

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DISCIPLINE OF PHILOSOPHY

Forward Thinking project

This Report forms part of a series of summary reports on philosophy in Australian Universities produced as part of the *Forward Thinking: Learning and Teaching Philosophy in Australian Universities* Project. This series of reports consists in reports on:

- The Significance of the Discipline of Philosophy;
- Philosophy in Australian Universities;
- Undergraduate Learning and Teaching;
- Honours Learning and Teaching;
- Postgraduate Learning and Teaching; and
- Staff Learning and Teaching.

These reports are available on the Forward Thinking Project website:

<http://aap.org.au/forwardthinking/reports/index.html>.

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About this Report

This Report provides a summary of the significance of the discipline of philosophy, including: its place in Western thought; a history of philosophy in Australian Universities; relation to other disciplines; generic skills and vocational significance.

Data in these reports is drawn from a number of sources, including: DEEWR, GCA and the AAP. Data was also drawn from a survey of Heads of Philosophy Programs. Those wishing to do further research may refer to the [datasets](#). Access to some data is restricted to project participants and Heads of philosophy programs. Access may be obtained from the [Executive Officer](#) of the Australasian Association of Philosophy.

Sections of these reports refer to Case Studies developed from issues raised in the surveys and later discussed at round tables on issues and innovations in teaching and learning philosophy. These cover: assessment, evaluation, graduate attributes and teaching philosophy to non-philosophy majors/BA students. Those wishing to pursue these issues further may refer to the [case studies](#).

Project Team

Professor Susan Dodds (University of Tasmania); Professor Ros Diprose (University of New South Wales); Dr Jennifer Duke-Yonge (Macquarie University); Eliza Goddard (Australasian Association of Philosophy/Flinders University); Dr Simon Lumsden (University of New South Wales); Professor Catriona Mackenzie (Macquarie University); Professor Peter Menzies (Macquarie University); Dr Mitch Parsell (Macquarie University); Associate Professor Ian Ravenscroft (Flinders University)

Project contacts

Eliza Goddard, Project Manager, elizagoddard@aap.org.au

Associate Professor Ian Ravenscroft, Project Leader, ian.ravenscroft@flinders.edu.au

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Place in Western thought

Philosophy is the oldest Western academic discipline, reaching back to Plato's Academy around 400BCE. Plato's Academy was in many ways the first Western university, offering students lectures by, and discussions with, leading authorities of the day. Philosophy was subsequently taught as a major part of the curricula of European universities, beginning in the 12th century. The flourishing of Chinese philosophical schools occurred at a similar period. The period of the "Hundred Schools of Thought", during the 6th Century BCE, saw the emergence of the lasting traditions of Confucianism and Taoism. Today Philosophy is taught in a large majority of universities world wide, and many Philosophy programs engage with diverse philosophical traditions like those of China, India and Islam as well as Western philosophy.

History of Philosophy in Australasia¹

In the very broadest and crudest of terms, Australasian philosophy has passed through three major phases. The initial phase—from the 1880s to the 1930s—was Idealist; the second phase—the 1940s and 1950s—was Wittgensteinian; and the third phase—from the 1960s to the present—has been predominantly realist and materialist.

Many of the earliest appointments in philosophy at the new Australasian universities—from the 1850s onwards—were Scots; in consequence, early institutional Australasian philosophy had a Scottish flavour. The influence of idealism waned before the influence of the Scots: John Anderson and Jack Smart both played prominent roles in the development of Australasian realism and materialism in the middle part of the twentieth century.

In its early days, of course, Australasian philosophy was imported: the idealists came from elsewhere, and their ideas were initially British Idealist modulations of Hegel and then, later, variations on themes developed by European phenomenologists. However, the most famous figure in Australasian philosophy in the first part of the twentieth century was a native son, Samuel Alexander, born in Sydney and educated at the University of Melbourne. Alexander departed for the UK at the age of seventeen, never to return; but his reputation in British philosophy was a matter of antipodean pride.

The decades bookending the Second World War brought two important kinds of additions to Australasian philosophy. First, there was the rise to prominence of philosophers who had been taught by Wittgenstein; second, there was an influx of philosophers escaping from the devastation in Europe. From the mix of these additions with the emerging empiricism promoted by John Anderson at the University of Sydney, there arose a distinctively Australasian brand of realism and materialism, first in evidence in Adelaide in the mid-1950s in discussions between Jack Smart, Ullin Place and Charlie Martin.

In the past fifty years, Australasian philosophers have produced influential work in almost all of the major fields of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, philosophy of mind, and so forth. They have been world leaders in environmental

¹ Professor Graham Oppy provides this section on the History of Philosophy in Australasia. Graham is Chief Investigator of the ARC project A History of Australasian Philosophy 2006-2009. For more information see: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/philosophy/research/history/grant8.php>

philosophy, paraconsistent logics, feminist philosophy, and a host of other fields. The works of people such as Arthur Prior, David Armstrong, Frank Jackson and Liz Grosz have set international research agendas.

The 'infrastructure' of Australasian philosophy has been very strong during the period of international prominence. The *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (established in the 1920s) has been a leading international journal; and the annual Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference has been one of the leading events on the international philosophical calendar. In the Australasian universities, philosophy has been strong almost everywhere; and, for at least the past thirty years, the Philosophy Program at the Research School of Social Science at the Australian National University has been one of the world's leading philosophy programs. Moreover, there are many native Australasian philosophers now ensconced in leading philosophy programs all around the world (in places such as Princeton, Rutgers, Oxford, Harvard, and so forth).

Place of Philosophy in Australian Universities

Australian philosophy has long been regarded as "punching above its weight": in spite of Australia's relatively small population, Australian Philosophy departments and programs have enjoyed excellent international reputations. Australian philosophers are recognized internationally as having had a significant impact on the development of philosophical debates in areas such as philosophy of mind, epistemology and ethics.

Undergraduate philosophy study in Australia contributes to both the development of generic skills and substantive discipline-based knowledge. Within a broad understanding of the Bachelor of Arts as offering a number of disciplinary approaches to understanding the human condition, studies in Philosophy are regarded as leading to substantive understanding of the development of cultures of inquiry or value, the relations among people in societies and relationships between humans and the environment. The concepts and theories studied in philosophy provide both substantive knowledge about concepts, issues and traditions of significance, as well as grounding the development of critical intellectual skills in analysis: interrogating and challenging those issues and traditions. To the extent that Philosophy demands thinking and argument at the conceptual level it contributes to the intellectual culture through its constant testing and inquiry about what is or can be taken to be accepted knowledge, values and belief.

Relation to other disciplines

Philosophy programs have responded in two main ways to the expansion of mass tertiary education in Australia since the 1970s, and concurrent challenges to "academic elitism". The first is to recognize that very many students who pursue a Philosophy major do so in combination with another major field of study within a BA and value the conceptual depth and theoretical rigour that Philosophy brings to their studies in cognate disciplines (for example, the extension of understanding of linguistics and communication through philosophy of language). Philosophy programs have thus developed courses that make contact with a number of other disciplines, enabling students from those disciplines to include Philosophy in their studies. Examples include:

Law: philosophy of law, ethics, political philosophy

Politics: political philosophy

Linguistics: philosophy of language
Literary studies: European philosophy & aesthetics
Medicine: bioethics
Psychology: philosophy of mind & cognitive science
Science: philosophy of science including philosophy of biology and philosophy of physics

The second trend is the development of subjects (or modules within subjects) tailored to vocational degrees or specialist majors (e.g nursing ethics for BNurs students, environmental ethics for Environmental Science students). These “service subjects” include subjects designed to provide generic skills (as with practical reasoning or informal logic subjects). In many cases, programs that have developed successful service subjects, have gained a stable EFTSL base of large enrollment subjects, which allow programs to retain more specialist Philosophy subjects that might otherwise be sacrificed due to low enrolment.

Generic skills

There are a number of generic skills which Philosophy is especially well placed to impart to students.

- (1) Since its inception, Philosophy has placed great emphasis on supporting the views being advanced with good reasons and sound argument. Both critical reasoning and logic are core parts of a Philosophy education. The ability to think critically and logically is of great value in all aspects of life, including university study and employment.
- (2) Philosophy students are also taught to read carefully and critically. What is the author actually saying? What are the conceptual assumptions underpinning her claims? What evidence does she advance in support of her views? Is there counterevidence that the author has ignored? Critical reading is a crucial skill, not only for university students but also for citizens of advanced democracies such as Australia.
- (3) Philosophers also value the clear, precise expression of complex ideas—whether verbally or in writing—and Philosophy departments/programs strive to teach the relevant skills. Good verbal and written skills are invaluable in both the university and vocational environments.
- (4) One particular form of communication is the essay. Much philosophical writing, whether ancient or contemporary, takes this form. Consequently, in learning and teaching Philosophy considerable emphasis is placed on essay writing. The skills needed in essay writing are obviously of value in the university context, but they readily transfer to the employment context in the writing of reports and proposals.

Philosophy has a role to play in broadening the participation of Australians in higher education, and many Philosophy programs have sought to break down the impression that Philosophy is an “elitist” or “irrelevant” and “esoteric” area of study.

Vocational significance

As noted above, Philosophy students acquire a range of generic skills which are of vocational value. In addition, there are specific values in studying Philosophy for particular degree courses, with flow on effects into the vocational environment.

In recent years, labour market shifts have revealed an unexpected new interest by employers in the skills of philosophy students. In the UK there are reports that philosophy graduates are in greater demand by employers and this is linked to the perception that their skills in reasoning and the analysis of complex problems, and their ability to apply reasoning to new information, make them better able to adapt to changing economic, regulatory and fiscal conditions (Shepherd 2007). There are similar reports from Canada (Drolet 2008), the USA and Australia (Gilling 2008). This is independent of emerging evidence that 10 years after graduation, Australian graduates who have completed a BA degree are able, on average, to earn more than the average university graduate (excluding those who studied dentistry). (This issue is being pursued in the current ALTC Project, 'Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates', Harvey, 2009).

In the face of rapid social and technological change, students who have studied Philosophy are more likely to be able to make critical assessments of the factors influencing those changes and to be able to understand and adapt their intellectual responses in light of changed circumstances throughout their working life. By contrast, those whose education is more technically oriented (e.g. training in a particular accounting or logistics program) are less likely to be able to respond creatively to new circumstances. While clearly there is a need for workers with different skill sets, an organization that depends wholly on workers who are technically proficient, but who lack broader conceptual understanding will be more vulnerable to global economic, environmental or social change.

For further discussion of areas of employment of philosophy graduates see the report on [Undergraduate Learning and Teaching](#) and [Postgraduate Learning and Teaching](#).

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