The process

The Dissertation Prizes were open to all recent PhD candidates awarded doctorates after June 2016 (with a certain latitude to allow for the processes involved) and who submitted their dissertations to the competition before October 2018. Since that time the Dissertation Judging Committee members, overseen by ICAS Secretary Dr Paul van der Velde and myself, have been assessing the qualities of each submission.

Longlists of 10 dissertations in each of the two categories, the Humanities and the Social Sciences, were posted online in March 2019. From those Longlists, Shortlists of five dissertations in each category have now been selected (see https://icas.asia/ibp-book-prize). The two category winners, selected from the Shortlists, will be announced at ICAS 11, as will the winners of the ICAS Committee Accolades in each category.

The Accolades draw attention to dissertations that, while not judged the best overall in their discipline, are none-the-less of considerable quality in important respects. ICAS 11 in Leiden there will be four Accolades in each category, namely, a Specialist Accolade; Ground-breaking Subject Matter Accolade; Most Accessible and Captivating Work for the Non-specialist Reader Accolade; and a Chairman’s Accolade. Those dissertations chosen by the Committee for Accolades may or may not be featured on the Long or Shortlists and the Chairman’s Accolades in each category are specifically selected from outside the Longlist.

The achievement

Given that, according to Professor Google, less than 60% of doctoral candidates actually complete their PhD (within a decade), the award of a doctorate is a considerable achievement for any individual and their dissertations usually testify to the enormous amount of research work that has gone into them. Given the great variety of dissertation subjects within the Humanities and Social Sciences categories, comparing the quality of these works might seem almost impossible. But the best dissertations do stand out. They inform with their research, stimulate with their presentation of evidence leading to interpretations by the judges. But clearly the best dissertations do stand out. They

The submissions

The 2019 ICAS 11 Dissertation competition has attracted just over 150 submissions, almost evenly divided between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. That compares favourably with the 126 submissions to the Chiang Mai ICAS 10 competition two years ago. Again we have attracted dissertations from more than 90 universities in just over 20 countries. Around 20% of the submissions are recognised by inclusion in the Longlist and Accolades, with those shortlisted representing (approximately) the top 7% of submitted dissertations.

One aspect of the process is the insights it gives into areas and subjects that are currently the focus of cutting-edge doctoral research. In terms of nation states, 34 submissions primarily deal with China, 28 with India, 13 with Japan and 11 with Indonesia. Afghanistan, Oman, Vietnam, and (perhaps surprisingly) Singapore, were all the subject of only one dissertation. But more than a dozen submissions dealt with trans-national regions, across-border issues between two or more states, or with diasporas and migrant labour. Furthermore, there were nine dissertations concerning Asia as a wider region. Central Asian studies, however, were a notable omission, attracting only one submission, and with opportunities for research in the Central Asian ‘Stans’ rapidly improving, we can hope for an increase in dissertations on this region at ICAS 12.

In terms of subjects, there was a considerable breadth. The popularity of studies concerning more than one culture or nation pointed to recent tendencies in academia to recognise that nation-state borders do not demarcate precise boundaries between cultures and peoples. It also points, perhaps, to the growing Asian diaspora in the Western world and the increasing tendency of Asian students to carry out doctoral study in the West, and for Western students to be attracted to Asian universities. Such tendencies must surely lead to greater inter-cultural understanding, not least in its expression in academic works.

Along with that tendency to study wider cultural areas or areas of cultural interaction, studies relating to museums and to educational issues show a considerable growth. A number of dissertations analysing the increasing role of Christian missionaries in disparate contexts pointed to something of a revival of that field, albeit viewed through contemporary rather than ‘Orientalist’ lenses. Reflections on contemporary, or near contemporary issues – such as the 2011 Bangkok floods or the suicide of Tamil Nadu farmers – were also popular. The lack of environmental studies noted at ICAS 10 has been reversed, with the environment (in various contexts) being the subject of a number of submissions. Film studies are much reduced, but those in areas such as gender, organisational studies and the construction of national identities, remain constant.

Upholding standards

Naturally there are excellent dissertations that are not featured among those chosen for the various IBP Lists and final Awards/ Accolades. That is a testament to the high standard of so many entries and there is no doubt that many of those not recognised by us will also be the basis for future monographs of considerable impact in their field. In an era where maintaining academic standards faces enormous challenges, the IBP Awards are an important contribution to upholding and advancing those standards.