



**Think big:
it's the business**

Corporate Australia has caught on to the fact that philosophy graduates bring critical thinking to thorny ethical and analytical problems. Jeremy Gilling reports.

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Whether postmodernism, cultural criticism and other relativist dogmas are to blame for the demise of the classics in universities or pragmatic, short-sighted bureaucrats, along with their top-end of town buddies who for decades demanded work-ready graduates, the demise of the classics has been lamented on campuses all over Australia – and the world.

Now, ironically, business may be coming to the rescue of at least one area – philosophy – as they recognise the value of rigorous training in problem solving and reasoning.

“Philosophy is well suited to the more portfolio-type career paths of today,” says Peta Bowden, chair of philosophy at Murdoch University. “Specialist training is not always ideal for people who change careers, whereas the generic skills such as systematic critical thinking and the analytical tools that philosophy imparts are immensely valuable wherever your career takes you.

“Philosophy trains you to appreciate the difference between expressing an opinion – the sort of thing everyone does down at the pub – and developing an argument. It enables you to critically evaluate an argument, and discriminate between stronger and weaker arguments. It’s interesting to observe our own students: when they start, they’re as opinionated as anyone else, but as they progress they learn to analyse a

problem, and develop and organise their thoughts.”

Such an approach is especially valued in areas such as business and medical ethics, she says.

“People trained in philosophy are skilful at cutting through the rhetoric and opinion to reach a clear understanding of the problem, break it into its component parts, and work through the solutions and the implications.”

There are a surprising number of corporate CEO who have studied philosophy at some stage, says Andrew Brennan, professor of philosophy at La Trobe University, and the trend to recruit philosophy graduates is being led in the US and the UK.

“In the US the fascination with the MBA is wearing off, and people are saying that in business you’re better off with an education. American management consultants often head hunt the best philosophy graduates for their critical thinking skills.

“If you spend a whole term studying Plato, then high-level mathematical logic, followed by Heidegger, your world view and your mindset would be rapidly expanded – you’d be intellectually flexible and adaptable.”

Federal education department records show undergraduate enrolments in philosophy rose 9 per cent between 2001 and 2006, with first year enrolments up 19 per cent over that time. Even more notable is

the 40 per cent increase in doctorate by research enrolments over this period.

In the UK, the trend is even stronger with an article in *The Guardian*, under the catchy headline 'I think, therefore I earn', that UK graduates with a philosophy first degree increased by 128 per cent in the same period.

Despite this huge jump, the article pointed to the fact that unemployment among philosophy graduates six months after graduation had dropped by a third and that the proportion of employed philosophy graduates who were in finance, business, marketing and advertising had increased by more than a third.

Brennan says the greater interest in philosophy may be a result of people feeling a lack of space to explore ideas.

"They go to dinner parties where discussion is dominated by real estate prices and day-to-day preoccupations like the sharemarket meltdown – topics that don't really allow you to engage with others in any depth. They seek a dialogue where people listen and think before they respond.

"At its worst, you suffer dialogues of the deaf. My colleagues and I experience this when trying to engage with politicians on matters of great importance to us, such as the ERA. You put a careful, detailed argument to a minister and receive in return a reply from one of their minders that simply restates government policy, blithely ignoring everything you've written and strongly suggesting that neither the minister nor the minder have absorbed a word you've said.

"Philosophy encourages people to engage in debate on the merits of a case. It's a great pity that more of our politicians haven't studied philosophy – we and they would be

much the better for it."

Jeff Malpas, professor of philosophy at the University of Tasmania, agrees. "For too long we have accepted low levels of ethical and critical expertise in business and in public life more generally. Many of the pressing issues we face are at bottom philosophical in nature – questions about what we value or should value. The current financial crisis is an opportunity for us to critically examine some of the philosophical assumptions that have led to this situation."

Bowden has observed a change in philosophy student composition during her 15 years at Murdoch. "Back then, more than half were mature age, with a career and life experience behind them. Now they're typically younger. The reasons for this are complex, but the change suggests that people more widely are seeing the value of philosophy."

She said the introduction of philosophy and ethics into the WA secondary school curriculum this year was helping to drive the trend.

However, Malpas is mildly sceptical about the ongoing enthusiasm of big business for philosophy graduates.

"There have been reports of business showing an interest for years, but the payoff never seems to materialise," he says.

"If it is occurring now, it's because they've finally twigged that people who can think are more valuable than those who've simply memorised a body of information or a set of formulae.

"Every company and every industry needs people who can invent new solutions, who can analyse issues in innovative ways, who can come up with new vocabularies and ideas." ■

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