by-step analysis course for any graduate economists with no formal exposure to analysis. A rare “complementing” nature of this course = it overlaps with the analysis component of tough MPhil modules like M110 and M210 (unless their syllabus changes from the previous year). It also prepares you well for your PhD. If you are unsure about analysis, this course can guide you through it from scratch. (Monday 2-4pm, LB room 3). **BUT make sure you know your priorities for the year, and just make an informed decision about whether (or how much of it) to attend.**

Something aside: the Economist is very good for job interviews in policy-orientated sectors or in finance. Highly recommended.

- **During term:** keep up with lectures and problem sets. Leave loads of detailed notes to help your revision in Easter because you will forget most stuff taught in Michaelmas by Easter.
- **Term break:** revise lecture notes and DO PAST EXAM PAPERS! (Some students go back 5 years, some even go back 10 years.) Leave the most recent ones for mock exams. Revise all material at least twice for accuracy and speed. Beware, some students work throughout Christmas and New Year.
- **Beginning of January:** be prepared to take January exams, even if you aren't actually taking them (i.e. keep up with others who are).
- **After Lent:** revise revise revise.

- You are already behind if you are looking at (any part of) lecture notes or problem sets for the first time during term holiday.
- Calculate your time backwards: you take something like 8 exams in Easter. If you spend one week per paper for revision, you will need at least 8 weeks in total to revise all modules. Thus final revisions must start at least 2 months before final exams. And so on.

- Until exams are over, most students just focus on finding a good topic and good supervisor. Just weather and meet any deadlines related to MPhil thesis but don't worry too much about anything more until exams are over.
- Most students spend the summer straight after May exams to work on MPhil thesis.
- Write well: “Politics and English Language” by George Orwell is highly recommended to learn about good academic writing.
- You score most points by creative thinking and your unique contribution to the literature. *Identify and clearly state what your contributions are.*

- Do literature review mainly for the sake of your own learning. Don't write everything you reviewed. Everything in the literature review section (and any part of your thesis) should be orientated around your main contribution. Don't write anything irrelevant just for the sake of writing or just because it sounds cool. (Read Orwell.)
- You must own every word in your thesis. Thus always ask yourself for *each* sentence you write: does this statement make sense, is it accurate, could it be simpler and clearer, is it necessary, are all the words in it necessary? (Read Orwell.)

How to choose your thesis topic and supervisor?

Steps to take:

- **Step 1:** Choose area **you are good at.** (e.g. Metrics/Macro/Micro)
- **Step 2:** Look for a **good** supervisor in your area: check his/her academic reputation, then also must check their reputation as a supervisor.
 - Some supervisors are more hands on than others.
 - Some supervisors see you way more often than the faculty guideline, while some strictly follow the guideline.
 - Is he/she known to be organized?
 - Is he/she usually available? Responsive to emails?
 - Easy to communicate with?

What type of approach do you seek from your supervisor?
These factors can greatly influence your thesis outcome.

How to choose your thesis topic and supervisor? (ctd.)

- **Step 3:** Skim-read your potential supervisor's papers and identify his/her research agenda. If you like his/her research agenda, go to Step 4. Otherwise go back to Step 2.
- **Step 4:** Decide on specific topic for your thesis. Discuss this with your potential supervisor identified above. Show enthusiasm and your interest in their research. Hopefully he/she will like you too - then you have a match.

Set a topic you can actually do (i.e. be realistic, don't set an overly ambitious topic). Purely theoretical topic is NOT recommended for MPhil or first-year PhD thesis.

Make sure your topic is aligned to your supervisor's research interest.

Importance of efficient networking

- Forget having a glorious Cambridge social life with frequent formal dining **if you want to remain competitive**. (Enough students underestimate Cambridge masters programs and fail each year.)
- But small effective networking with the right people will take you very far
- For new students: continuing students are very competitive and have loads of good information about survival in Cambridge, so liaise with them
- For continuing students: some of the best MPhil students are from outside this faculty. Also many continuing students who did very well in previous years fall down the ranking because of this. So liaise with new students and keep up with them
- Better to network with a group of hardworking (and nice) students: you will hardly see them at social occasions like formals but many of them exist and come high in the ranking

Before exams, remember....

- Don't give up, because you can give up whenever you want, but you can keep going only at this moment.
- This will be one of the most rewarding years of your life.