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More things in heaven and earth, Horatio

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By Hannah Fearn

Employers have discovered that a mind sharpened by the study of philosophy is ideal for today's workplace, writes Hannah Fearn

Fraying corduroys, wonky spectacles, a pretentious and languorous turn of phrase: of the academic clichés, the philosopher has it all. No undergraduate, surely, would choose to study the subject for anything more than a love of the discipline. After all, where on earth does it lead? What type of employer would invest in a graduate with such a nebulous qualification?

Perhaps this was once the case, but the tide is turning. The number of students choosing to study philosophy is on the up, rising by 10 per cent from 10,770 to 11,885 between 2002-03 and 2006-07, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. And philosophers are now more employable than ever - the number of philosophy graduates in full-time and part-time work six months after graduation rose by 13 per cent over the same period (although the overall number of students in higher education has also increased in that time).

Academics say their graduates are finding it easier to get work after university as employers begin to understand more about the critical skills the degree offers. "My information is only anecdotal, but my experience suggests that unemployment rates are very low indeed, at least if one looks past the first year or two out of university," says Wayne Martin, director of graduate studies in the department of philosophy at the University of Essex.

"This will surprise those who think of philosophy as foggy speculation about deep and dark matters. But anyone who has been trained in academic philosophy will know the astonishing discipline of mind that it requires and cultivates."

Martin admits that he makes the acquisition of transferable skills - the skills that employers seek out - a central part of his job as a tutor.

"I put a lot of pressure on (students) to develop the skills involved in digesting dense and difficult materials, teasing out argumentative structure and then producing powerful, clear, argumentative analysis," he says. "Some of those students will go on to apply those skills in an academic setting, but many will find work across a whole range of professions, in law, finance, government, policing, media, teaching, writing and business. Two of our former Essex philosophy students are firefighters, a third works at the Tate Modern; the possibilities are endless."

Now that one in seven of all graduates passes through a business school, a philosophy degree could help a candidate stand out to an employer. Is philosophy now better for one's career than an MBA? Carl Gilleard, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), suggests that it could be. Philosophy graduates, he says, will be more prepared for the workplace of the future, thanks to their ability to "learn how to think and learn how to learn".

He says: "The world of work is changing. More and more, we are becoming multiskilled workers. We are having to manage lots of projects and priorities and organise our own world of work and develop new skills all the time," he says.

"A graduate today can fully expect to still be in the world of work in 2058. The one thing that we can be certain of is that we will be applying skills that we haven't even thought of today. We will have to relearn and relearn and relearn."

Employers seeking the best graduates now look at a wider range of degrees, he says, because they recognise that courses such as philosophy teach the kinds of skills that are essential for senior professional roles, skills that may not be developed at business school. "Being able to think laterally, having good analytical skills, being an effective communicator - these are the sorts of skills that most good managers would be expected to have. I think employers are beginning to

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ask, "Where are we going to find these skills?"

According to Gilleard, less than half of all graduate jobs now specify a particular degree. For most AGR members, that figure is less than a quarter. But Gilleard says that the shift in perception among employers is in part a result of the work that universities are doing to help students understand the skills they will leave higher education with.

"The moving of employability up the higher education agenda has been a very good thing. Philosophy in particular is one of those disciplines that employers have started to recognise as having more about it that links to the world of work than they might have imagined," he says.

To help students and employers with this process, the Higher Education Academy teamed up with the Council for Industry and Higher Education in 2007 to produce a series of student employability profiles, Degrees of Skill, which outlines exactly what proficiencies a student in each of the major disciplines could expect to have acquired upon graduation.

For philosophy, the profile lists the ability to analyse problems, to think creatively, self-critically and independently, and to be self-motivated, among others. Graduates will boast "a flexible mind adaptable to managing change", it claims.

"A degree in vocational subjects such as business, finance, law, marketing or media studies provides immediate skills and practical tools for gaining entry into the employment market, whereas philosophy focuses on providing the ideal environment in which to develop the fundamental and essential attributes on which these skills depend," the profile explains. "Philosophy teaches the student how to analyse and communicate ideas in a clear, rational and well-thought-out way."

It concludes: "With such in-depth grounding, philosophy graduates are likely to develop into well-rounded, mature, thoughtful and articulate employees."

Should employers have any residual doubts about the practical content of the degree, the profile also attempts to set these aside, espousing the benefits of studying formal logic: "These skills are of immediate value in computer and information management careers and in all contexts where precision, clarity and high-level abstract planning and analysis are required."

The profile forecasts that philosophers will soon be in demand. "The skills of vision, creativity and analytical power being developed through the study of philosophy will have a premium."

Helen Beebee, head of the department of philosophy at the University of Birmingham (currently on research leave), regularly speaks to the parents of prospective students to explain just how well equipped graduates of the discipline are for business. "I think I am telling the truth," she says. "When I've talked to ex-students who have gone on to careers in business, they've all said that their philosophy background really has helped them."

"They are good at understanding things, pulling them apart, working out where the weak points are and thinking creatively about how to solve problems and develop and justify their positions. I think philosophy graduates have really learnt how to think for themselves - perhaps more than in a lot of other subjects. Anyone with a good 2:1 or first-class philosophy degree has got a brain that's in very good working order."

In fact, Beebee's dealings with parents and employers have also led her to the conclusion that attitudes within business are changing for good. "A parent who worked for (the networking and communications technology company) Cisco Systems came up to me and said he agreed with everything I'd said and that he deliberately sought to employ arts and humanities - and particularly philosophy - graduates rather than science graduates," she explains.

Perhaps it is the changes within society at large, such as the economic downturn, that have led to this sudden acceptance of philosophy. A more considered approach, and a more perceptive employee, is required.

"We have seen the consequences of people not thinking through the consequences of their actions and not testing their assumptions. Smart employers will want people who can see ahead," says Barry Smith, director of the Institute of Philosophy, based at the School of Advanced Study, University of London.

"There is a noticeable increase in interest in what philosophy is, and what the study of it provides you with," Smith adds. "Philosophy often attracts those who want something more from life, who feel the need for intellectual challenge, especially in times of crises or uncertainty. After 9/11 we had lots of graduates from the financial world wanting to take an MA in philosophy. We are having to rethink many cherished assumptions, and philosophy helps people do this in a systematic way. Philosophers are very good at pointing out faulty thinking and are in general better equipped than most to detect bullshit."

Smith has also observed philosophy graduates branching out in the world of work. Where in the past they may have automatically gone into law or the Civil Service, their skills are now being

appreciated further afield. A department in the US was apparently so pleased with a philosophy graduate it had recruited that it considered advertising in the American Philosophical Association's email newsletter, Jobs for Philosophers.

Whether philosophy is actually better for your career than an MBA remains debatable. What is clear, however, is that the change in attitudes towards the discipline has been mirrored by a shift in the focus of the MBA. Jeanette Purcell, chief executive of the Association of MBAs, has both a philosophy degree and an MBA. She says the management qualification is adapting to changes in the employment market.

"Within the course itself, we're seeing a much greater emphasis on the softer aspects of business. How well are these students developing their ability to think creatively, to understand others and understand themselves? It reflects what employers are saying to us."

The profile of MBA students has also changed dramatically, Purcell says. "A smaller proportion are focused on being in finance. There are MBA students thinking about going into not-for-profit or smaller businesses." There is also a sense that, to remain popular, the MBA has to move on from the traditional arrogance that once surrounded the qualification. "Business schools are working hard on getting MBAs to move away from that and being conscious that we don't know everything," Purcell says.

But not everyone believes that business has changed. James Garvey, secretary of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, thinks attitudes are more hardened than those drafting graduate employability profiles would like to admit.

"Studying philosophy is probably an awful career move if what you want is plenty of money and a job, but it's ideal if you want to understand what it is to be a human being, what goodness and truth and beauty are. Having that sort of understanding, it nearly goes without saying, does not pay very well at the moment," he says. "Certainly someone with a philosophy degree stands a better chance of thinking independently and clearly, seeing through fallacious reasoning, and so on, but I'm not sure that sort of thing is attractive to most employers."

Although he has a strong message for employers who are hesitant to recruit from a more diverse academic background, Garvey is not hopeful for the future of philosophy graduates in the workplace.

"Philosophers, as a species, tend to be a little odd, but they are nothing if not good thinkers. A philosopher's ability to think should override the hesitation, if the hesitation is just rooted in worries about oddness. The discipline has always been misunderstood, and not just by employers. We have a long history of being misunderstood and, occasionally, poisoned as a result. Maybe that's unlikely to change."

Ultimately, even if philosophy is now more welcome in business and industry than ever before, it is unlikely to guide a prospective student's decision to apply to study the subject. Joel Braunold, a third-year philosophy student at the University of Bristol, is just beginning to think about what lies ahead for his career. Did he select philosophy because he thought it would lead to a better job? "Absolutely not. I chose philosophy because I enjoyed doing it. I was always told that by doing philosophy I would never get a job. I don't know anyone who's ever done philosophy to get a job."

Braunold intends to enter the world of public policy when he completes his degree this year, and his experience campaigning for the National Union of Students will no doubt stand him in good stead. Philosophy, he believes, will never hold graduates back if they know how to sell it to employers.

"Even in a buoyant economy, there were 30 applications for every graduate-level job," says the AGR's Gilleard. "It's a competitive market. I don't think a lot of graduates realise how competitive it is and how important it is therefore that they learn how to differentiate themselves from the masses."

But Beebee has a positive message for young philosophers facing their first interview. "If graduates have thought about it, they can give a good story and it tends to impress."

Readers' comments

► **Julie Closs** 5 January, 2009

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, of the Higher Education Academy, has produced a guide on employability for philosophy students, 'Where next? Unlocking the Potential of your Philosophy Degree'. It aims to get students thinking about the aptitudes and skills they are developing while they study philosophy, and how to articulate them, so that they will be in a better position to get the job they want when they complete their course. It is used widely by students and departments across the UK. The guide is available online at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/emp_guides.html.