

PHILOSOPHY

What is truth? Do you have free will? What can you know? What is the meaning of life? Does God exist? Is abortion morally permissible? What about war? Using drugs? Euthanasia? If these sorts of questions interest you, you're ready to study Philosophy.

WHY STUDY PHILOSOPHY?

The word 'philosopher' literally means lover of wisdom. It is not surprising then that the goal of Philosophy is to improve our understanding of the world and how we should live in it. Philosophers – like all wise people – are concerned to answer questions about truth and value, about what's real and what's important. But Philosophy isn't just the love of wisdom. Philosophy is also the love of thinking critically and creatively, of discussing intelligently and of arguing cogently. And these are skills that can be applied to almost any issue in almost any context.

The study of Philosophy will therefore help you with all other courses you take at university. Since creative, critical and cogent thinking are fundamental to every subject, lecturers and tutors are always looking for these qualities and will be grading your work according to how well you demonstrate them. Doing a Philosophy course can therefore give you a competitive academic edge and enhance the overall quality of your degree.

Moreover, if you're primarily interested in another subject area, such as Politics, History, Law, Mathematics, Psychology, Science, Literature or Religion, you can complement that area of study and uncover its basic presuppositions by taking a course in the *Philosophy of* Politics, History, Law, Mathematics, Psychology, Science, Literature or Religion. In fact it doesn't matter what subject you're interested in at the tertiary level, there's probably a philosophy subject about it!

Now here's a story about Microsoft. Microsoft is famous for its gruelling interviews. An excellent CV and good personal skills were never enough to ensure you a place at Microsoft. They've always wanted more – much more – and so they instituted a policy of asking their applicants to solve logic puzzles and paradoxes, and to

answer hypothetical and trick questions. You see, Microsoft believed that when it came to the computer industry, good employees needed to be able to think critically and creatively. They had to question assumptions and think outside the box. Logic puzzles and paradoxes are designed to test that ability. Other industries now recognise the importance of these skills. Consequently many in the corporate and business world are emulating Microsoft's interviewing style, and incorporate trick questions and logical puzzles as features of their interviewing process. An ability to solve brainteasers can therefore be very useful when you're competing for a good job. But what's all this got to do with Philosophy? Well, Philosophy is all about learning to solve logic puzzles and answering trick questions. Not only will a Philosophy course significantly increase your critical thinking skills, it will make it fun, and thereby increase your degree of comfort with this style of thinking. Who knows, after taking a Philosophy course, you may even look forward to those job interviews!

BEING A PHILOSOPHER

Philosophers, as such, are only employed by universities, where they carry out teaching and research roles. Academic positions are highly competitive and you would need a PhD of good quality, together with developed research interests and a record of publication. Discussing your academic career goals with tutors and academic supervisors is a good first step.

Topical coverage of career related issues brought to you by Victoria University Career Development and Employment.

Areas covered include how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities, to life/work planning, graduate destination information and current issues or material relevant to the employment scene. Your comments and suggestions always welcomed.

OTHER OPTIONS

In general, Philosophy graduates will be competing for jobs which are not discipline-specific, often those defined by “a relevant tertiary qualification”. Therefore the academic standard of your degree is an important criterion for selection, together with your ability to make your degree and its subject matter relevant to the job description. Most universities run a Graduate Recruitment Programme through which graduates have access to organisations who are looking for high-potential people to ‘grow’ into management roles. Often these are large, sometimes multinational, corporate structures that can make provision for new employees to learn technical matters on the job, as long as they have the right stuff intellectually. Philosophy graduates can make a good case for having the right intellectual stuff.

Studying Philosophy can, in itself, help identify cognitive styles that are natural to you and which can help with career development. For example, if you enjoy logic, and tend to think in ‘if...then...’ sequences, work which allows you to carry tasks through to a conclusion could be satisfying - roles such as auditor, legal executive or conference organiser. Enjoyment of logic may also mean ability in mathematics and/or computer science. These may be subjects to consider if planning a double major or double degree and could lead to employment in; operations research, mathematical modelling, cryptography (encoding signals used in pay TV and ATM transactions), website design, software development or operating systems. Logic also has an affinity with linguistics and could lead into ESOL (English as a Second Language) teaching, cognitive science, or archive and library management.

Alternatively, you may find ethics and issues of morality fascinating. Ethical considerations are highly pertinent to business and professional practice, where decisions based on simple expediency are increasingly open to challenge. Ethical awareness may profitably be applied to the practice of law, medicine, accountancy, science, engineering, business and government, and increasingly permeates all areas of an organisation’s operation, and all levels of responsibility. Ethics are particularly significant in the development of government and local authority policies and strategic plans, where public monies and communal resources are involved, and accountability is

high. International Relations is an extension of this area. If ethics are important to you, the reputation and purpose of the organisation you work for will probably also be important. Organisations with a social or humanitarian focus, such as the Cancer Society or Red Cross, may appeal and such organisations, in turn, may value your ethical consciousness, provided it is coupled with other, practical skills.

If the study of metaphysics (what is real) or epistemology (how we know the truth of what we know) gets your brain buzzing, you probably have an ability to engage in abstract reasoning and shuffle conceptual constructs around in your head. This may lead you to roles which involve research, strategic planning or design skills, such as political researcher, management consultant or urban designer.

PUTTING YOUR SKILLS TO WORK

Your first task as a Philosophy graduate is to understand the skills you now possess and learn to describe them simply. Words like ‘epistemology’ and ‘metaphysics’ do not resonate in the minds of most employers. As well as translating the big words into skill words, you will also need to learn how to connect them to what the employer seems to be looking for. This is the meaning of the term ‘transferable skills’.

It is also important to realise that employers often use skill-titles, such as ‘communication skills’, as a shorthand term for a whole lot of non-specific tasks that come up day-to-day on the job. It is probably fair to suggest that during most selection procedures there is a degree of confusion on both sides, as to what the job is really about and what’s required to do it well.

The following is a sample of the skills that show up frequently in job descriptions. These are often called generic skills and are totally transferable from job to job. Describing each skill separately implies they are distinct and function independently. In fact, these skills are deeply entwined and operate collectively most of the time. The important thing to remember is that Philosophy graduates have typically developed these skills to a high level.

Analytical skills: the ability to take an idea or a situation apart and understand the working relationships between each segment. Philosophy graduates are taught

to look at issues from multiple points of view, and can construct and deconstruct arguments using logic and deductive reasoning. Because they are critical thinkers and therefore not easily fooled, they are alert to inconsistencies and spurious claims of inevitable outcomes. This skill is very important in roles where balanced judgement and the ability to hypothesise and predict are required, such as management positions, policy analysis, accountancy, and the legal profession.

Problem-solving skills: the ability to recognise a problem exists, identify what it is, and work out what to do to make it go away. Philosophy graduates are experienced problem-solvers. They work intensively on issues that pit fact against fallacy; they weigh good reasoning against bad, and are regularly expected to offer solutions as to what might be done about the difference. Since problems occur every day in every workplace, good problem-solvers are welcome wherever they go. Job areas where problem-solving skills are particularly important include; computing and information technology, systems analysis, human resources, criminal justice, and the health sciences.

Decision-making skills: the ability to choose the best option from a range of alternate possibilities. Philosophy graduates are trained to examine the pros and cons of an idea and shape that thinking into a logical conclusion which is, typically, tempered by ethical considerations. This kind of meta-analysis of process and consequence is valuable in work that demands quick decisions, such as air traffic control or law enforcement, and roles involving co-operative decision-making, such as counselling, psychology or social work.

Communication skills: comprise two broad categories, written and verbal or oral. They refer to the ability to capture the main points of an issue or situation and pass them on to others, accurately and in a form that's easy to understand. Philosophy graduates are experienced at synthesising information and presenting it to others as substantive and logical argument. Clarity and precision are expected. Fluency and style are encouraged. Communication skills are the big ticket item on almost every employer's shopping list. All jobs require them. Some jobs specialise in them, including journalist, public relations adviser, barrister, novelist, and minister of religion.

Influencing skills: the ability to persuade others towards accepting the validity of a given position or point of view. Philosophy graduates are adept at putting together a reasoned argument and consequently good at sniffing out shaky ones. Knowing the difference is important, since most people consider themselves to be rational beings and therefore respond positively to apparently rational propositions. The ability to influence is in demand throughout the highest levels of management and administration, in sales, marketing and advertising, and areas in which support networks are necessary, such as political and special interest organisations.

Research skills: the ability to know what to look for, where, and how to find things out in a systematic and repeatable way. Philosophy graduates are taught to formulate hypotheses, identify issues, seek out relevant data, and use objective methods to assess the validity of ideas and propositions. Many jobs these days are not static situations, but function more like evolving systems, whose progress requires people who can seek and find, and have ideas about what to do with what they've discovered. Such people will be well placed to take on leadership roles which demand both authority and vision. Philosophy graduates can be such people.

ROLE CALL

Jobs titles are often highly specific to an organisation and describe a particular function within it. The term 'role' is increasingly being used to refer to a generic type of job function with descriptive words added as appropriate, such as a management role with the title 'Manager, Communications and External Relationships.'

Having developed a good range of higher order thinking skills, Philosophy graduates are well placed to consider career development in terms of a generic role (or roles) adapting their skills and experience into specific organisational contexts as appropriate. Here are some examples of generic roles together with a sample of tasks from recent job descriptions.

Analyst roles can include:

- Policy analyst
- Business analyst
- Systems analyst
- Intelligence analyst

Sample tasks could include:

- Analysing and advising on issues of equity and efficiency as they arise in the processes of government
- Developing general analytical and policy frameworks for subsequent application to specific problems
- Presenting analyses and proposals in a manner which effectively communicates essential ideas to a target audience
- Identifying areas of need, then making recommendations and drafting policies that effectively address them
- Critically analysing a proposal and ensuring it will be effective in practice
- Actively monitoring and reporting on the operation and performance of the system as it relates to regulatory requirements
- Directing and coordinating programme activity and policy formulation
- Establishing strategic information requirements

Management roles can include:

- Human resources manager
- Library manager
- Event manager
- Project manager

Sample tasks could include:

- That all assigned projects are delivered on time, to agreed standards, and within budget
- Taking responsibility for the leadership and strategy direction for all programme activities, including the annual plan
- Having responsibility for the annual budget and achievement of all financial objectives
- Developing and managing new and ongoing strategic relationships with sector representatives and wider communities
- Strategic leadership, management and coordination of work across the team
- The ability to achieve operational objectives

- The provision of regular reports detailing progress being made against key result areas
- Responsibility for implementing statutory requirements
- Monitoring progress towards the achievement of business plans and adjusting where appropriate
- Providing feedback to staff about job performance in relation to management objectives

Professional roles generally require additional vocational training, however the intellectual capacity that the study of Philosophy develops, especially in logic, critical thinking and ethics, can enhance the performance of these roles considerably.

These roles can include:

- Psychologist
- Engineer
- Teacher
- Lawyer

Sample tasks could include:

- Undertaking qualitative and quantitative assessment of intervention outcomes
- Strict adherence to the principles of client confidentiality and informed consent
- Ensuring that personal information gathered and held about an individual is accurate, up-to-date, complete, relevant, and not misleading
- A sound understanding of the social, cultural and religious values of different groups
- An ability to facilitate constructive consultation processes
- An ability to grasp complex ideas and process information effectively
- Demonstrated personal integrity and honesty in handling personal and other sensitive information
- An ability to suggest solutions to problems and devise new approaches
- An ability to work to resolve conflicts and differences towards mutually acceptable outcomes
- An ability to understand information flows

GRADUATE PROFILES

Jessica Hammond

Policy Adviser

Ministry of Transport



I found Philosophy by accident, attending a Vic open day talk on law which had the Philosophy presentation in the same room. After hearing a presentation on Pascal's Wager argument for belief in God I was hooked so I enrolled in a BA, then Honours, then Masters. My thesis was on the ethics of human genetic engineering where I worked on what in the public service we would call "greenfields issues".

From the start I loved how I was constantly confronted with questions I never realised needed to be asked such as whether failing to give money to Oxfam might be the moral equivalent to murder, whether time travel is logically possible or whether we know anything at all.

After my MA, I decided the best place for a philosopher outside of university is in policy. And, since moral philosophers want to save the world, public policy seemed a good place to start.

Philosophy encourages us to have good reasons for believing the things we believe, trains people on how to decide what counts as a good reason and what is superfluous or irrelevant. The skills I developed at constructing and dissecting arguments, and the writing skills from many hours of essay writing, have been extremely useful in my role as a policy adviser.

Getting into transport policy was another happy accident – at a pub, talking about my public service aspirations, I was overheard by a recruitment adviser. I have been at the Ministry for 18 months working on funding policy. It may seem a funny place for a bioethicist, but a love of problem solving and analysis means any intellectually challenging environment with tough issues can be a good fit.

Tutoring and lecturing in my postgraduate years, I found many students took a Philosophy paper for fun in third year and wondered why they hadn't done it from the start. I would recommend everyone give Philosophy a go, or at least talk to someone in the department about

whether it would suit. For those taking other subjects, there is probably a "philosophy of" whatever you're studying – philosophy of law, maths, art, science, sex, biology, language, religion – that would compliment your studies.

Not knowing what Philosophy was before I started, it has been a huge surprise to find that employers do know what Philosophy is, or at least know that it produces what they want: good writers and excellent thinkers.

Sam Gaskin

Analyst, Strategic Social Policy Group

Ministry of Social Development



I did not intend to major in Philosophy when I began studying at Victoria. I was however curious about the subject and took a Philosophy paper in my first trimester. I

was impressed by the subject's quick cut to the chase. What's at stake? What do the disagreements hinge on?

Philosophical questions are also often conceptual; they strike at the nature of things. I am especially interested in ethics, psychology and aesthetics. Studying these subjects challenges, clarifies and often changes people's fundamental beliefs about art, behaviour and morality. In Philosophy, there's a lot at stake if that car you're chasing gets away.

The combination of the immediacy of arguments and getting to the essence of topics draws students to comment and debate in tutorials and lectures. As I picked up additional Philosophy papers and progressed through my BA I found that Philosophy lectures and tutorials are less likely to stagnate than those of other subjects. Lecturers spend less time trying to bleed answers out of students and more time grappling with their arguments and opinions.

And these arguments and opinions can vary greatly. There is plenty of scope for applying unique and creative thinking to philosophical questions. The ability to analyse very diverse arguments and generate creative responses to them are the key skills I learned by studying Philosophy.

These skills have been invaluable working as a Strategic Analyst at the Ministry of Social Development. I am tasked with considering a very broad range of issues – from drug classification to the implications of bird flu – and the ability to quickly identify and assess key arguments is a great asset.

A range of other skills I developed while studying Philosophy has also come in handy in my current role. Studying Philosophy promotes systematic, clear thinking. It also contributes to the development of clear and persuasive written and verbal communication. In my experience, all of these skills are genuinely valued by both employers and colleagues.

Roseleen Bhan

Personal Assistant

Department of Child, Youth and Family

How many people can say that they have left an exam, totally and utterly exhilarated?

I can! It was my first year Philosophy exam, coming out of the exam; I must have looked like an idiot with a grin on my face that spanned from ear to ear. I was so inspired that the very next day I changed my BA in Anthropology to a double major: Anthropology and Philosophy. Philosophy really made an impression on me. My exhilaration was due to the fact that, Philosophy as a discipline and subject gave me the freedom to express and analyse a situation/argument in my own way. It never constrained my thoughts or ideas; rather it encouraged me and taught me to look outside the square. It spans a range of topics, for example: logic and logic of argument construction, moral ethics including freewill and fate, big questions such as ‘is there really a god?’, classical philosophy of the mind/ identity/ knowledge, and even Indian philosophy.

To seek a greater knowledge, a better understanding of the world you live in and its people, a BA subject such as Philosophy can really open your eyes. Currently I work for the Department of Child, Youth and Family as a Personal Assistant. It’s a great job that has allowed me to work administratively in a front line social work site and



now in a management orientated service centre. This is my first real job, the start to my career and it has been a job that has challenged my ethics. I found myself pulling up a lot of the skills I had learned from my Philosophy ethics papers that I took. My understanding of what is ethically viewed as ‘right and wrong’, legally, personally, and publicly in regards to situations that the Social Workers dealt with everyday, were never easily divisible. However, when I looked at the bigger picture, where I observed social work being ridiculed publicly particularly in the media as being ‘wrong’, it in fact was ethically ‘legally right’ and ‘personally right’ for the child and family involved. What was missing from the public view was the bigger picture, information that is not normally privy to the public. Having the ability to see the bigger picture whether or not you are privy to all the information, is and will always be a very important life skill.

A lot of people including my own friends who are science, commerce or law orientated, have often asked me what sort of job a major in Philosophy can get you, to which I reply “It’s not about the job, it’s about the skills it equips you with”. Philosophy is limitless in what skills it can teach you. It gives you personal, analytical, argument building, logical, writing, and problem solving skills; just to name some. Therefore if you want to enrich your study, those who are clever will pair their degree with a BA in Philosophy.

James Mansell

*Senior Business Analyst,
Decision Support*

*Strategy and Planning
Child, Youth and Family*

I found Philosophy after attempting to do many other courses that I had thought made more sense in terms of a career. Contrary to my fears it has provided for an interesting career with lots of opportunities and I soon discovered that doing what you love will give better marks AND is more fun!

After I finished my BA (Hons) Philosophy in 1995 at VUW I did a stint tutoring in Dunedin, then got a part time job at the Wellington School of Medicine as a Junior



Research Fellow for one project on doctor patient relations and found the Philosophy directly helpful for analysis (i.e. ethics). However, Philosophy also teaches us how to learn, question, think clearly and solve problems which is invaluable in a research environment. I soon got offered more projects where hard thinking was required.

Following on from the Wellington School of Medicine I went into my first full time position working for ACC Healthwise in 1998 where I was recruited as a Health Purchasing Analyst. We were contracting through competitive tender for elective surgery health services for ACC. It was the first time this had been done in NZ - against a lot of resistance from the doctors. It was certainly the first time I'd done anything like it. My role here was to analyse data, help to design business applications (databases) to support the business, help think up strategies to succeed in the tender process. The critical faculties and an eye for what counts as good evidence have helped enable me to produce reliable data analysis and also to assess other people's evidence. I was promoted to Senior Analyst in 1999. From 2000 to 2004 I set up my own company where I hired out my research and analysis skills.

In February of last year a mate told me about a new team being set up in Child Youth and Family to help get the department back on its feet. I took the job as Lead Analyst in the Decision Support Team. My role is to support senior management in making sound decisions. In this regard I've done data analysis, interviews with front line staff, setting up systems for accessing relevant data, causal modelling of the business, and boning up on decision theory (for which the Philosophy has been very useful).

Throughout this time I have kept in contact with the philosophers at VUW who are great mates and always a source of sound advice.

In my experience Philosophy cannot help but set you up for almost any role you wish to take. The skills in thinking clearly, making subtle distinctions, clarifying other people's positions, self learning and problem solving have all been valuable and recognised as such in all of the diverse jobs I've had. You may have a hard time getting that first break because people do not

understand what philosophers can do, but once you are in you will very quickly be recognised as a source of sound advice. And who would have thought Philosophy would lead to working in research, defining and purchasing knee operations, designing databases and learning about social work decision making?

Helena de Bres

PhD Student

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

I completed my BA in Philosophy and French at VUW in 1999, and my Honours degree in Philosophy at the end of 2000. At the end of that year, I was fortunate enough to be awarded a two-month Summer Research Scholarship in the Philosophy Program at the ANU's Research School of Social Sciences in Canberra. I then applied to, and was offered a place in the graduate school at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA and started the 5-yr PhD program there in the Fall of 2002. My philosophical interests currently lie mainly in political philosophy and philosophy of social science, along with some areas of ethics and philosophy of mind.

I found the philosophical training I received at Victoria University to be excellent preparation for my PhD study. In the space of four years I was able to establish a broad grounding in most of the major areas of contemporary Philosophy, as well as develop analytic and writing skills that have served me well not only in Philosophy, but also in other areas of study.

Without the support of the VUW Philosophy department I doubt I would have considered applying to grad school - which would have been a shame, given that I'm having such a fabulous time. But even for those not interested in taking Philosophy further than their undergraduate years I'd recommend the department highly. I found the courses I took at the Philosophy department at Vic to be by far the most intellectually stimulating and rewarding of my undergraduate years, and would regard them as an excellent supplement to almost any course of study.



PHILOSOPHY AT VICTORIA

The way in which Philosophy is done at Victoria provides intellectual skills that can be employed widely inside and outside a university setting. In every course students are shown how to analyse issues, and how to both produce and assess coherent arguments by engaging with primary texts. This means that doing some philosophy should be of benefit to students who are not planning to major in Philosophy as well as to those who are.

The Philosophy programme at Victoria University of Wellington has an extraordinary range and depth of research strengths. The Philosophy programme boasts a significant number of lecturers doing active research in the following areas: Logic, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Language, Metaphysics, Aesthetics, Political Philosophy, and Ethics. Moreover, Philosophy has close ties with lecturers in other programmes - political science, gender and women's studies, mathematics, and religious studies - who are doing significant philosophical work within their distinctive disciplines.

A Philosophy course is an important component to any degree from Victoria. The University's Strategic Plan outlines its aim to produce graduates with the following core attributes: (i) Leadership, (ii) Creative and Critical Thinking, and (iii) Communication. Philosophy as a discipline explicitly and primarily aims to teach us to think creatively and critically. It also aims to teach students how to lead by making rational and independent decisions, and how to communicate ideas clearly and effectively. Philosophy courses thus encourage the development of the University's distinctive attributes in its students.

You can choose to major in Philosophy within a Bachelor

of Arts (BA), or be confident that whatever your choice of major, there will be Philosophy courses relevant to it. Students with an interest in Linguistics should consider Philosophy courses offered in the area of logic, philosophy of language and cognitive science. Many Linguistic courses could also prove attractive to Philosophy students; for further information interested students should contact the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies.

Courses in Logic are also offered within a Bachelor of Science (BSc); there is a close relationship between logic and pure mathematics and between logic and computer science.

Other interesting connections with Philosophy include science through the philosophy of biology, science, ethics and genetics. There are connections with media studies, art history, literature and film through the philosophy of art and the media, philosophy of literature, film and aesthetics or philosophy of the arts and connections with politics and women's studies through feminist philosophy, political philosophy, morality and international relations.

A Philosophy major at Victoria will act as a springboard to further postgraduate studies which can include a Bachelor of Arts (Honours), a Master of Arts, or a PhD. A Graduate Diploma in Arts can be substituted for an Honours year by students who have a degree that does not contain a Philosophy major.

A major in Philosophy will also create job opportunities with the government, bio-ethics committees, and consulting firms in the Wellington region. The Philosophy programme has close ties with Capital and Coast Health and has Philosophy majors working in almost every Ministry within the New Zealand Government.

Special thanks to:

The School of History, Philosophy, Political Science and International Relations, in particular Dr Ken Perszyk, Head of School and Dr Stuart Brock, Senior Lecturer; graduates Roseleen Bhan, Helena de Bres, Sam Gaskin, Jessica Hammond and James Mansell and all those people who contributed to this publication.

Career View is published by Career Development and Employment
Victoria University of Wellington, Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui
PO Box 600, Wellington, Tel: 64-4-463-5390 or 64-4-463-5393, Fax 64-4-463 5252
http://www.vuw.ac.nz/st_services/careers/
December 2005
ISSN 1172-4315