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THEMATIC ARTICLE

Philosophy: (many) threats and (some) opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy is being hit hard by the decline in university funding, thanks in particular to the lack of a significant overseas student market and the reliance of many departments on a large number of individually small joint courses, which universities are keen to axe as a cost-cutting measure. One—admittedly modest—way in which the situation can be ameliorated, and which is working well at Leeds, is to offer bespoke teaching to university science and medical departments. Such departments want, and often need for accreditation purposes, to teach their students about (for example) ethics and sustainability, and they see the benefits for student engagement and employability in incorporating some relevant humanities teaching and assessment. So this is one way in which philosophy departments in particular, but perhaps humanities departments in general, might try to keep their heads above water. This article is published in the thematic collection 'On recent closures and threats of closure in the Humanities and Social Sciences', edited by Regenia Gagnier.

Keywords philosophy, university funding, cost-cutting, bespoke teaching, science and medical departments, humanities teaching, ethics, sustainability, student engagement, accreditation

Philosophy is being hit hard by the decline in university funding. In the last five years we have seen several philosophy departments close, including those at the University of Central Lancashire, the University of Wolverhampton, and—very recently—the University of Kent. (Kent attained the 5th-highest GPA (grade point average) for Philosophy in the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, giving the lie to the idea that an excellent REF score is a defence against the threat of closure.) We have also seen several departments significantly downsized (for example, Birkbeck and Roehampton) and others threatened with closure. Other departments are in significant difficulties. We expect more contractions and, possibly, closures—especially among smaller and non-Russell-Group departments—to follow in the near future. The previous government's 'culture wars' narrative often appealed to the idea that universities are 'elitist'. But one effect of the huge reductions in funding, caused primarily by the real-terms cut in undergraduate fees (outside Scotland) and the hostile visa climate, is that many students at the lower end of the grade spectrum will be denied access to traditional academic disciplines.

Closures and downsizing are not the only consequences of the funding crisis, however. Increasingly universities are seeking to reduce the amount of time that academic staff are contracted to devote to research. Traditionally in 'research-intensive' universities this has amounted to 30–40 per cent of staff time, but it is being eroded, in some cases to as low as 10–20 per cent.

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The university's narrative often takes the form, 'if you want more research time, apply for funding'. But this is a model that works badly in the arts and humanities, even if it can work in the sciences. As we are all too painfully aware, research funding is extremely scarce and therefore extremely competitive. Academics with vastly reduced research time are in danger of spending most of that time applying for funding, which is then unsuccessful, with the upshot that they have no time to do any actual research at all.

Furthermore, those researchers who are successful will then often have more capacity to network and create better grant projects, and they are then in a better position to be more successful in their next grant applications. This is a situation where those rich in research time and networks carry on being rich and can get richer; but if we have learned anything from the REF it is that talented and productive researchers are to be found across the full range of UK universities. In practice, teaching loads and institutional research infrastructure—and hence the capacity for gaining external funding—are already highly variable. But the recent erosion of contracted research time at some universities will further contract the pool of researchers with that capacity. It will also lead to researchers being even more concentrated in the smaller number of universities whose working conditions and infrastructure are more research-friendly.

The decline in funding hits philosophy hard for a number of reasons, many of which apply to other arts and humanities subjects too. One is the relative lack of overseas students, especially outside London and in departments not ranked highly in the QS World University Rankings, which is a major driver of demand from Chinese students. Another reason is that some higher-ranked humanities faculties have sought to maximise income by hugely expanding their undergraduate intake. This means that departments whose student intake previously included many who failed to make the grades for the higher-ranked departments have found their usual recruitment pool evaporate. They, in turn, have lowered their admissions grades in an attempt to maintain recruitment, which has pushed the problem further down the (supposed) university pecking order. And, since the supply of undergraduates is finite, eventually that process bottoms out.

A further reason is that philosophy departments have traditionally run a significant number of joint honours courses from across the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences—with, for example, mathematics, physics, psychology, law, politics, English, and history—which often individually only recruit a handful of students. Such small courses are generally regarded unfavourably by the university's administration, largely on the grounds that they are not cost-effective. While the administration may have a point—it is easy for academic staff to discount the costs involved in quality assurance, marketing, timetabling, and so on—on the other hand they may not; it is nigh-on impossible to conduct a serious cost–benefit analysis. This being so, departments tend to lose any battle over a reduction in joint honours courses. This is of course a financial problem for departments, but it is also a problem for the discipline. Philosophy is a broad church, and it needs researchers who know and understand logic, mathematics, physics, literature, social science research

methods, and so on. Joint honours courses play an important role in recruiting PhD students with a variety of skill sets and interests outside philosophy that they can develop and bring to bear on philosophical issues. In turn, philosophical analysis and structured ethical debate can be of benefit to many of our sibling disciplines, both within the classroom and further along in enriching disciplines' pedagogic changes and research horizons.

On the other hand, one joint honours course in particular—Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)—has been a resounding success for many philosophy departments. Initially the sole preserve of Oxford, York began offering a PPE degree in the 1980s, and provision has expanded nationally to the point where well over thirty UK universities now offer PPE degrees. In many philosophy departments PPE recruitment is very healthy, and often has a higher entry tariff than other courses offered by the same department.

Involvement in such high-prestige, high-tariff courses not only delivers a measure of immediate financial security; it has also helped (so far) to ward off the threat of closure, even if it is no guarantee: by and large, no philosophy department means no PPE degree (although a few PPE degrees do exist without a significant philosophy academic unit). In general, close involvement in student education that reaches out into other departments across the university in a way that both those other departments themselves and the university administration regard as valuable is, in principle, not only an income-generator but (one would hope) a way of staving off some of the worse existential threats in many cases. In the rest of this article, we describe the University of Leeds' IDEA Centre (Inter-Disciplinary Ethics Applied), which sits within the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science and which delivers applied ethics teaching, research, consultancy, and training. IDEA has been enormously successful in pursuing this strategy of embedding ethics and applied philosophy teaching within courses in sciences (for example, various engineering courses, maths, computing), business courses (for example, management, international business), medicine and dentistry. It might therefore serve as a model for imaginative ways of embedding philosophy, or indeed other arts and humanities subjects, within a range of taught courses in a way that both raises significant income and provides a measure of protection against the threat of closure.

IDEA began teaching in 2005, set up as one of the national Centres for Teaching and Learning (CETLs), starting with just four members of academic staff teaching initially into medicine. It has since grown into teaching across nearly twenty different disciplines, and has added a consultancy and training function alongside healthy levels of research impact and public engagement. It also provides its own MAs (routinely taken by intercalating medical students and mid-career professionals), short courses, and stand-alone 'discovery modules' available across the university for undergraduates. It also provides PhD supervision. This activity now supports just under twenty members of academic staff. Whilst the undergraduate teaching that IDEA delivers might be described by many as 'service' teaching, central to the philosophy and function of the centre is to think of and explicitly label this teaching as *partnership teaching*. There are regular meetings between IDEA staff and module leaders in

the other disciplines both to keep an eye on operational issues that arise in the courses and to plan for curriculum changes in the medium and long term. Applied ethics teaching is fully integrated into each discipline course that IDEA staff teach on, and they help to design and grade assessments. This has required an attitude shift on the part of philosophers who come into this unit: we are not teaching philosophy and ethics to philosophy students, but rather playing a minor yet crucial role in setting up civil engineering students, say, to think creatively within their chosen discipline and help to prepare them for a career within engineering. However, we have found that such an attitude shift has enabled colleagues to become better teachers; and both this and our sustained connections with colleagues in other disciplines have generated research ideas and given a boost to our wider consultancy and training for external organisations.

Leeds is lucky to have an established and experienced unit such as IDEA to deliver this type of education for its students. We are aware that the current times in UK higher education might be (far) less favourable to the establishment of this type of centre than they once were: not only are budgets tightly squeezed even in fairly financially stable institutions, but this breeds a tendency to take far fewer risks and to stick with what one has. In financially desperate institutions the ability to imagine the possibility of such teaching seems very remote. However, the benefits for teaching from the arts and humanities into many other disciplines should still be shouted long and loud.

One aspect of the Leeds experience not yet mentioned is professional accreditation, something that for many in the arts and humanities (less so in the social sciences) is not part of our working lives. The courses that IDEA teaches into are governed by frameworks that, in different levels of detail, require students to cover material such as professional ethics, sustainability, risk, and philosophical issues about artificial intelligence. Sometimes, teaching staff in other departments are unwilling or unable to step into those spaces, at least with a measure of confidence. Similarly, there are drivers here that could help other arts and humanities disciplines. One is employability. Professional engineers need to write reports, give presentations that speak plainly to those from outside engineering, and generally communicate well with anyone they come across. This is something that disciplines within the arts and humanities can help with—not with the odd lecture here and there, but with a set of sustained interventions that develop as the students progress through their degree course.

Another driver is simply student demand. Some students find a degree course wholly focussed on actually learning the science hard going. Teaching them material that is *related* to the sciences but not, itself, science is something many of them really value. As evidence of this demand, in Philosophy at Leeds we run a third-year Philosophy of Physics module. A handful of philosophy students take it, but in the last couple of years we've seen enrolment from physics student running at around sixty to seventy students each year. Those students may (or may not) love their physics, but they also want to think *about* physics. And more generally they want to have the opportunity to read and write in plain English, engage in some creative and critical thinking, and express their ideas.

The IDEA model at Leeds is not easy to emulate. It's a teaching-allocation and timetabling nightmare within the centre itself: it revolves around many other disciplines, after all. And it requires building and sustaining significant relationships with teaching coordinators across the sciences and other subjects, figuring out what they want their students to learn and what skills they want to see developed. But it keeps a healthy number of philosophers in gainful employment.

In principle, this could be a model that could be rolled out more widely across the humanities—maybe even involving collaboration across different humanities disciplines to deliver what colleagues in other disciplines require their students to learn and the skills they want them to develop. There are of course many ways in which the humanities use science and technology as their subject-matter: in history, in English, in art history, in media and communication, in politics, and so on. There's good evidence that science departments and their students want to engage with those broader perspectives that the arts and humanities offer, and it is certainly imperative for these students in their professional lives.

We don't in any way think that arts and humanities teaching, let alone our research, should be confined to servicing the needs of others. IDEA does, after all, help to shape the offering in other disciplines as well as offering its own distinctive MAs and other courses. But within the arts and humanities we should be both proud that we have ideas, perspectives, and traditions to offer students who choose to study within other disciplines, and open to doing so in a sustained way, perhaps more than some of us have been in the past. There has been much talk recently of the need for the arts and humanities to articulate clearly their value to wider society. Injecting a dose into the curricula of students studying outside the arts and humanities is a way of demonstrating their value to the dentists, engineers, IT professionals, accountants, and indeed *Daily Mail* readers of the future.

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