MEMORANDUM FOR THE GUIDANCE OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

Graduate students admitted to the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies without a Cambridge M.Phil. are not at first registered for any particular degree. They are simply admitted to embark on research in their general area of interest. During the third term of their first year they are required to take and pass a Progress Examination. The purpose of this is to assess the work they have done so far and to assess the prospects for the successful completion of their research. Once they have passed this examination, they are then registered for the Ph.D. degree.

It is now a requirement of graduate funding institutions that students studying for a Ph.D. receive research training in addition to the guidance offered by supervisors. Students are expected to attend lectures and seminars that are relevant to their subject and also to attend relevant training courses in IT (provided by the University Computing Service), in the use of library facilities (provided by the University and Faculty libraries) and in generic skills (provided by the University Staff Development office). The student should agree with his/her supervisor on a programme of training and this should be recorded in a training log that will be issued at the beginning of each year.

In addition to a supervisor, the student will also be assigned an Advisor. The main role of the Advisor is to act as an assessor of the student’s progress examination at the end of the first year and to participate in any subsequent reviews of his/her work.

THE PROGRESS EXAMINATION

The Progress Examination in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies usually consists of a Critical Essay and a General Statement. In certain circumstances, however, it may be appropriate for the Progress Examination to take a different form and to include, for example, a test in a language that is deemed to be essential for the successful completion of the candidate’s research. Both parts of the Progress Examination should be submitted by the division of the third term of research.

The critical essay in most cases forms an important part of the Progress Examination. The student in consultation with his or her supervisor must choose the subject of the essay, and the Degree Committee must then approve it. The essay will naturally be closely related to the subject of the student’s research and it should demonstrate the skills that will be demanded of the student in the course of his or her research. The skills required will naturally vary from subject to subject, but in most cases students will be expected to demonstrate the following areas of competence:

- the careful and critical use of primary source material for qualifying
- revising or expanding the arguments contained in secondary sources
• weighing up the arguments of secondary authorities and testing them against each other

• relating the subject of research to the broader context into which it falls.

In sum, the essay should demonstrate both that the candidate has the necessary skills for successfully completing the proposed research and that the chosen subject of research is amenable to a scholarly treatment. There is no minimum or maximum length prescribed for the Critical Essay, but it should be fully annotated and be accompanied by full bibliographic references, and by translations of primary source materials wherever it is thought desirable.

The General Statement

The General Statement should be no more than 3000 words in length and should describe the scope of the student’s research in terms that are intelligible to non-specialist, for it will be seen by members of the Degree Committee before deciding whether or not the candidate should be registered for the Ph.D. Degree.

The statement should therefore consist of the following three elements:

1 A clear description of the subject of research, its importance and any problems that it poses. If any particular methods, methodological approaches or techniques are being used, they should be explained and their use justified. It is important too that the Degree Committee be given some idea of how the student proposes to organise the material and how to write it up.

2 An account of the sources being used for the research and where they are to be found. The Degree Committee will also want to see here a full bibliography of secondary material relevant to the subject of research.

3 A description of what the students have achieved so far and the progress that has been made. The Degree Committee will expect students to give a realistic assessment of their work and to explain how it relates to the thesis the student is proposing to write.

The Dissertation

The Board of Graduate Studies has laid down the general standards that a dissertation has to meet. The remarks that follow are addressed mainly to candidates for the Ph.D. degree, but they are applicable to all students writing research dissertations.

The Board of Graduate Studies has stipulated that examiners should not recommend the award of the Ph.D. Degree until they have satisfied themselves that the dissertation presented for the degree meets those standards. In particular, it has stipulated that the dissertation be clearly written, that it take due account of previously published work on the subject, and that it represent a significant contribution to learning through the discovery of new
knowledge, the connection of previously unrelated facts, the development of new theories, or the revision of older views. The first two points are easily overlooked but they are as important as the third. Although a dissertation is written in the first instance for two examiners it does not follow from this that it need not be clearly written. If an argument suffers from poor presentation or is burdened with jargon or irrelevancies, then it is less likely to be convincing, and this is as true of a dissertation as it is of the most secret state papers.

As for the second point, the requirement that a dissertation take account of previously published work, it should be borne in mind that a dissertation is a test of the candidate’s skills as a researcher and as such it must demonstrate a firm grasp of the bibliography related to the subject under consideration. This does not mean that candidates are likely to be penalised for not being aware of an obscure article in some obscure journal, but it does mean that they should be aware of the ways in which the problems tackled in the dissertation have been approached in the past.

The requirement that a dissertation represent a significant contribution to learning is an important one but it has often been misunderstood. In the first place it should be noted that the regulations of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies relating to the length of the Ph.D. dissertations state that they shall not exceed 80,000 words including the notes, appendices, bibliography and texts. The dissertation is not therefore expected to be a magnum opus or the last word on its subject. It is, therefore, necessary for candidates, in consultation with their supervisors, to decide upon a subject that offers an opportunity to make a significant contribution to learning within the length limit laid down by the Faculty. Candidates who have failed to appreciate the implications of this may face difficulties later on when they present their dissertations.

A candidate may find it impossible to keep within the length limits in editing a complete text, presenting a complete corpus of archaeological material or covering all aspects of a particular period of history and may then apply permission to exceed the limit. The Degree Committee are unlikely to agree to such an application. The completeness the candidate is seeking may be necessary for publications as a book but it is not necessary for a dissertation. A dissertation does not have to be so complete as to be immediately publishable in order to represent a significant contribution to learning.

On the other hand, some candidates may resort to the exhaustive examination of a minute period of history, a short unedited text, or the like, in the belief that unprecedented exhaustiveness of detail is what constitutes a significant contribution to learning. But obscurity is no substitute for scholarship. A dissertation may be limited in scope, and to some extent the length limit makes this inevitable, but it should at the same time raise questions that have a discernible relation to broader problems and areas of enquiry.