



MPhil fieldwork photos

A multidisciplinary approach: creating the MPhil in Development Studies

The academic year 2016–17 marks the 20th anniversary of the MPhil in Development Studies. Below, *Frances Stewart* describes the motivation for introducing the degree and we catch up with some of the first year's graduates, while overleaf, one of their number, *Anasuya Sengupta*, describes a new venture firmly grounded in the principles of the course.

When I was interviewed as a candidate for the directorship of the International Development Centre at Queen Elizabeth House, as it then was, I said that introducing a multidisciplinary degree would be one of my main priorities. I became Director in July 1993 and three years later, the first students were admitted to the MPhil in Development Studies.

There were several reasons for wanting to introduce such a degree. First and foremost, considerable experience working in and on issues of development had convinced academics at QEH (along with many other development scholars) that

a multi or interdisciplinary approach was essential.

Serious mistakes were made, for example, by economists in analysis and policy prescriptions as a result of ignorance about people's lives and behaviour. On the other hand, many anthropologists were passive observers of local societies and lacked motive as well as ideas on how to tackle the scourge of poverty, or policy processes generally. Political scientists focused on the workings of political systems but were unable to confront the economic realities which could sustain or threaten these institutions. Though we felt that economists frequently made massive and irresponsible mistakes – as in the austerity years of the 1980s debt decade – we also concluded that understanding

economics was critical if these mistakes were to be challenged and replaced by improved analysis and policies. Equally, while poverty cannot be understood by economists without drawing on other disciplines, understanding the causes of poverty and analysing policies to reduce it requires economics as well as anthropology. And ultimately, as is becoming more and more apparent, it is politics, influenced by economic and cultural developments, that determines policy change.

These considerations pointed to the need for those studying development and using their knowledge subsequently in practice or in academia to have a multidisciplinary education. This was not just an abstract belief, but deeply felt; each one of the team at QEH developing

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This was the main reason for developing the degree, but there were other more institutional reasons. QEH then consisted of a number of academics coming from different disciplines – history, agricultural economics, economics and politics – all working, in one way or another, on development issues. Outside QEH in the University, there were many more scholars working on aspects of change in developing countries, within their own departments. Contacts across disciplines, even within QEH, and to a greater extent in the University as a whole, were very limited – this greatly reduced the potential quality of our work and also meant that development studies as such was almost invisible in the University and in the outside world. Creating and then teaching on the degree helped overcome much of this silo mentality.

Then there was the critical issue that QEH at the time had very few students of its own – just the 8–10 students taking the MSc in Agricultural Economics each year; mostly, academics attached to QEH each taught for their own department. This meant that QEH as an institution was highly vulnerable. Well-endowed All Souls might be able to afford to have no students but with the economic pressures increasingly facing the University, it seemed unwise to assume that it would continue to underwrite QEH indefinitely.

Creating the MPhil, taking over responsibility for the MSc in Economics for Development (which is run jointly with the Department of Economics), instituting a DPhil programme in Development Studies, and later developing masters in Migration; Forced Migration; and Global Governance and Diplomacy has transformed a quite small body with very few students into a flourishing (and viable) institution. The most important consequence of the entrenchment of a body of brilliant

students studying development at QEH is not the financial viability of the institution, but rather the academic buzz created by the students on a daily basis, which makes the institution come alive, hugely enriching the academic life of all those associated with QEH. Of these degrees, the MPhil in Development Studies is pivotal: it was the first; at QEH, it is the only two-year master's degree and has the largest number of students; and it embodies a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary spirit.

The design of the MPhil was the outcome of a close-knit team then working at QEH in collaboration with others elsewhere in the University. Barbara Harriss-White played a lead role; other important contributors were Nandini Goptu, George Peters, Gavin Williams, Ceri Peach, Megan Vaughan, Wendy James, Rosemary Thorp, Valpy Fitzgerald and Lawrence Whitehead.

The MPhil was conceived to reflect what we saw as the mission of the institution as a whole – to be multi and interdisciplinary, to have the highest academic standards, to be catholic in topics covered, and in ideology and methodology, and to be appropriately critical. To achieve these ambitions we soon decided the degree had to be two years, not one; and that in the first year, the courses would be both disciplinary and multidisciplinary. We were keen that students should have a serious grounding in the separate disciplines. Hence History and Politics, Anthropology and Economics were taught separately in the first year. To make this manageable, each student had to choose two of the disciplines, but economics was compulsory for those who had not previously studied it, on the grounds that the dominance of economics, in policy-making especially, made some knowledge of economics essential.

But we wanted the interdisciplinary content to be there too: hence the core Development Studies course which all students have to take, which is intended to be essentially interdisciplinary. We did not want to prescribe the topics students should learn, but aimed to leave them to choose, in their second year, from the many courses available in QEH and elsewhere in the University – hence the combination of a set menu in the first year, and *à la carte* in the second. The result has been a fantastic array of choices made by a pool of highly talented and creative students.

Over the past 20 years, there have been a few changes to the degree. But it remains very much as first designed. In my view it has been outstandingly successful in meeting all our original objectives.

The class of '96

Kimberly M Getgen is Vice President, Marketing and Sales Operations, at Blue Pillar

Eric Greitens is Republican Governor of Missouri

Ruth Hall is Professor at the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape

Pauline von Hellermann is Lecturer in the Anthropology Department at Goldsmiths, University of London

Dolores Infante is Human Rights Officer at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Miho Mitsui is Manager, Benefits and Entitlements Services, Global Shared Services Unit, at the United Nations Development Programme

Justin Parkhurst is Associate Professor of Global Health Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science

Adam Schwartzman is a poet and writer

Anasuya Sengupta is Co-founder and Coordinator of Whose Knowledge?

Mubuso Zamchiya is Managing Director of The Luminos Fund



Frances Stewart was Director of Queen Elizabeth House from 1993 to 2003 and is Emeritus Professor of Development Economics.