

I think, therefore I earn

Philosophy graduates are suddenly all the rage with employers. What can they possibly have to offer?

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Philosophy student Joe Cunningham: considering a future in medical ethics. Photograph: Graham Turner

"A degree in philosophy? What are you going to do with that then?"

Philosophy students will tell you they've been asked this question more times than they care to remember.

"The response people seem to want is a cheery shrug and a jokey 'don't know'," says Joe Cunningham, 20, a final-year philosophy undergraduate at Heythrop College, University of London.

A more accurate comeback, according to the latest statistics, is "just about anything I want".

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show philosophy graduates, once derided as unemployable layabouts, are in growing demand from employers. The number of all graduates in full-time and part-time work six months after graduation has risen by 9% between 2002-03 and 2005-06; for philosophy graduates it has gone up by 13%.

It is in the fields of finance, property development, health, social work and the nebulous category of "business" that those versed in Plato and Kant are most sought after. In

"business", property development, renting and research, 76% more philosophy graduates were employed in 2005-06 than in 2002-03. In health and social work, 9% more.

The Higher Education Careers Services Unit (Hecsu), which also collates data of this kind, agrees philosophers are finding it easier to secure work. Its figures show that, in 2001, 9.9% of philosophy graduates were unemployed six months after graduation. In 2006, just 6.7% were. On average, 6% of all graduates were unemployed six months after graduation.

In 2001, 9.3% of philosophy graduates were in business and finance roles six months after graduation. In 2006, 12.2% were. In 2001, 5.3% were in marketing and advertising six months after graduation. In 2006, 7.3% were.

It is particularly significant that the percentage finding full-time work six months after graduation has risen, since the number of philosophy graduates has more than doubled between 2001 and 2006. In 2001, UK universities produced 895 graduates with a first degree in the discipline; in 2006, they produced 2,040.

And it is so popular with its graduates that many go on to postgraduate study rather than join the workforce. Charlie Ball, who runs Hecsu's labour market analysis, says: "More philosophy graduates are being produced, and they are much less likely to be unemployed than five years ago."

Philosophers have always come in handy in the workplace with their grounding in analytical thinking. Why, only now, are they so prized by employers?

Open mind

Lucy Adams, human resources director of Serco, a services business and a consultancy firm, says: "Philosophy lies at the heart of our approach to recruiting and developing our leadership, and our leaders. We need people who have the ability to look for different approaches and take an open mind to issues. These skills are promoted by philosophical approaches."

Fiona Czerniawska, director of the Management Consultancies Association's think tank, says: "A philosophy degree has trained the individual's brain and given them the ability to provide management-consulting firms with the sort of skills that they require and clients demand. These skills can include the ability to be very analytical, provide clear and innovative thinking, and question assumptions."

Deborah Bowman, associate dean for widening participation at St George's, University of London, which offers medicine and health sciences courses, says philosophers are increasingly sought after by the NHS: "Graduates of philosophy who come in to graduate-entry medicine, or to nursing courses, are very useful. Growth areas in the NHS include clinical ethicists, who assist doctors and nurses. Medical ethics committees and ethics training courses for staff are also growing. More and more people are needed to comment on moral issues in healthcare, such as abortion."

Being on an ethics committee of the NHS is something Cunningham is looking into. "It would be a direct application of my skills," he says.

The popular philosopher Simon Blackburn, a professor at Cambridge University, sees the improving career prospects of philosophy graduates as part of a wider change of public perception. "I guess the public image of a philosopher has tended to concentrate on an ancient Greek in a toga, or some unwashed hippy lying around not doing very much," he says. "I do detect a change in the way the public sees philosophers. I have been pleasantly surprised by the number of people who come to philosophy events nowadays."

Blackburn can take some credit. The user-friendly books on philosophy that he and other philosophers such as AC Grayling, Stephen Law, Julian Baggini, Nigel Warburton and Alain de Botton write have made their way into the mainstream.

Course design

Those in charge of designing university courses have also become sensitive to claims that their subject has no relevance to the modern day.

Blackburn says: "In the years after the second world war, there was a sort of Wittgensteinian air about philosophy, which meant practitioners were proud of the fact that they appeared slightly esoteric and were not doing anything practical. There was very little political philosophy, and moral philosophy was disengaged from people's actual moral problems, and that did lead to the subject being marginalised. That has changed. Political philosophy is a central part of the Cambridge course."

Jonathan Lowe, professor of philosophy at Durham University, agrees that courses' concern with the real world has accelerated in the past five years.

"It's probably because of the new financial arrangements for students that courses have had to prove they are applicable to real world issues," he says. "And the teaching methods have changed. There are more student-led sessions. Students have to argue on their feet and give presentations. That probably shows at interviews."

News that employers and the public hold philosophers in higher regard should presumably be cause for celebration? Not entirely, says Blackburn. "It is also slightly worrying, because people turn to philosophers when they feel less confident and more insecure."