

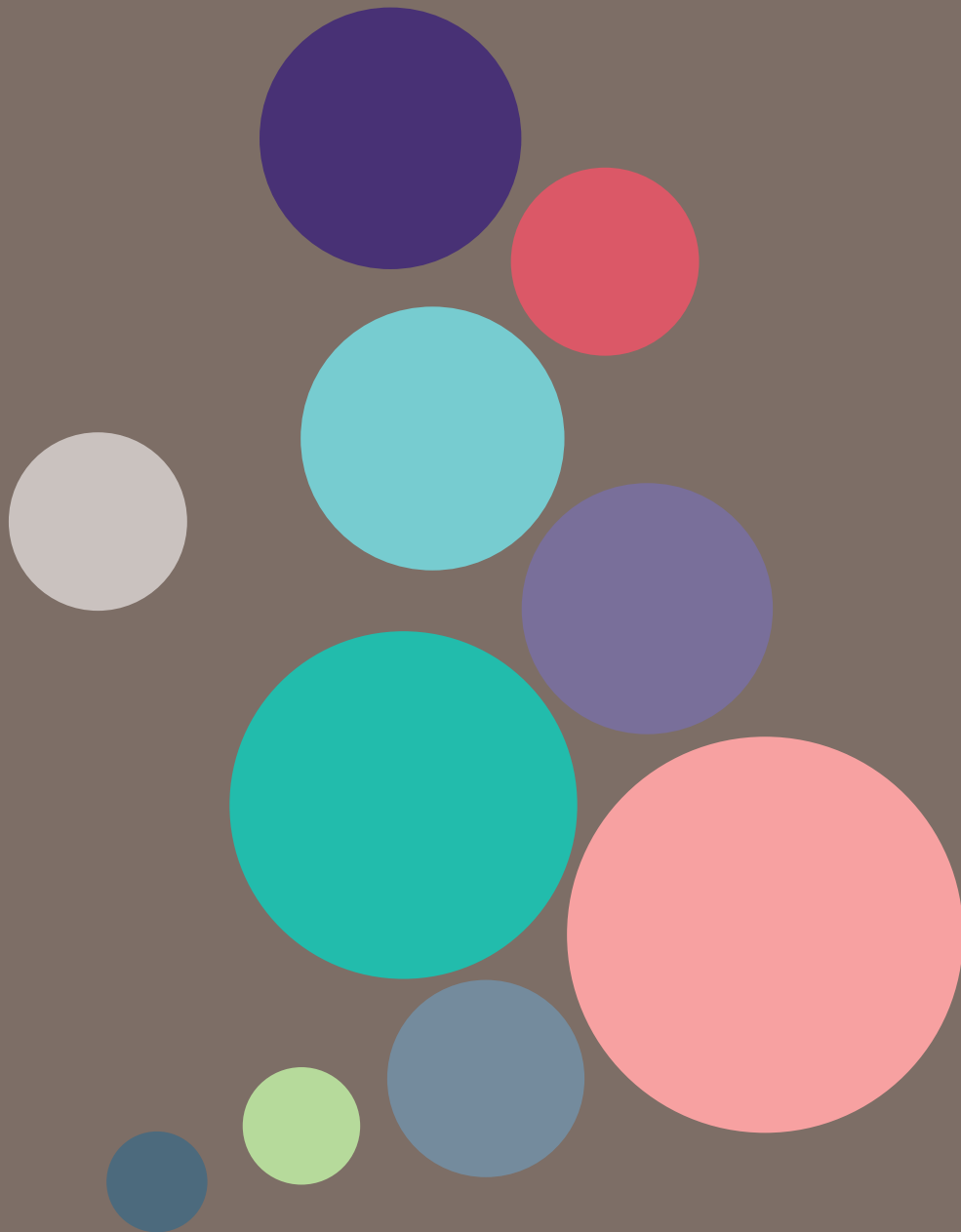
# Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: *The Hidden Impact*

July 2013



Occupational Destinations of Oxford  
Humanities Graduates, 1960–89:  
Percentages and (Raw Numbers)

|                         |       |         |
|-------------------------|-------|---------|
| ● Civil Service         | 5.8%  | (654)   |
| ● Education             | 25.8% | (2,899) |
| ● Finance               | 10.4% | (1,165) |
| ● Legal                 | 11.3% | (1,266) |
| ● Media/Literature/Arts | 11.4% | (1,285) |
| ● Management            | 19.8% | (2,233) |
| ● Marketing             | 2.3%  | (255)   |
| ● Medical               | 1.7%  | (188)   |
| ● Other                 | 6.4%  | (719)   |
| ● Welfare/Charitable    | 5.2%  | (588)   |



# Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: *The Hidden Impact*

Dr Philip Kreager, Institute of Human Sciences, University of Oxford

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## Foreword

It has become commonplace to view the Humanities as under threat or in decline. Without doubt, they face particular and sometimes serious challenges, but arguably this is the case for all academic disciplines during times of economic uncertainty. *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: The Hidden Impact* is therefore timely, given that it is essentially a good news story for the Humanities. Taking a sample of 11,000 Oxford Humanities graduates and analysing their career destinations, the report shines a light on the breadth and variety of roles in society that they adopt, and the striking consistency with which they have had successful careers in sectors driving economic growth.

Oxford is regularly placed at or near the top of world rankings in the Humanities, a significant achievement that reflects both the effort of academic colleagues and the sheer quality of their work. Together, we have long made the case for the value of the Humanities. We are adept at arguing for their intrinsic merit: for the importance of the critical perspectives developed through their study; for their power, through the narratives of history, literature and art, to reveal the truths about society and the human condition. Instinctively, we have also known that a Humanities education is of great value beyond academia, giving a special grounding for a wide range of careers, but have lacked the hard data to make that argument in a more meaningful way.



I welcome this report and its findings. I hope that it will stimulate a reappraisal of the Humanities' contribution to society, and allow universities, policy-makers, and the public and private sectors alike, to be mindful of the full extent to which investment in the Humanities is beneficial.

*Humanities Graduates and the British Economy* is the result of the vision, patience and hard work of more people than it would be practical to list here. I must, however, thank Dr Philip Kreager, who was commissioned by the University of Oxford to design, direct and analyse the research with his team, and express our great appreciation to those graduates who participated in the in-depth interviews, providing a range of insights which are truly remarkable. I must also express the University's gratitude to Guy Monson (himself an Oxford graduate), in discussions with whom this report had its genesis, and whose belief in the cause and great generosity have made it a reality.

The tradition of the Humanities is a cornerstone of the modern, enlightened world. *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy* is a bold first step in articulating the importance of that tradition in economic terms, and a compelling justification for the Humanities' continued relevance and importance.

Professor Andrew D Hamilton MA, PhD, FRS  
Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford

# Executive Summary

Higher education is historically rooted in a model of learning based in the Humanities in which literate, critical, and communication skills are a recognised public good. These skills and the public values they serve – such as the capacity for making informed choices, for evaluating evidence and argument, for creative thought and problem-solving – are widely recognised as much more than economic means and ends.

However, the need to demonstrate the impact and value of Humanities higher education to society and the economy has intensified during the recent period of economic crisis. It is important to consider not only the intrinsic value of Humanities in higher education, but also the ways in which these subject areas are responsive to economic change and how the knowledge and skills they provide make a major contribution to the UK economy and society.

The lack of substantial data and evidence on the contribution of Humanities graduates to the economy and society needs to be addressed. The statistical profile of Humanities graduates, combined with in-depth interviews on their life courses, as presented in this report, are steps toward providing this evidence base.

The evidence collected here demonstrates that the long-established system of Humanities-based higher education in Oxford has proven highly responsive to national economic needs. While this is a pilot project focusing on a single university and restricted to Humanities graduates, it provides a methodology that could lead to additional studies of other UK universities as well as graduate contributions in the sciences and social sciences.

## The Humanities Graduate Research Project

The research project consists of a quantitative study of 11,000 individual Humanities graduates who matriculated at University of Oxford between 1960 and 1989 (Part I) and a qualitative study tracking the lifelong career history up to the present day of a sample of those graduates (Part II).

The period chosen encompasses major structural changes in the British economy.

The length of the period and the time elapsed since their graduation allows for a better understanding of employment trends than immediate graduate destination surveys do.

## Main Findings of the Statistical Survey

The Humanities achieved remarkable balance and growth in its contributions to employment sectors which emerged as new sources of economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, while sustaining its core contributions to public services.

The number of Humanities graduates employed in key economic growth sectors like finance and law increased significantly from 1960, and media from 1980. The increase in finance nearly trebled Humanities employment in that sector, and law increased by a factor of 2.5. This growth occurred, together with equally high proportions employed in management, well in advance of the policy shift to prioritising financial and related economic occupations that characterised British government policy from the early 1980s.

The rise in finance, media and legal employment from 1960 was experienced in four of the five largest Humanities subjects (Philosophy, History, English, Modern Languages). By the end of the period studied, 16–20 per cent of Humanities graduates in all five largest subjects taken as a whole were employed in management, media, legal and finance sectors.

Education remained the largest single area of graduate employment, with 23 per cent of graduates.

Employment trends in the financial sector of the two largest Humanities subjects, Philosophy and History, rose faster than the national average until 1975, with Philosophy continuing to keep pace with national trends in the 1980s.

The increasing rate of financial sector employment of Philosophy and History rose more rapidly than the contribution of that sector to the national economy over the period to 1979, and in Philosophy for the whole period. Financial sector employment of Modern Languages and Classics graduates kept pace with rising sector contributions to GDP until 1979 and 1974 respectively, then sustained the levels reached to the end of the period.

## Main Findings of Qualitative Analysis of Graduate Careers

Existing reliance on data about graduates' first main employment is not a sound basis for evaluating the impact of higher education over the life course. Only 33 per cent of graduates in the sample remained in the sector of their first occupation. 28 per cent made major career changes, moving between employment sectors after their careers were well-established, and a further 8 per cent maintained dual careers over an extended period.

Graduates as employers as well as employees see professional contributions and personal development as depending on more than technical skills. Hiring and career advancement both rely on evidence of the individual's capacity to continue to learn new technical and other skills, communicate well, and adapt actively in the context of new challenges posed by changes in the economy and society. These capacities were rated more highly than the teaching of techniques to be applicable on first employment.

Knowledge skills at the core of Humanities-based higher education were consistently cited as the basis of this capacity, especially the ability for succinct and persuasive written and verbal communication, coupled with the capacity for critical analysis and synthesis. These core skills enable ready tackling of new problems and tasks, assessment of risks, due account of ethical issues, and conduct of negotiations, all of which shape effective leadership.

Competition is an important driver of quality in education, as in employment. Interviews show, however, that successful employment experience is not explained by a market model of competition. New ideas and processes may be stimulated by market competition, but product design, commercial excellence, and intelligent marketing are not driven solely by demand and supply. Graduates, as employers and employees, have found that competition is a learning process in which people and their ideas need careful nurturance. They point out that Humanities-based higher education provided them with applicable models of how to generate new and workable ideas, and for managing the people who have them.





## Introduction

Since 2010 sweeping changes have been made in the UK to public support for higher education.<sup>1</sup> Founding principles upon which universities have long been expected to work are under radical revision. The speed with which proposals have been implemented is remarkable, and there is already evidence that they are bringing about significant change.<sup>2</sup> These changes have opened up debates about the value and public benefit of different subject areas within higher education in the UK.

In these debates, the Humanities have often been portrayed as victimised or in crisis, with both detractors and defenders focusing on questions of intrinsic value versus the utilitarian benefit of these disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Arguments for the contribution of the Humanities to the economy in a period of economic constraint have focused largely on the research and knowledge exchange agendas, with education and employability having a less prominent role in the growing evidence base.<sup>4</sup>

The contribution graduates make to economic growth, the skills required to make that contribution, and the value of higher education to social mobility have been prevalent concerns in recent public policy discourse, with employers calling for skills of communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial ability – most of which are core elements of Humanities degree programmes.<sup>5</sup> What is lacking is an evidence base for the contribution that Humanities graduates have and can continue to make to economic growth, as well as their broader contribution to civil society and education.

While it can be useful, first destination data for university graduates fail to address longer-term career patterns and prospects.<sup>6</sup> UK universities do not systematically collect data on the longer term career patterns of their graduates, where their lives take them, their sequence of employment, and the contribution their undergraduate education plays in this process.

This report on a substantial sample of Humanities graduates who began their degrees at the University of Oxford between 1960 and 1989 provides both a quantitative and qualitative analysis that tracks career pathways across the longer time frame, up to the present. Its findings offer us new insights into the contributions of Humanities graduates, and a model that could be used for further studies.

More particularly, the research reported here provides a first evidence base on which a number of practical and fundamental questions can be answered. We need to understand both how well Humanities education serves the economy and society, and what it contributes to individual graduates' life courses.

The two are intimately related, and give rise to a number of specific questions to which the research is addressed:

- What is the relationship between the degree subjects that young people choose and the occupational sectors in which they ultimately work?
- Is there a necessary relation between the different degree subjects and graduates' economic contributions to society?
- Are graduates who choose courses that do not prioritise special technical skills of current and immediate use in the marketplace actually at a disadvantage in the development of their careers?
- Are employment trends a sufficient indicator of graduates' economic contributions?

These are only some of the issues on which this research sheds new light. Of course, pilot research by its very nature provides only preliminary findings. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, however, the research gives a succinct picture of principal employment and degree relationships, and an in-depth look at the individual experience that lies behind them. The research shows, in other words, the lines along which it would be possible to build a more full empirical foundation for policy and its assessment. The evidence presented here is thus a step toward answering two crucial questions:

- What criteria should we use to assess educational impact? And
- How and what does university education contribute to individuals' life courses?

<sup>1</sup> Browne Review (2010) *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education*. Published 12 October. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf>; White Paper (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. Published 28 June. <http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform/white-paper/>; Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2010) *Progressive Plans for Higher Education*. Published 03 November. <http://www.bis.gov.uk/studentfinance>.

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE (2013), *Impact of the 2012 Reforms*, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/about/intro/abouthighereducationinengland/impact/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Bate, ed. (2011), *The Public Value of the Humanities*, London: Bloomsbury; Stefan Collini (2012), *What are Universities for?*, London: Penguin; Martha Nussbaum (2010), *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press.

<sup>4</sup> AHRC (2009), *Leading the World: the Economic Impact of UK Arts and Humanities Research*, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Publications/Documents/Leading-the-World.pdf>; and A. Hughes et. al. (2011), *Hidden Connections: Knowledge Exchange between the Arts and Humanities and the Private, Public and Third Sectors*, AHRC report, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/Publications/Documents/Hidden-Connections.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Lowden, et. al. (2011), *Employers' Perceptions of the Employability Skills of New Graduates*, University of Glasgow and SCRE Centre, [http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/docs/Graduate\\_employability\\_skills%202011.pdf](http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/docs/Graduate_employability_skills%202011.pdf); Abigail Diamond, et. al. (2011), *Global Graduates: Global Graduates into Global Leaders*, AGR, CIHE and CFE report <http://www.cihe.co.uk/wp-content/themes/cihe/document.php?file=1111GlobalGradsFull.pdf>; CIHE (2010), *Talent Fishing: What Businesses want from Postgraduates* <http://www.cihe.co.uk/wp-content/themes/cihe/document.php?file=1003talentfishing.pdf>; and P. Altbach, et. al. (2009), *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*, UNESCO report, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001831/183168e.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> For example: *DELHE: Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education, Comparative Report. 2008*. DELHE (Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education), National Centre for Social Research, for HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency).

# The Research Project

The research project tracked the lives of a small, systematic sample of 50 Oxford graduates who matriculated in the period 1960–1989. It situates this sample quantitatively by locating it both in relation to a larger body of records of Oxford graduates, and to national economic data. First, records of approximately 11,000 individual Humanities graduates who are well advanced in their careers were extracted from the University’s Development and Alumni Relations System (DARS), with the help of staff who maintain the registrations. This extensive body of records enabled us to create a statistical profile of occupational, gender, and educational characteristics of individuals who are now 20 to 50 years beyond graduation, and which may therefore be considered a much more indicative record of what Oxford Humanities graduates actually go on to do in their lives than records of leavers’ experience of their first six months post-graduation. This descriptive statistical profile is then compared to national trends in major employment sectors and the relative contributions of these sectors to British GDP, thus placing Humanities graduates in national economic context.

Even such a large body of quantitative information, however, has its limitations. It only picks out graduates at one later point in time. Also, it cannot be taken as statistically representative of all Oxford Humanities graduates, since there are many more graduates for whom records kept in DARS are incomplete and were therefore excluded from this study. This is where the systematic sample of 50 graduates comes into its own. These individuals were invited to participate in an extended, semi-structured interview in which they were asked about the successive steps or stages in their professional careers; the social, economic and personal factors which shaped this trajectory; other activities and interests they have; and the role which their educational experience in the Humanities may, or may not, have played in these several aspects of their life course. The sample was stratified so that the number of interviews in each professional or career area was proportionate to the number of graduates in the statistical profile who went on to careers in that area. While representative, the sample is small as is usual in pilot research, and cannot correct for biases that may exist in the larger but not statistically randomised sample of 11,000. Most of the 50 in the sample turned out to be ‘high flyers’, suggesting that graduates advanced in their careers who have remained in contact with the university do not reflect the full range of graduates’ experience. This is an important limitation, yet the pioneering nature of this study should also be kept in mind: no British university maintains a comprehensive longitudinal

database on its graduate diaspora, nor does any public body. The research reported here breaks new ground in two respects: by greatly expanding the quantitative range and depth of our knowledge on graduate life courses, and by combining this with a substantial body of in-depth qualitative data.

In-depth interviews were designed to be open-ended and informal. Rather than a strict ‘tick the box’ type of interview, graduates were encouraged to talk about particular aspects or stages of their lives that they considered most important, and to reflect on how their experience, values and strategic choices evolved from the point at which they completed their Humanities degree.<sup>7</sup> As we shall note in summarising the findings of the interviews, life course data of this kind inevitably show that even the more extensive DARS data on 11,000 life courses considerably simplify people’s real experience. Not only are there marked changes from one field or career to others over time, but some individuals effectively sustain multiple careers that combine freelance and significant civil society roles as well as full-time professional employment.

Humanities graduates were chosen as the focus of the research for two main reasons. The most obvious of these was noted in the introduction. The long-established central position and general values of the Humanities at the heart of British higher education are being displaced in current educational policy by an approach that sees knowledge as more appropriately generated and governed by markets for skills and technical information that respond to immediate economic needs. In view of this shift, the life courses of undergraduate Humanities students of the period 1960–1989 are of particular note because of the remarkable changes in British economy and society of that period. As Britain gradually extricated itself from the economic consequences of the 1939–45 war, it shifted in the 1970s toward a more service based economy in which the financial sector played a new and major role, and in which other areas, notably in technology, media, and management services, also came to assume a new importance. Although the period, like the present, was not without economic setbacks occasioned by international and regional economic crises, Britain’s approach to economic development and financial management came to have a prominence on the world stage, giving it a leading role in arguments for globalisation.

It is an important test, therefore, of the economic responsiveness of the Humanities-based curriculum to examine how active its graduates were in major changes in the economy of the 1970s and 1980s. Traditional subjects – Classical Languages, English and European Languages, Philosophy, Theology, and Arts – continued to predominate in the curriculum.<sup>8</sup> Did such a traditional orientation put Humanities graduates at a disadvantage? How did they cope with the changing economic and social climate? Did Humanities graduates make important contributions to contemporary economic, social and political developments? Were they adverse to new technologies?

The second reason for focusing on the Humanities addresses whether traditional higher education in the Humanities provided useful values, skills, and attitudes in the changing economy of the 1970s and 1980s. In-depth interviews enable us to examine the nature and variation of people’s experiences, to draw out in their own words how they responded to the changing job market, and to explore whether they took major roles in new professional opportunities. While this kind of open inquiry enables substantial insights into evolving life courses in an era of economic innovation, we should remember that a sample of 50 is a small one, and the research is merely *pilot research*, and can therefore give us only a taste of what more comprehensive inquiry would make possible.

The purpose of a pilot research project, in other words, is not to provide final answers. Pilot research projects make sure that key empirical dimensions of a problem are being raised, that received opinions are questioned where necessary, and that the way is prepared for systematic research on a problem if that seems indicated by its findings. Where a problem raises issues for which available evidence is inadequate, the role of a pilot is to establish the need for new evidence, and where possible to explore new ways of using what evidence is available. A pilot thus ‘opens a door’ onto a potentially new perspective. It provides the opportunity to suggest new and practical ways of thinking about the role of higher education, and how we can best assess its contribution to people’s lives.

As noted above, the main data currently used to assess graduates’ careers – survey reports on first jobs post-graduation – are plainly inadequate for a life course perspective on the role of higher education in promoting economic and social development. Careers, as in-depth interviews show, are often not linear (i.e. in which a person simply moves along a well-trodden path to job seniority in a single profession). We need, rather, to be able to track employment changes and related experience for successive generations that graduated in different social and economic circumstances, and whose employment trajectories were then influenced by changing circumstances – both positive and negative – in subsequent decades. We need to be able to make these links so that graduates’ occupational trends can be related to trends in degree subjects, and these patterns related in turn to national trends in different sectors of the labour market and their relative contributions to the economy. We also need a great deal of qualitative information about how and why people made the choices they did.

Instead of a linear perspective, we can more helpfully think about graduates’ lives as they leave university as a kind of *diaspora*.<sup>9</sup> Not only graduates, but their knowledge and skills, are more or less ‘mobile’ – i.e. applicable to a range of opportunities and challenges beyond what they learned at university. Following graduation, young people fan out across the country and the world, undertaking new and successive professional roles. Their dispersion is, of course, not random. Graduates follow (or make) opportunities as they participate in existing social and economic structures – and as these

structures are not fixed but respond to wider influences, the changes required are likely to affect them differently at different life stages. The extent to which higher education helps to make people responsive to change – its impact over their lives – lies not only in what they did at university, but on how well that education enables them to take on new and unexpected challenges and the further learning they entail. Do they have the mobile knowledge skills that they, their society and economy, need?

<sup>7</sup>The framework of questions used by interviewers to shape discussion is given in the Appendix to this report.

<sup>8</sup>Some subjects, notably Philosophy, were taught in combined honours courses that could include Economics, but only a minority of students took this option. None of the Philosophy graduates in the systematic sample took a strong interest in economic lectures and supervision, although one person who declined to be in the sample did.

<sup>9</sup>The term ‘diaspora’ originally referred to the dispersion of Jewish populations, but has come in recent demographic, social and economic research to refer to a much wider range of migrant populations. Typically, diaspora populations retain an important tie to a site of common early experience, from which they have then dispersed. The tie may be variously to a physical location, a common history, institutions, shared achievements, and so forth.



# Part I

## Statistical Profile

Quantitative data on Humanities graduates builds a simple but comprehensive picture of their academic and occupational achievements. To begin with, data on the entire 1960–1989 period is presented, beginning with the distribution of degree subjects. The distribution of occupations pursued by graduates over this period is then given, and gender variations in both distributions. Discussion then moves from absolute numbers to trends, treating first changing choices of degree subjects over the period, and then linking these choices to occupational choices. The third part of this section compares these trends to changes in the wider economy, looking first at the participation of Humanities graduates in national occupational trends, and then their presence in major sectors of economic growth over the period.

The Development and Alumni Relations System (DARS) at Oxford records nearly 34,000 graduates in the Humanities over the period, for which recent occupational and contact information are available on nearly 11,000 persons. The latter are composed of people who have kept in touch with the University together with those added as the University has sought to expand the coverage and accuracy of the registration. DARS thus does not enable us to construct a systematic randomised sample of an entire dataset, as there would be too many persons for whom there are not recent data. The registration also takes no account of periods out of employment – it merely records the main occupation at the time of recent contact. As the total of 11,000 graduates – nearly one in three of total graduates – is nonetheless a very substantial body of information, descriptive statistics have been compiled on this population, and these are presented in the following 23 Figures. Since the 11,000 are not representative in a formal statistical sense, the analysis has been kept simple, giving trends in the ‘raw data’ and proportionate changes of groups within it. The approach is intended to show main order of magnitude trends and principal patterns of distribution.

DARS employs an occupational classification system of over 150 job areas, and the data from government labour force statistics and financial data also rely on elaborate and changing classifications. The main degree subject areas in the Humanities also present a complex picture, the courses being of very different size in terms of student numbers, and with many students taking combined honours courses (e.g. History and Modern Languages; Philosophy and Theology). The degree subjects were simplified – inevitably somewhat arbitrarily – by assigning combined honours graduates to the larger of the two subjects they were taking.<sup>10</sup> This resulted in nine main subject areas, as listed in **Figure 1** and subsequent figures. As the analysis proceeds, the focus shifts to the five larger subject populations (Classics, English, History, Modern Languages, Philosophy), chiefly because the occupational trends and other characteristics of smaller subjects showed relatively less change over time, but also because the great bulk of Humanities graduates in employment are from these larger subjects. Occupations listed in DARS were likewise reduced to nine areas, with one residual category. Here we have followed the specific occupation of the graduate, not the locus of his or her employment.<sup>11</sup> In comparing these data to national labour statistics, the nine employment areas were related to parallel classifications used in official statistical compilations. In the following sections all data refer to the DARS database unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, someone reading History and Modern Languages is included in History; those taking combined honours courses including some non-Humanities subjects, like Physics and Philosophy, or Philosophy, Politics and Economics, are included under Philosophy.

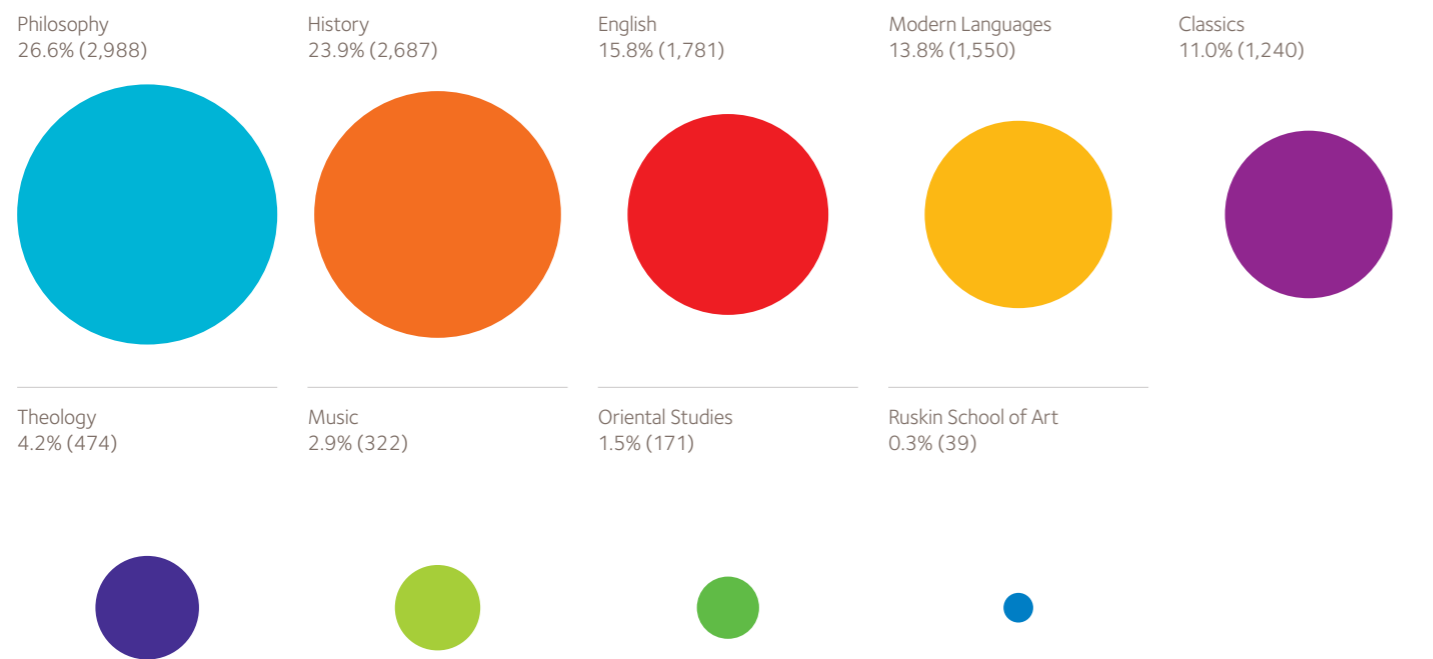
<sup>11</sup> Thus, someone working as a financial advisor or marketing executive to an automotive manufacturer is included in ‘Finance’, or ‘Marketing’, not in ‘Industry’.

# 1.1 Degree Subjects and Occupations

Figure 1 makes immediately clear the relative size of the nine Humanities subject areas, with over half of graduates in just two disciplines – Philosophy and History – each comprising roughly a quarter of all Humanities graduates. A second tier of subjects have between 10 to 15 per cent of graduates: English, Modern Languages and Classics. Taken together, however, these three strongly language-oriented subjects comprise over 40 per cent of the whole. The remaining schools are all much smaller, with below 4 per cent of total Humanities graduates. These are, in descending order: Theology, Music, Oriental Studies, and the Ruskin School of Art.

Figure 2 provides a simple reality check, confirming the consistency of data: Are there marked changes in the proportions of these subject areas over time?

**Figure 1:**  
Graduates 1960–89 by Degree Subject:  
Percentages and (Raw Numbers)

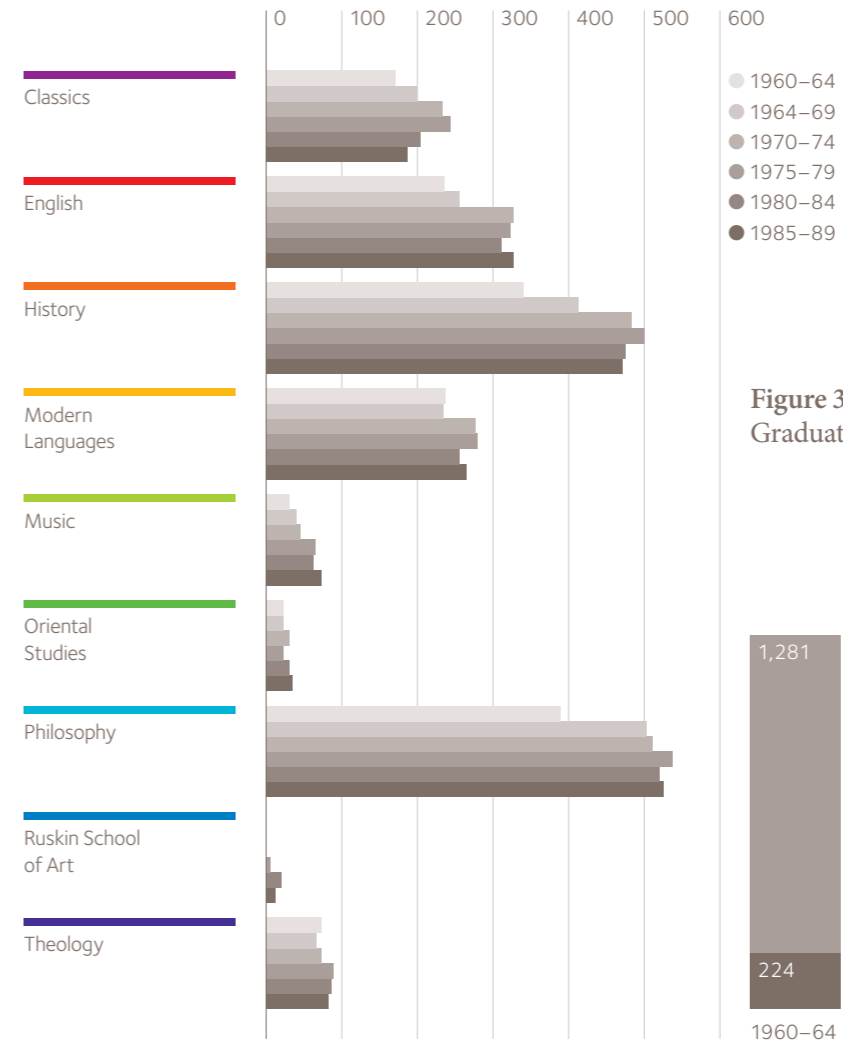


As Figure 2 shows, there are small fluctuations over time between the five year age groups, but there is no reason to think that the proportions given in Figure 1 are influenced by any irregular or large shifts in student numbers between subjects. The relative position of the several subject areas is remarkably constant.

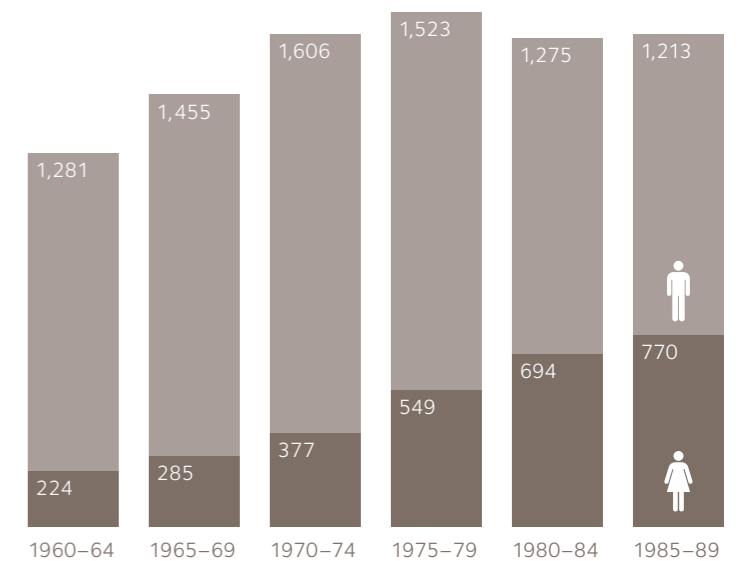
Figure 3 reports a major change over the period, the steady increase in the percentage of women, which doubled between the early 1960s and late 1980s. This shift reflects the growing number of colleges admitting women as well as men. Three of the five previously single-sex women's colleges also began to take men in this period, but this was obviously not sufficient to counter the decline in male places.

Figure 4 puts this change of gender composition in the context of its impact on different degree subjects. The percentages given in the Figure, as with Figure 1, indicate relative numbers of persons in each subject as a proportion of all Humanities students. If we consider, however, the size of the 'colour blocks' given in Figure 4, we see for example that women taking Modern Languages and English are a larger proportion of all women, but that their numbers have not yet reached parity with men in these subjects as a whole. Classics, History and Philosophy have a relatively higher percentage of male students.

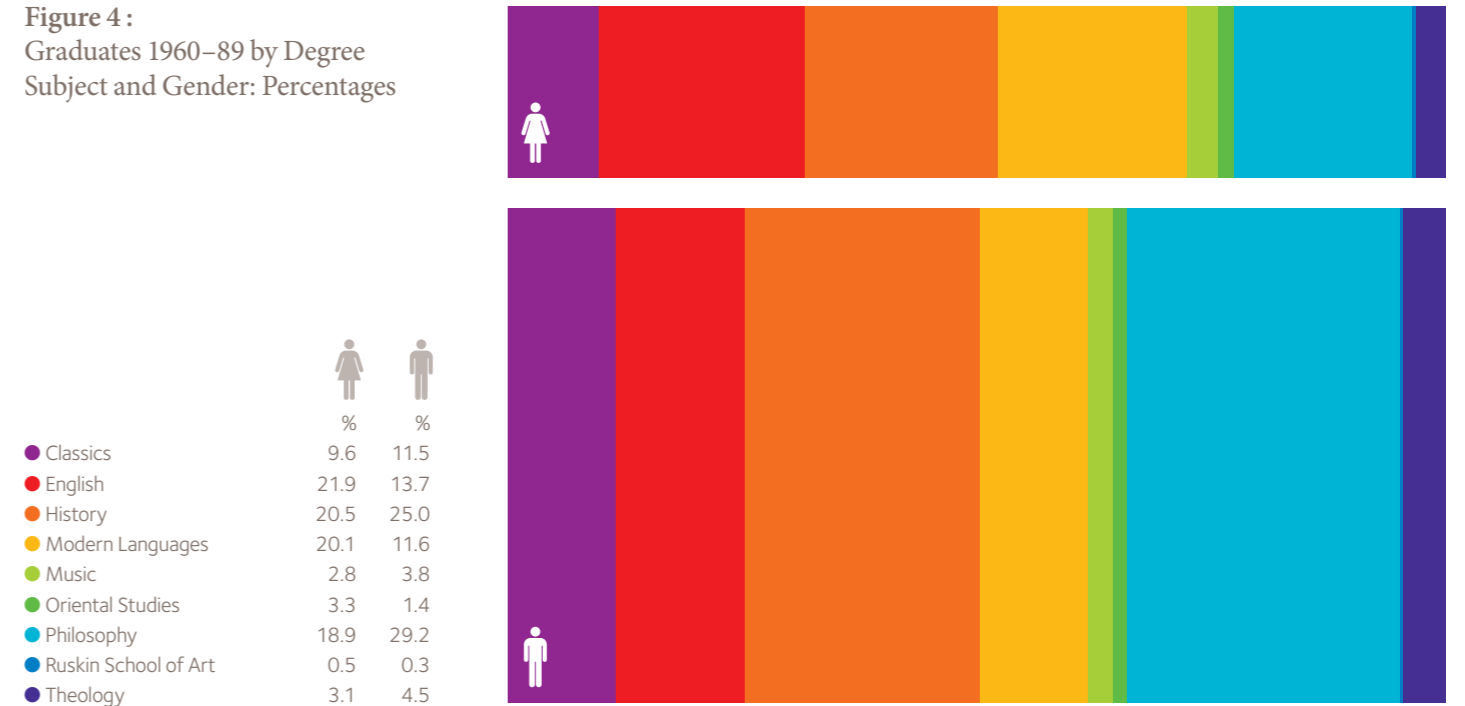
**Figure 2:**  
Changing Degree Subject Cohort Sizes:  
Raw Numbers



**Figure 3:**  
Graduates: 1960–89 by Cohort and Gender: Raw Numbers

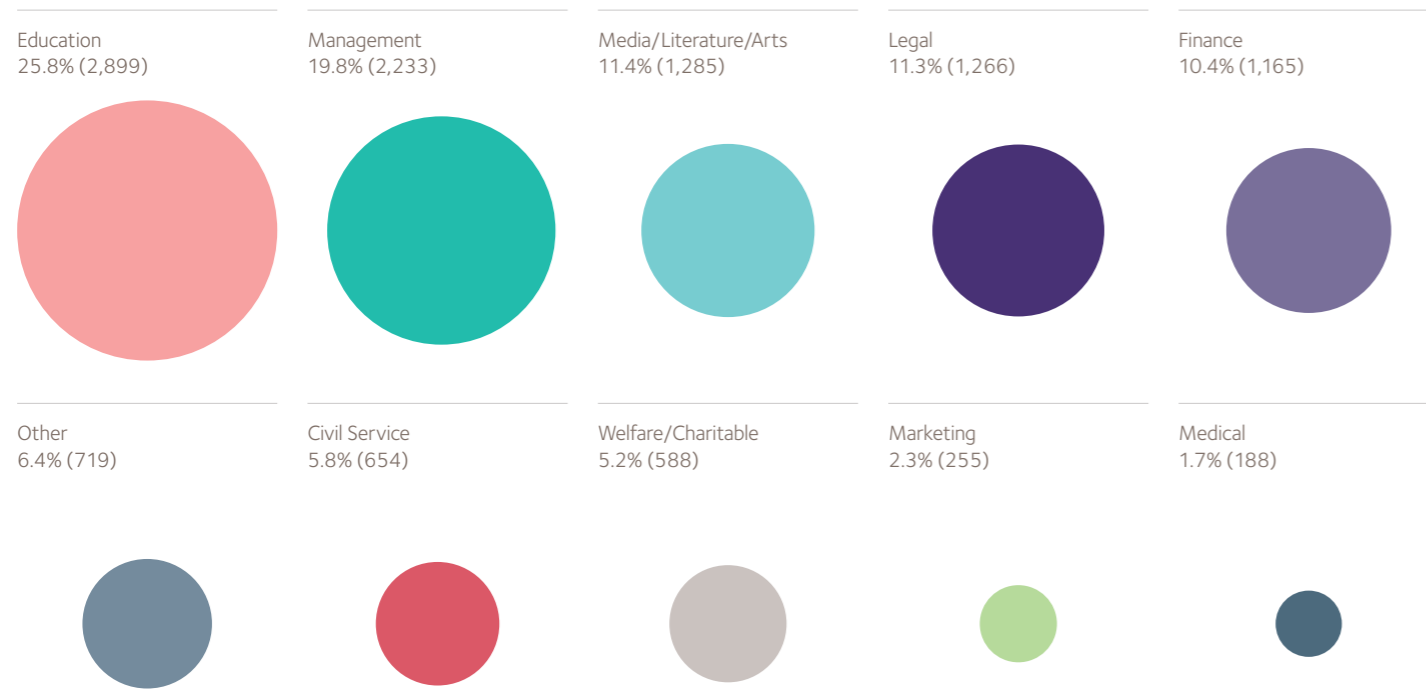


**Figure 4:**  
Graduates 1960–89 by Degree  
Subject and Gender: Percentages





**Figure 5:**  
Occupational Destinations of All Graduates,  
1960–89: Percentages and (Raw Numbers)



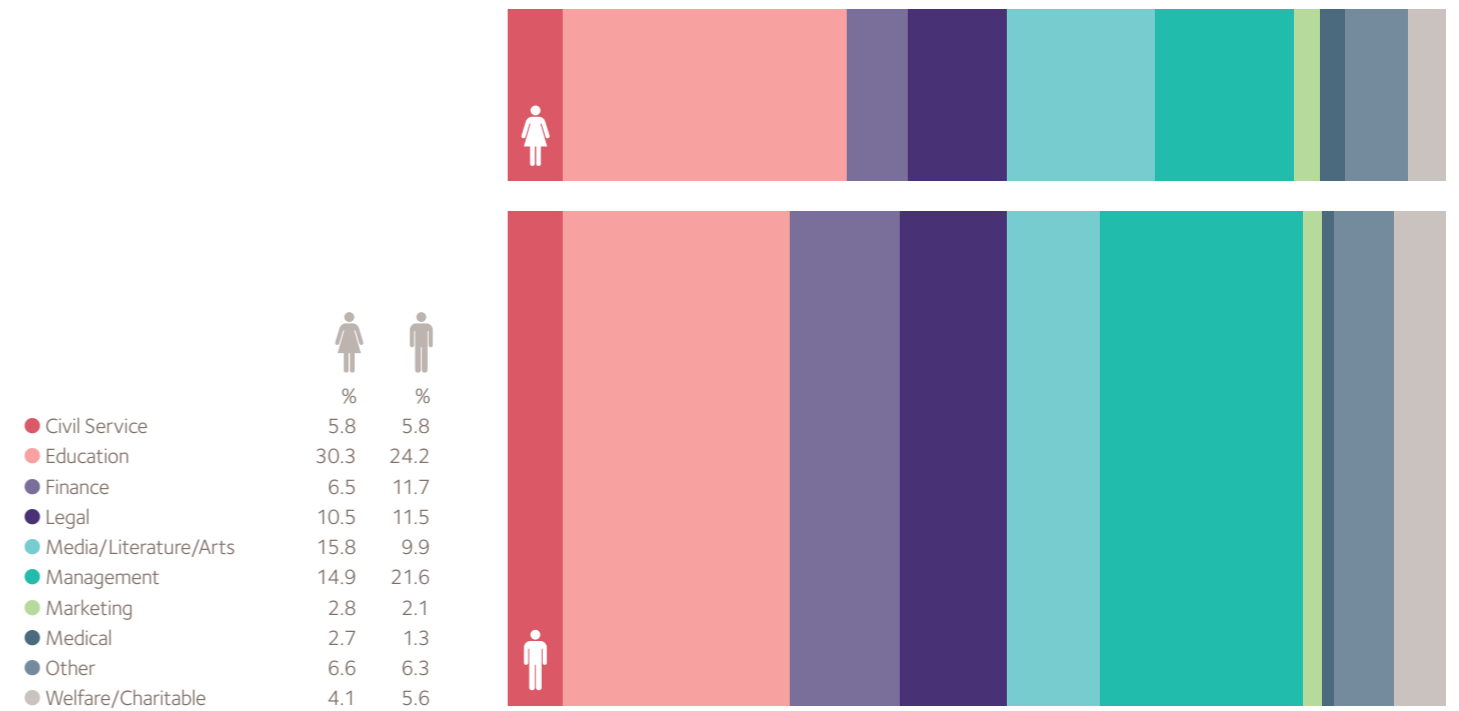
With Figure 5 we turn to total occupational data for the 1960–89 period. In aggregate, just over one in four Humanities graduates in this thirty year period remained in the educational sector, usually in secondary and university level teaching or administration. Commercial sector employment, encompassing Management, Finance, and Marketing, was notably higher at 32 per cent. As we shall see, when we go on to break down these block numbers into trends, fields like Education, Management and Finance all experienced significant changes, with marked declines in the former and increasing proportions of graduates entering financial sector employ over time. Graduates having careers in the Civil Service represent a much smaller group, at 6 per cent. If we consider this group together with those in Education as carrying out the established role of the Humanities in public service, then almost one-third of graduates over this period supported its normative role in society. To this public service we might add many of those working in smaller sectors like Welfare, Medicine and the Law. The classification Media/Literature/Arts is clearly a composite group, taking in poets, novelists, journalists, the visual and performing arts, as well as print, television, radio and film media. Both this group and the Legal profession (which, interestingly, show the same levels of employment) combine professional groups engaged chiefly in commercial enterprise with groups devoted, for example, to

**80%**

of Humanities graduates join

**5** occupational sectors – Education, Media, Law, Finance and Management

**Figure 6:**  
Occupational Destinations of Graduates  
by Gender, 1960–89: Percentages



a range of public issues (human rights, the environment, race relations).<sup>12</sup> The Figure shows, overall, a remarkable balance in the occupational contributions of Humanities graduates, with at least one third located in both commercial and public service sectors.

Five occupational sectors – Education, Management, Finance, Law and Media – predominate, together encompassing nearly 80 per cent of all Humanities graduates. When we consider occupation in relation to gender (see Figure 6), the percentages shown indicate that men continued to outnumber women in all of these main groups, with the Media being the one area in which women reach more than half the proportion of men. From the relative size of the ‘bands’ we can also see that the same five main occupational destinations are primary for women as well as men. Perhaps the most notable shift in increasing female employment is in entry to the Civil Service: the proportion of all female graduates entering Civil Service employment is the same as male, although in aggregate men continue to be twice as likely to become Civil Servants.

<sup>12</sup> A residual or ‘other’ category was necessary to complete this classification, and it is indeed a diverse group, including for example: architects, transport, catering, athletics, industry and agriculture. Small numbers of Oxford Humanities graduates chose these fields, amounting together to one in seventeen graduates.



The most notable shift in increasing female employment is in entry to the Civil Service

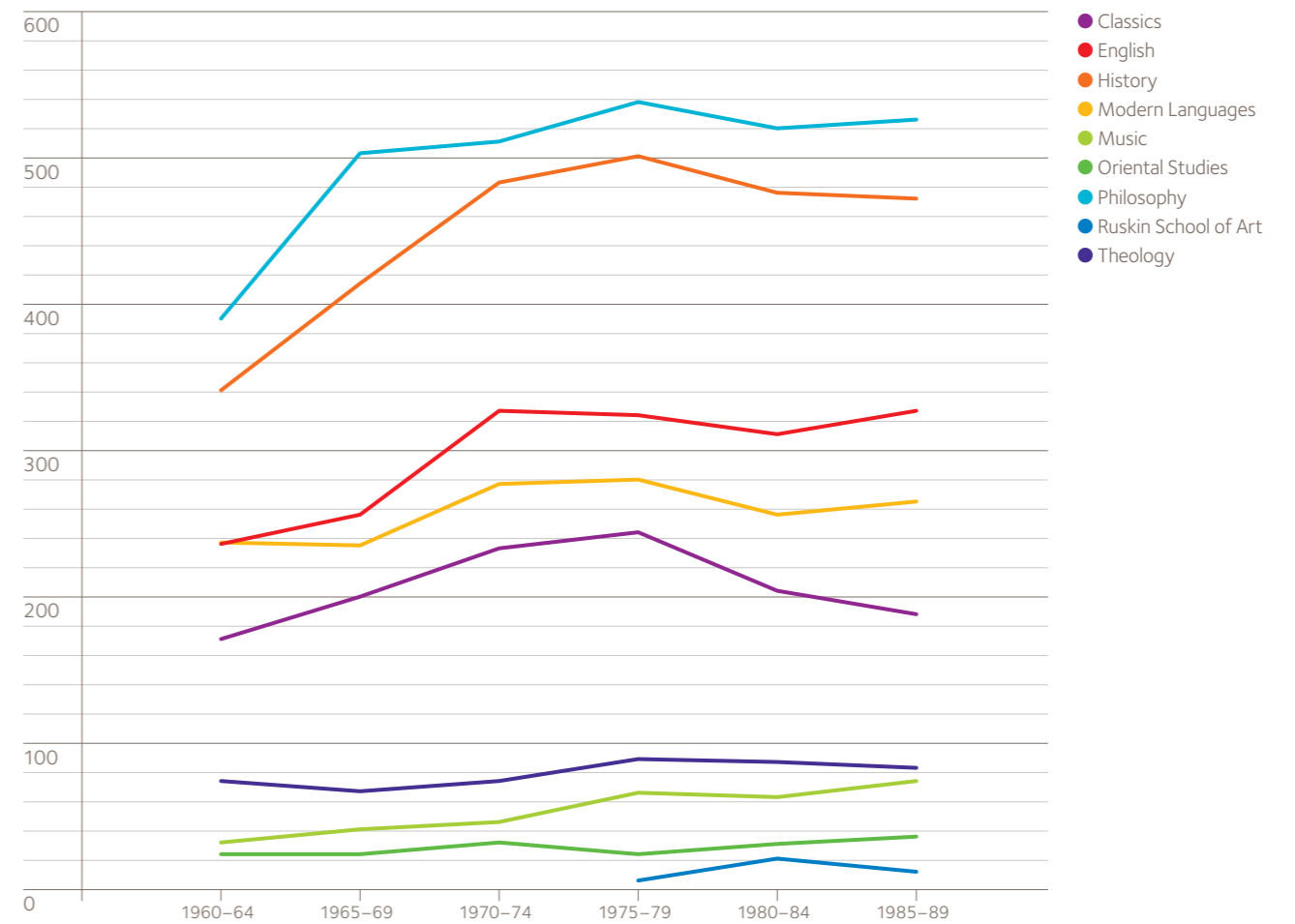
## 1.2 Occupational and Academic Degree Trends: How Are They Related?

Figure 7 tracks changing cohort sizes in the nine subject areas.<sup>13</sup> As Figure 1 would lead us to expect, these fall into three main groups: Philosophy and History; Languages, Cultures and Literatures; and the four smaller subjects of Theology, Music, Oriental Studies and the Ruskin School. There is no change in the rank order of degree subject sizes, but Philosophy, History and English have all increased much more significantly than the rest. In these last three subject areas the increase is between 33 and 42 per cent, with most of the change taking place in the first half of the period (between 1960 and 1974). No subject has actually declined in numbers.

Recent government policy places very strong emphasis on *student choice*. Informed choices about careers are supposed to be made in important respects by students choosing degree subjects that will prepare them for their subsequent careers. The DARS data provide a detailed picture of how degree subjects and occupational sectors are related. As noted, evidence on the jobs that people have 20 to 40 or 50 years after matriculation gives us a much more informed understanding of how degree subjects relate to the life course than is possible from reported first occupations just after graduation.

<sup>13</sup> The series plotted in this and subsequent Figures track numbers or percentages of graduates according to when they matriculated (i.e. began their degrees), in five year age groups. They are plotted by degree subjects, and then both subjects and fields of professional employment. The field of employment, however, is recorded only at a single point in time, twenty or more years after matriculation, as DARS does not contain continuous records of individual career moves and changes between professional fields. This properly longitudinal picture is addressed in the second part of this report, in the sample of in-depth interviews.

Figure 7: Graduates 1960–89 by Cohort and Degree Subject: Raw Numbers



No subject has declined in numbers, with three increasing more significantly than the rest.

**35%**

Increase in cohort size in Philosophy

**38%**

Increase in cohort size in History

**39%**

Increase in cohort size in English

# +100%

Increase in History and Philosophy Graduates working in the financial sector

# Nº.1

Education sustained its position as the largest sector of Humanities employment

**Figure 8:**  
Cohort Occupational Trends for Graduates:  
Raw Numbers

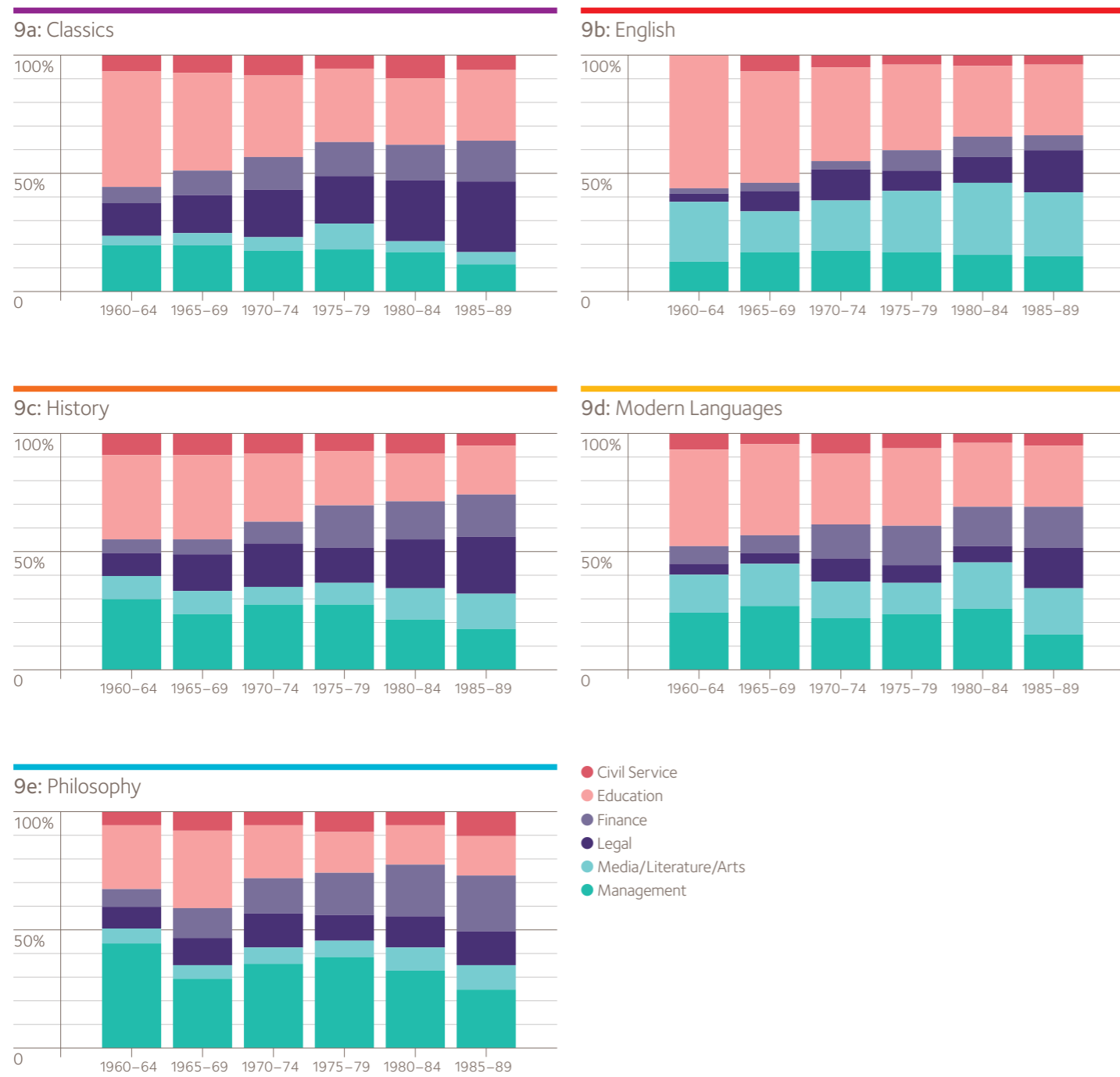


Figure 8 reveals that there is no simple, uniform relation between degree subjects over time and occupational outcomes. There is a striking diversity in occupational choices within subjects, and particularly for the largest five. Clearly, the kind of static picture given in Figures 5 and 6 for the whole period, or which might be given for any single five or 10 year period, would not reveal the dynamic character of these subjects. In the larger degree subjects, preference for several occupational areas changes markedly, both in trend and rank order, although some occupational choices – not those attracting the majority of graduates – remain fairly constant. All four of the smaller subject areas, in contrast, show relatively little change in any occupational area. This appears to be largely a function of their smaller size. Fluctuations are modest, reflecting the relatively modest numbers entering each occupation. Even where there are variations in the rank order of preferences (e.g. between the media and educational sectors in the case of Music), only small numerical shifts are needed to effect this result.

A number of the more striking changes in the larger subjects deserve note:

- The financial sector attracted increasing numbers of graduates in all large subject groups. In Philosophy and History the increase (over 100 per cent) extends over the whole period; similar proportionate increases occur in Classics (up to the 1970s), in Modern Languages (during the 1970s), and English (in the late 1970s), although the increases are more modest in absolute terms, as they begin from low starting levels.
- Law also shows increases over the whole period in all subjects, with History again having a rise of over 100 per cent. Philosophy, Modern Languages, and English experienced rises in the 1960s and early 1970s, and then tended to decline up to the early 1980s, when they renewed an upward path. Classicists moved into law more in the 1960s than later, although modest increases continued.
- Media, Literature and Arts increased steadily by over 100 per cent amongst English graduates (from the late 1960s) and in History (from the late 1970s).
- Education sustained its position as the largest sector of Humanities employment, but experienced a fall in numbers in all the large subjects (excepting a brief and rapid rise in Philosophy early in the period followed by a gradual return to a level slightly below its starting point).
- Management experienced the most varied shifts, with abrupt rises and falls amounting to a kind of zig-zag pattern in Philosophy and History, with net declines over the whole period. The more modest movement of Classics and Modern Languages into Management was in both cases followed by falls to lower than initial levels; only English sustained its modest gains over the whole period.
- Civil Service choices are more modest but on the whole constant in all the major subject degrees, with small variations from cohort to cohort.

**Figure 9:**  
Six Main Professional Destinations of Graduates,  
by Cohort: Percentages



Possible reasons for these diverse shifts are an interesting issue, and in the following section we note several economic and social factors that inevitably influenced many people's choices – the diversity of patterns in Figure 8, however, underscores the fact that, even so, such factors do not appear to have influenced people's career paths uniformly. More in-depth qualitative inquiry is plainly needed to explain these patterns.

Two general observations stand out regarding Figure 8 and the trends it shows as a whole. One is the tendency over the period for graduates to move away from educational and management professions toward finance, law and the media. There is not a clear divide, in which we find education, as a traditional Humanities profession, on one side, and commerce on the other. Commercial employment areas like Management fall along with Education, while Humanities-related fields like Media, Literature and Arts rise along with Finance. The second general point is that these shifts take place against a broader pattern in which, as noted for Figure 5, contributions on a large scale continue to be made right across the public services and commercial sectors.

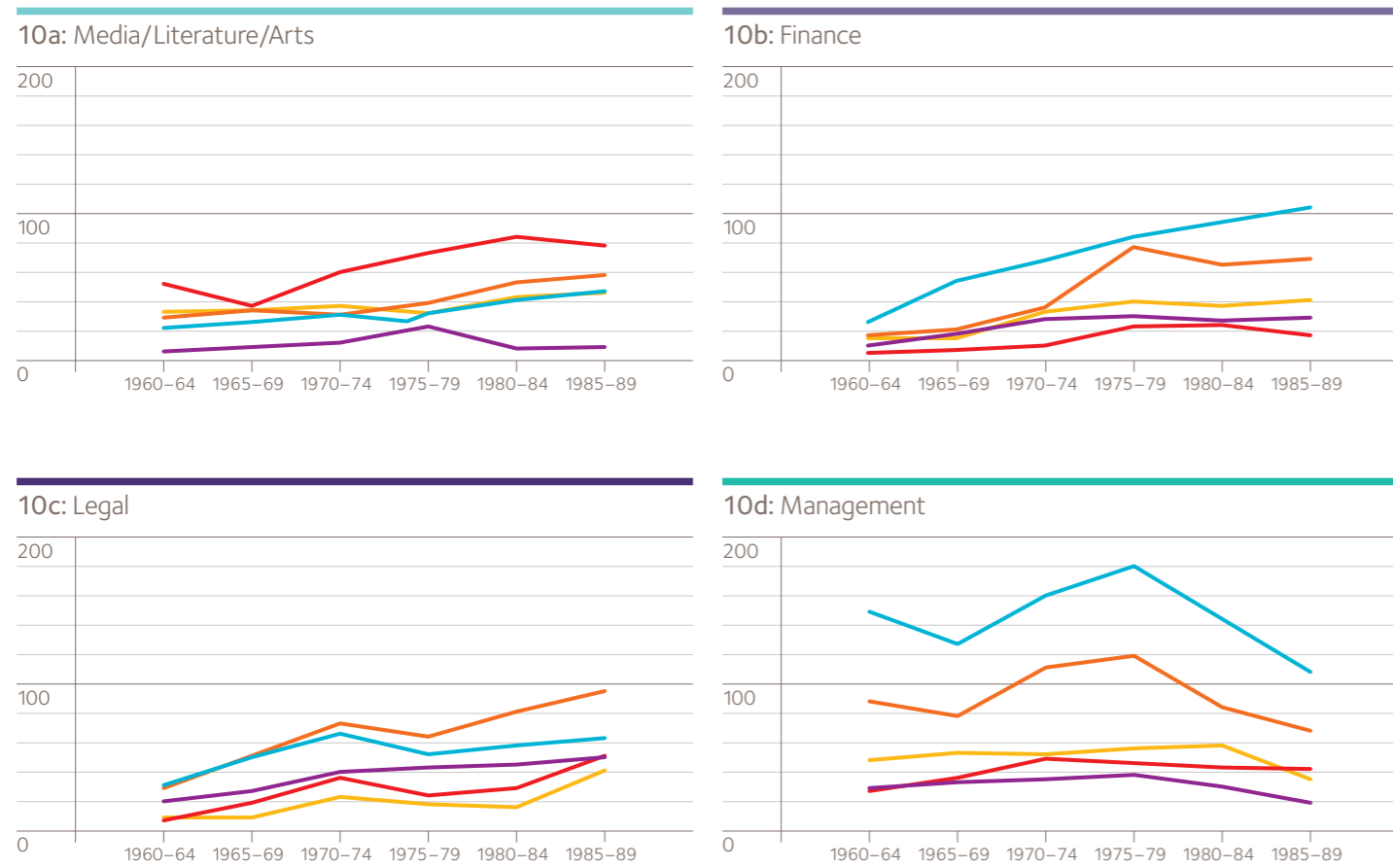
Figures 9a-e express these changes on a subject-by-subject basis, showing shifts in occupational preferences as a proportion of all graduate choices in the five main subject areas. The tendency to move out of Education and Management is again visible in all subjects, with percentage moves into Finance, Law and the Media varying between subjects, and with more or less random small fluctuations in Civil Service occupations.

There is a tendency over the period for graduates to move away from educational and management professions toward finance, law and the media.



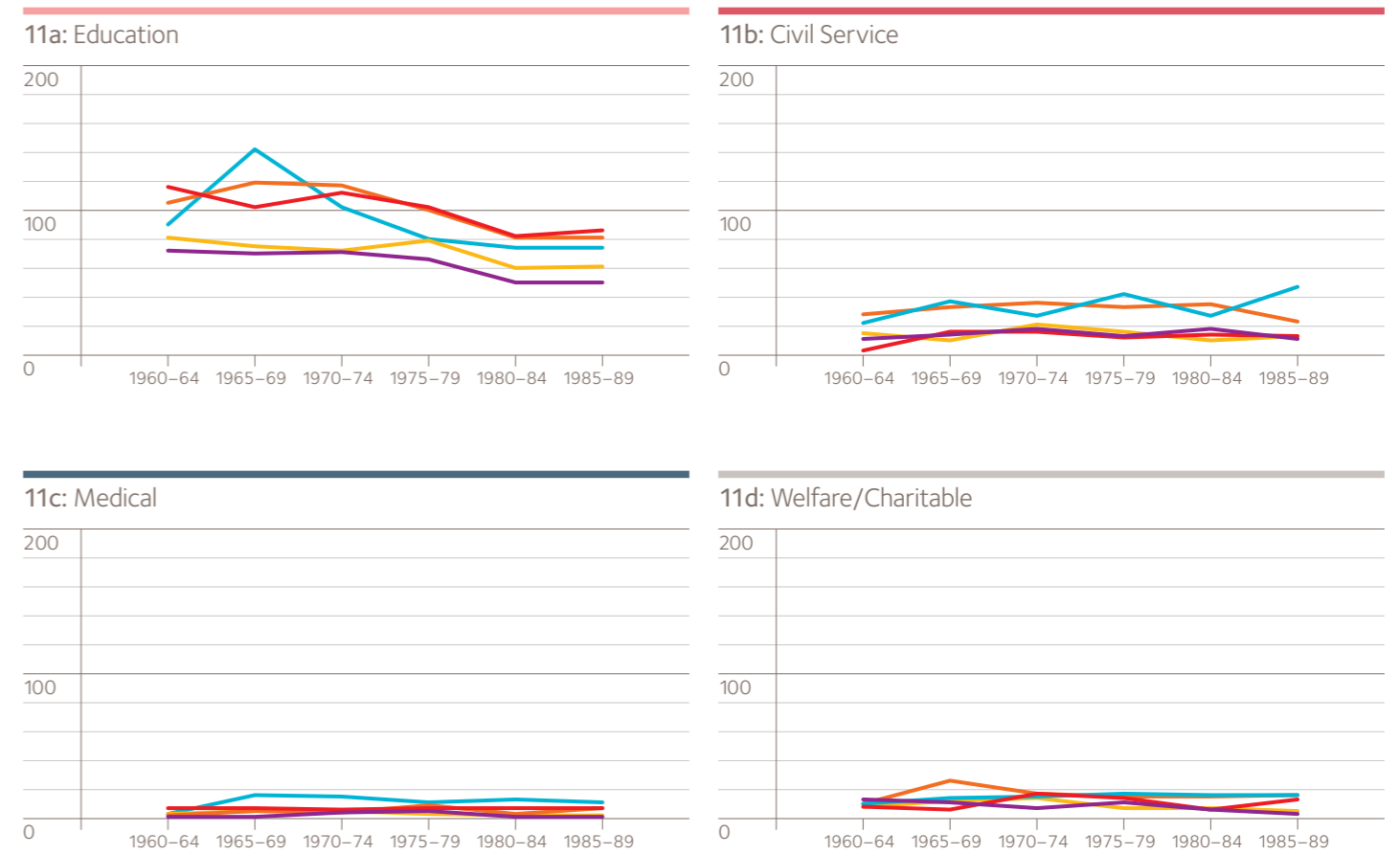


**Figure 10:**  
Trends in Group 1: Professional Employment by Degree Subject in Successive Cohorts: Raw Numbers



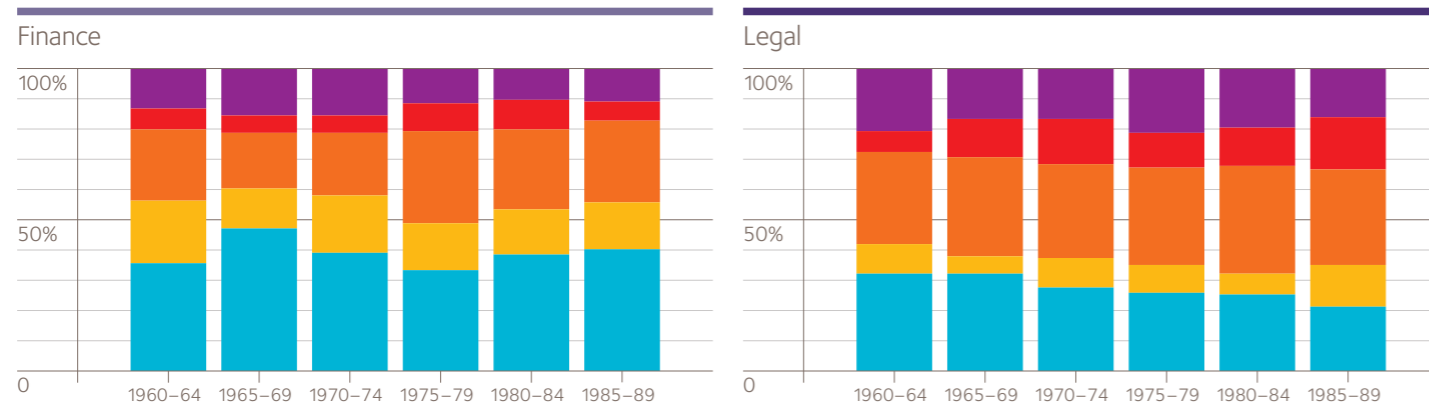
These broad distinctions can be sharpened slightly, as in Figures 10 and 11, by viewing changes from the employers' point of view, and regrouping the occupations into two broad groups. Figure 10 shows the overall greater volatility of predominantly commercial job sectors, and Figure 11 the more modest fluctuations in public service, medical and welfare sectors. The exception, in the latter Figure, is of course Education, which thus stands out as the main professional area to have lost ground to private sector and largely commercial enterprises.

**Figure 11:**  
Trends in Group 2: Professional Employment by Degree Subject in Successive Cohorts: Raw Numbers

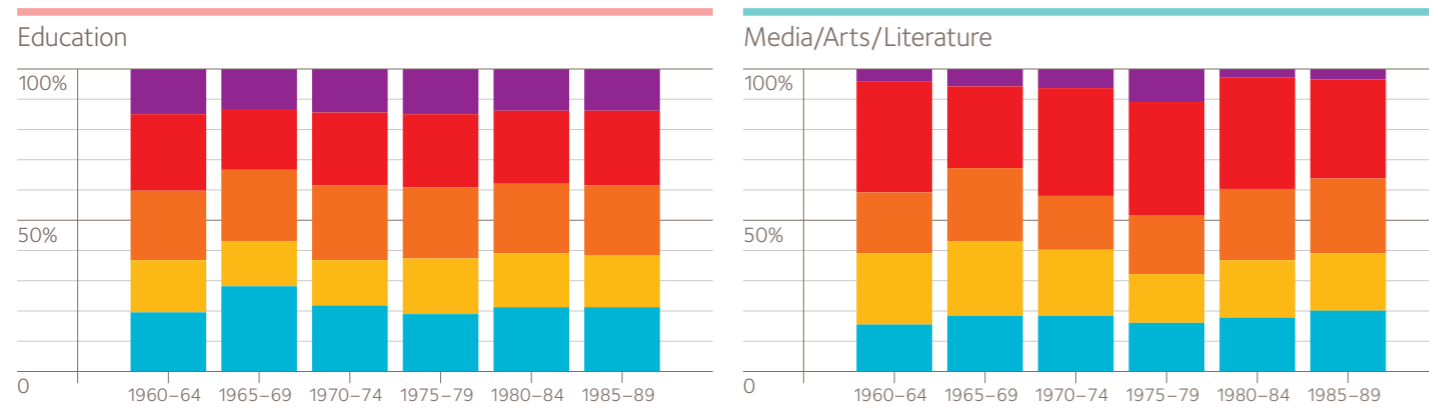


Education stands out as the main professional area to have lost ground to private sector and largely commercial enterprises.

**Figure 12a:**  
Financial and Legal Destinations, by Degree Subject and Cohort: Percentages



**Figure 12b:**  
Educational and Literary Destinations, by Degree Subject and Cohort: Percentages



A continuing balanced contribution of the Humanities, in which all employment sectors are catered for, is evident.

Continuing the 'employers' point of view, Figures 12a-b look at four of the main employment fields. From this perspective a much more stable and continuous picture emerges over the whole period. If, as employer in a given sector, we ask 'Where do we usually recruit new employees?' the percentages drawn from each part of the Humanities show only small fluctuations from cohort to cohort, and over time each employment area draws fairly consistent proportions from each of the five main degree subjects. Again, a continuing balanced contribution of the Humanities, in which all employment sectors are catered for, is evident.

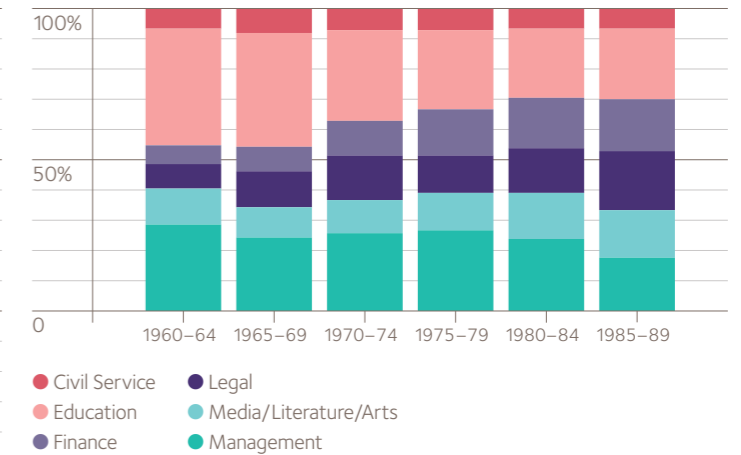
## The steady rise of graduates entering Finance, Media and Legal Services remains evident.

Figure 13 tracks the movement of all Humanities graduates – i.e. regardless of which of the five main degree subjects they studied – into six main employment sectors. The steady rise over the whole period in graduates entering Finance, Media and Legal Services remains evident in the raw numbers, as do the overall declines in Management and Education (although numbers in the latter two sectors remain relatively high). Figure 14 expresses these data as a percentage of all graduates in the combined degree subjects. Movement into Finance over the whole period expands threefold, and Legal Services more than double. This expansion, together with more modest increases in Media, mean that the 1985–89 cohort shows more balance across five of the six sectors than was the case in the 1960s, with Civil Service recruitment remaining relatively constant.

**Figure 13:** Six Main Professional Destinations of Humanities Graduates\*, by Cohort: Raw Numbers  
\*Five main degree subjects



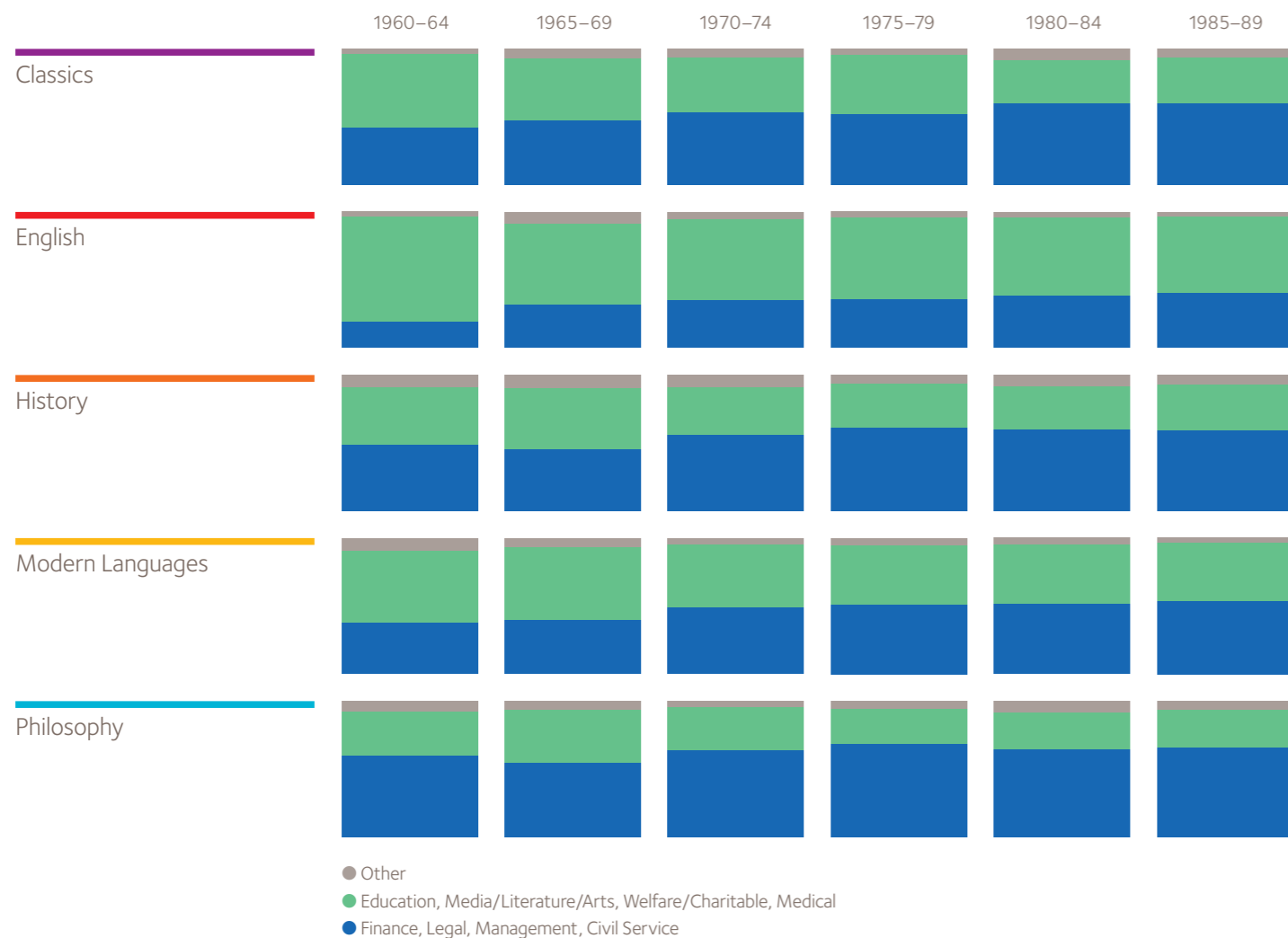
**Figure 14:** Six Main Professional Destinations of Humanities Graduates\*, by Cohort: Percentages  
\*Five main degree subjects



# 1.3 Humanities Employment and the Wider Economy

Figure 15 provides a suitable turning point in our discussion, as we move now toward the issue of what place Humanities graduates have taken in the economic growth of Britain over the key transitional period from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. If we regroup the professions, as in Figure 15, to separate central government and legal, financial and business management (what are usually seen as 'City' oriented professions) from the other occupational sectors, a striking shift is visible across all of the major degree subjects: the steady growth of blue (i.e. City and government) associated sectors as a percentage of all Humanities graduates, cohort by cohort, across the whole thirty-year period.

Figure 15: Occupational Trends by Degree Subject and Cohort Percentages in Three Professional Groups



Britain in the period from the 1970s is widely regarded as having entered a new era in which the role of service sectors, and particularly financial and business-related services, greatly expanded as a contributor to the economy. The first decade covered in this report continued what the *Cambridge Economic History* has called 'the sedate pace' of post-war era growth: despite shocks, like the currency devaluation of 1967, GDP increases averaged around 3 per cent per year.<sup>14</sup> The early 1970s saw the collapse of the international monetary system based on Bretton Woods, the oil price shock of 1973, rising inflation and unemployment, and the beginnings of a shift to monetarist economic policy in Britain when it turned to the IMF for assistance. From 1973 to the end of the century GDP growth slowed to an annual rate of 2.3. By the early 1980s unemployment had reached 3 million. However, revenues from North Sea oil began to buttress the economy by 1982, and the programme of privatisation of national industries under the Thatcher government created a more favourable investment climate by the end of the period covered in this Report.

Figure 16: Trends in UK Employment Over Time (1960-86)<sup>16</sup> (thousands) \*includes all legal service personnel

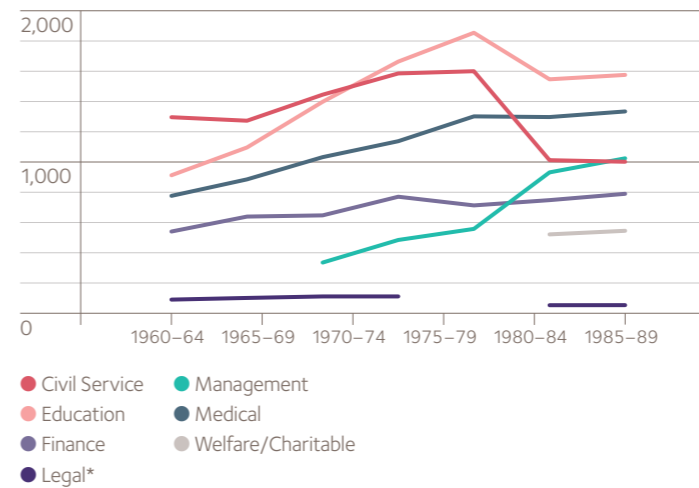


Figure 17: Total GDP by Industry (1960-89)<sup>17</sup> (£ millions)

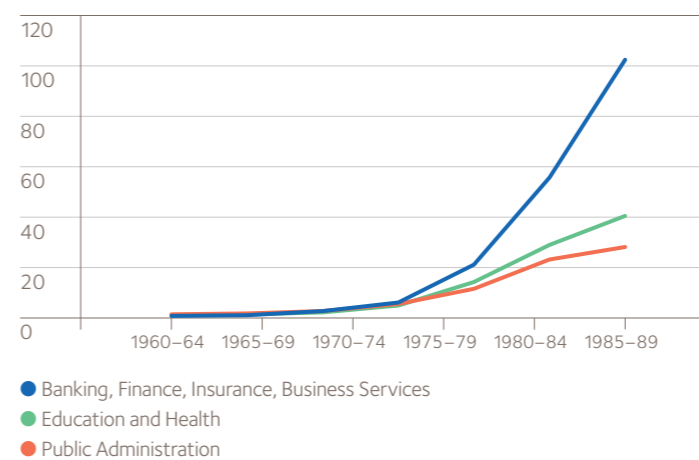
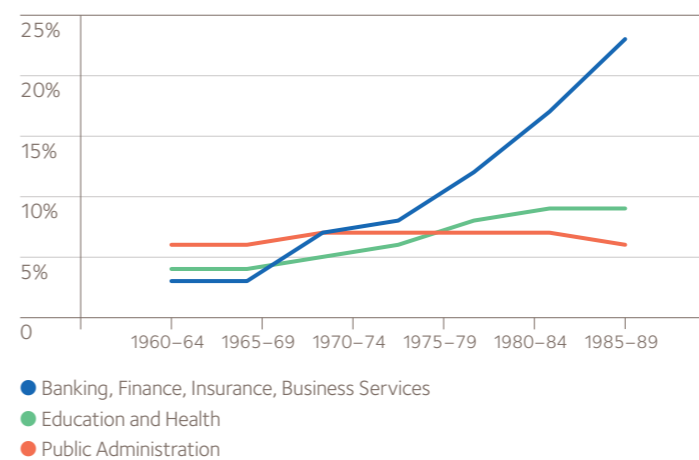


Figure 18: GDP as a Percentage of Total Annual GDP, by Industry (1960-89)<sup>18</sup>



Figures 16 to 18 are intended to provide a simple overview of trends in employment, GDP, and their relationship in the period.<sup>15</sup> Figure 16 makes clear that the rise in Financial sector employment was steadily in process from the beginning of the period, while Management occupations show a rising trend from a later date. Financial sector employment increased by 40 per cent over the whole period, while jobs in Management doubled during the last twenty years of the period. To this extent the policy changes of the 1980s were able to build on, and doubtless reflected, significant emerging patterns in the economy. The leveling-off of parallel rises in medical employment trends, and declines visible in the Civil Service and educational sectors from 1980, belong to the period of Thatcher-government reforms, which reduced public sector employment levels. The relative contributions of three main sectors to GDP are then indicated in Figures 17 and 18. Statistical sources here combine Education and Medical classifications, and it is likely that the series for 'Public Administration' includes a wider set of occupations than covered in previous Figures presented here under 'Civil Service'. Figures 17 and 18 nonetheless give an unambiguous picture of the changing role of general Financial, Management and related professions in the economy.<sup>19</sup> Financial sector contributions increased fivefold as a component of annual GDP growth over the period.

<sup>14</sup> Neal, L (2004), 'Impact of Europe', in R. Floud and P. Johnson, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. III*, p. 277; Kitson, M. 'Failure followed by Success or Success followed by failure? A Re-examination of British Economic Growth since 1949', *ibid*, p. 31

<sup>15</sup> Producing long-term time series from national labour market statistics presents many difficulties, as the occupational classification schemes have been changed, with additions and regrouping of constituent categories, from time to time. It can be very difficult to assess whether exactly the same sets of occupations are being tracked consistently. (For this reason there is a gap in the Legal series in Figure 14, as the difference in levels of legal employment in recorded statistics in the 1970s and early 1980s implies that many more clerical and other staff were included in the classification in that period.) The pre-1992 data have been described as 'still experimental' in publications of the Office of National Statistics; the authors consider the data give an accurate picture, as long as we keep to the main long-term trends (C. Lindsay and P. Doyle, (2003) 'Experimental Consistent Time Series of Historical Labour Force Survey Data', *Labour Market Trends*, September 2003, p. 467).

<sup>16</sup> Source: Employment Gazette 1960-1989; Annual Abstract of Statistics 1960-1969.

<sup>17</sup> Source: Central Statistical Office, Annual Abstracts of Statistics, 1960-1989.

<sup>18</sup> Source: Central Statistical Office, Annual Abstracts of Statistics, 1960-1989.

<sup>19</sup> Consideration was given to tracking employment trends over time by sector as a percentage of total employment in the economy. Over the whole period, however, total employment fell by over three million, reflecting structural changes in industry. In other words, changes in the several sectors shown in Figure 16 were overshadowed by larger changes in employment elsewhere in the economy. Percentages would thus be shaped more strongly by other factors, not within the scope of the Report. These changes should also be kept in mind when considering the percentage data on GDP changes in Figure 18.

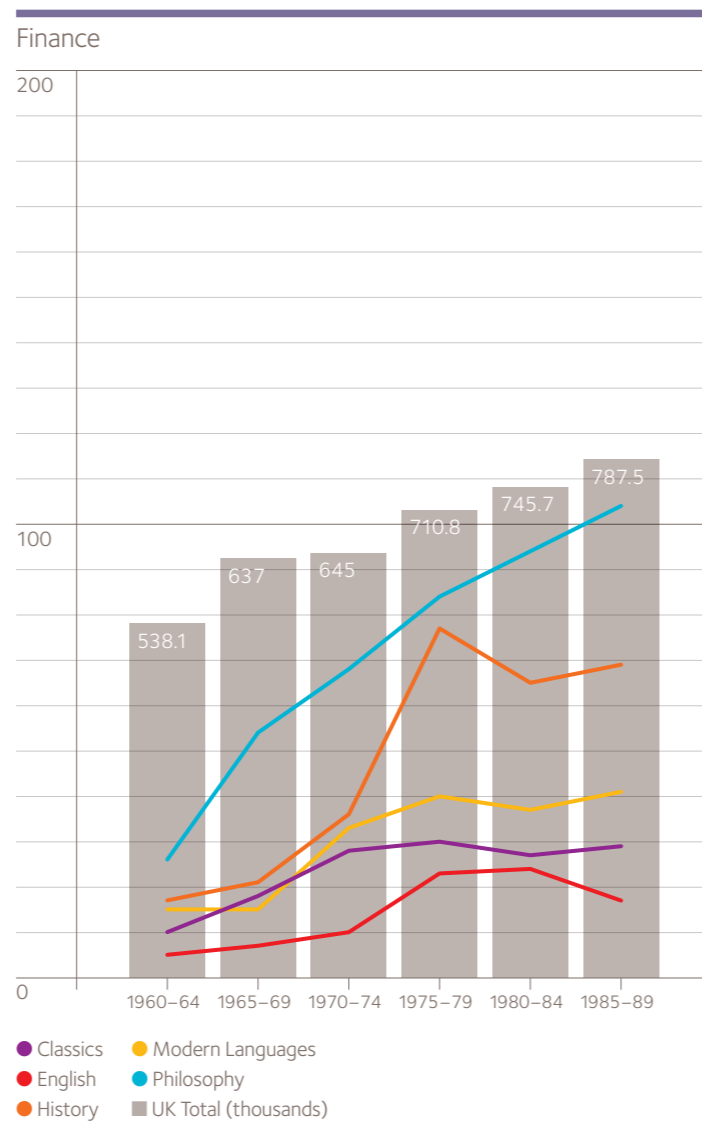
# 1.4 Linking Graduates' Degree Subject Choices to Their Later Employment

Figures 19 to 21 combine data on trends in degree subject employment over the period, as given in Figures 10 and 11, with the changing employment trends in the three main sectors shown in Figure 16. Levels of employment in each main sector, as given in Figure 16, are indicated by the vertical bars, and the degree subjects are shown by trend lines. Some data from other Figures given earlier in the Report are also relevant here. From Figure 5 we know that the Finance and Management sectors absorbed almost one third of Humanities graduates over the whole 1960–89 period. From Figure 9 we know that Management absorbed between 15 and 45 per cent of graduates, depending on the cohort and degree subject. From Figure 9 we also know that financial sector employment rose in all five main degree subject areas over the period, most notably amongst History and Philosophy graduates, from 6 to over 20 per cent of graduates in these subjects.<sup>21</sup> As Figure 19 shows, the trend of History graduates going into Finance rises more steeply than the national trend from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s; its rate of growth is more than three times the national increase. In Philosophy the trend is likewise steeper for twenty years, from 1960 to 1979, and then keeps pace with national increases.

Figure 20 shows that History and Philosophy rose in advance of, and to much higher levels than, national employment trends in Management before declining to levels that are still high, in national terms, in 1980. As Figures 9c and e show, graduates in these subjects in the 1980s were increasingly finding employment in the Finance sector, Law, and the Media, and this appears also to be true of graduates in Modern Languages and Classics.

Civil Service employment, as also discussed earlier with reference to Figures 5 and 9a, is more constant over the period, involving smaller numbers and small fluctuations from cohort to cohort. Figure 21 shows that recruitment here varies between the subject areas, intake reflecting the broad aggregate difference in the size of degree subjects, with no consistent pattern amongst them. Only History remains broadly in line with the trend of national employment in this sector. Philosophy and Classics move in opposite directions, up or down, in almost every successive cohort. In sum, within the Humanities, Civil Service recruitment appears suitably catholic.

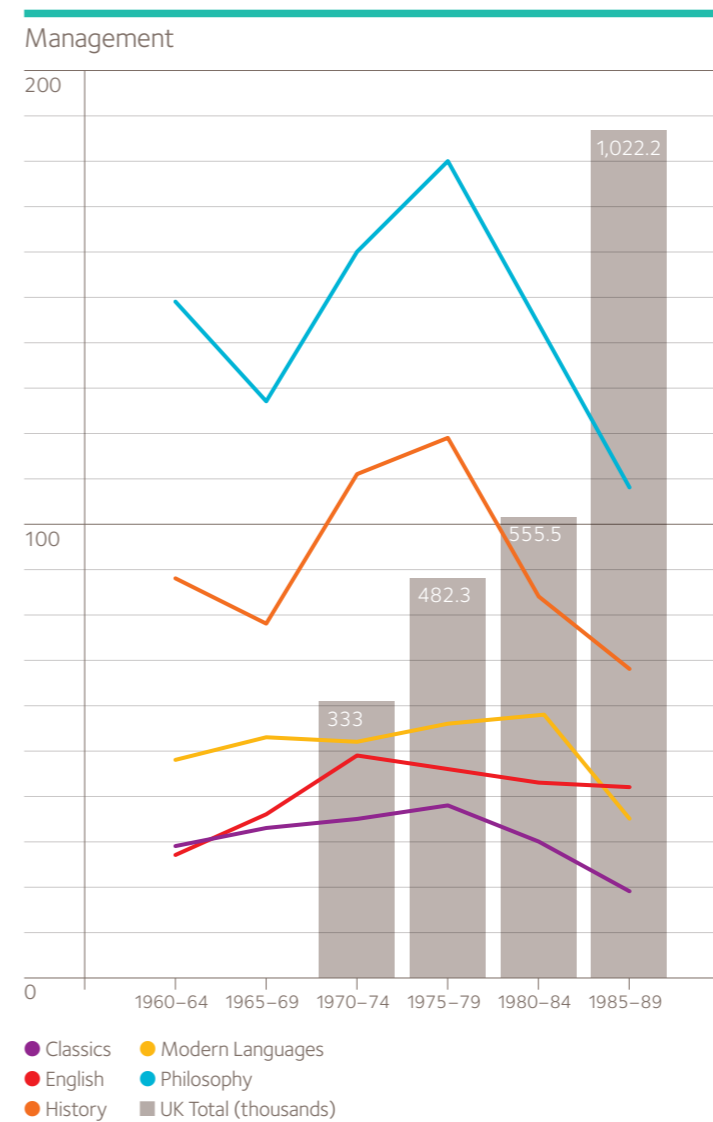
**Figure 19: Trends in Employment in the Finance Sector 1960–89: National Trends Versus Oxford Humanities Graduates: Raw Numbers<sup>20</sup>**



# 3x

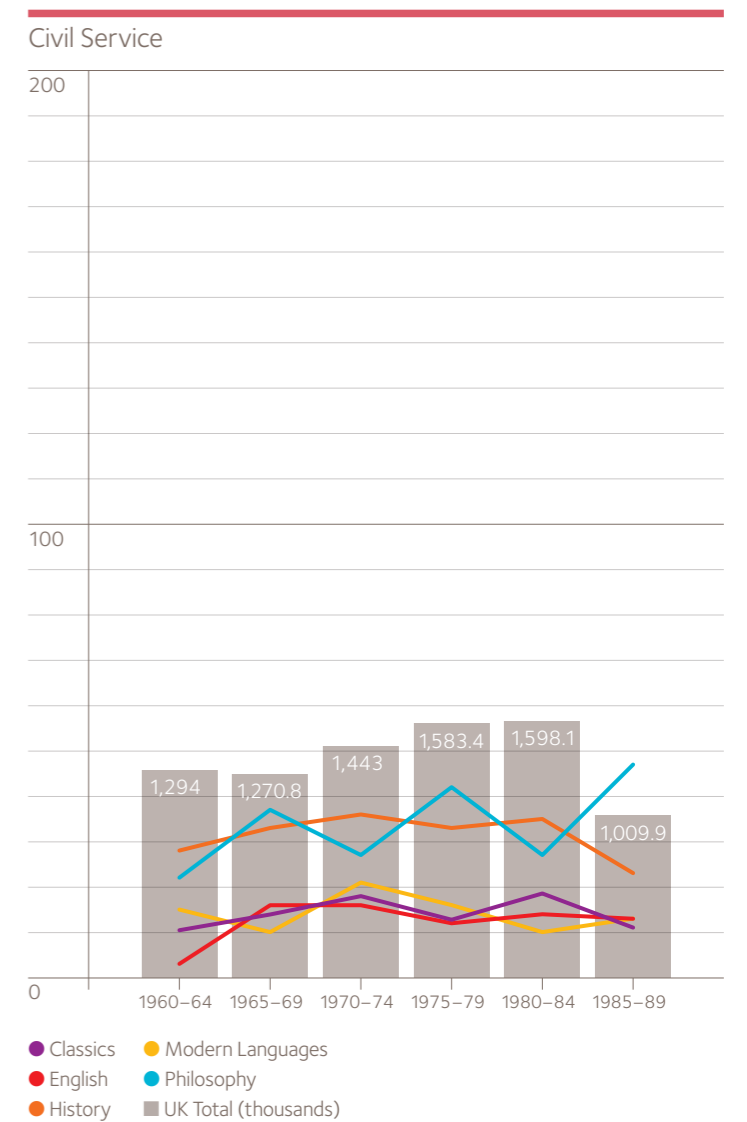
The rate of growth of History graduates going into Finance from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s is more than three times the national increase.

**Figure 20: Trends in Employment in the Management Sector 1960–89: National Trends Versus Oxford Humanities Graduates: Raw Numbers<sup>22</sup>**



History and Philosophy rose in advance of, and to much higher levels than, national employment trends in Management between 1960–79

**Figure 21: Trends in Employment in the Civil Service Sector 1960–89: National Trends Versus Oxford Humanities Graduates: Raw Numbers<sup>23</sup>**



<sup>20</sup>Source: Figures 10b, 16.  
<sup>21</sup>It should be kept in mind that, at Oxford, Economics is commonly taught as part of the combined Philosophy, Politics and Economics Honour School, so it is likely that some minority of those classified as 'philosophy' found greatest interest in the Economics part of the course. The large numbers of Historians subsequently pursuing financial careers, however, and notable rises in this choice amongst the other three subjects over the period, make clear that it is not exposure to Economics as a discipline that is the primary factor.  
<sup>22</sup>Source: Figures 10d, 16  
<sup>23</sup>Source: Figures 11b, 16



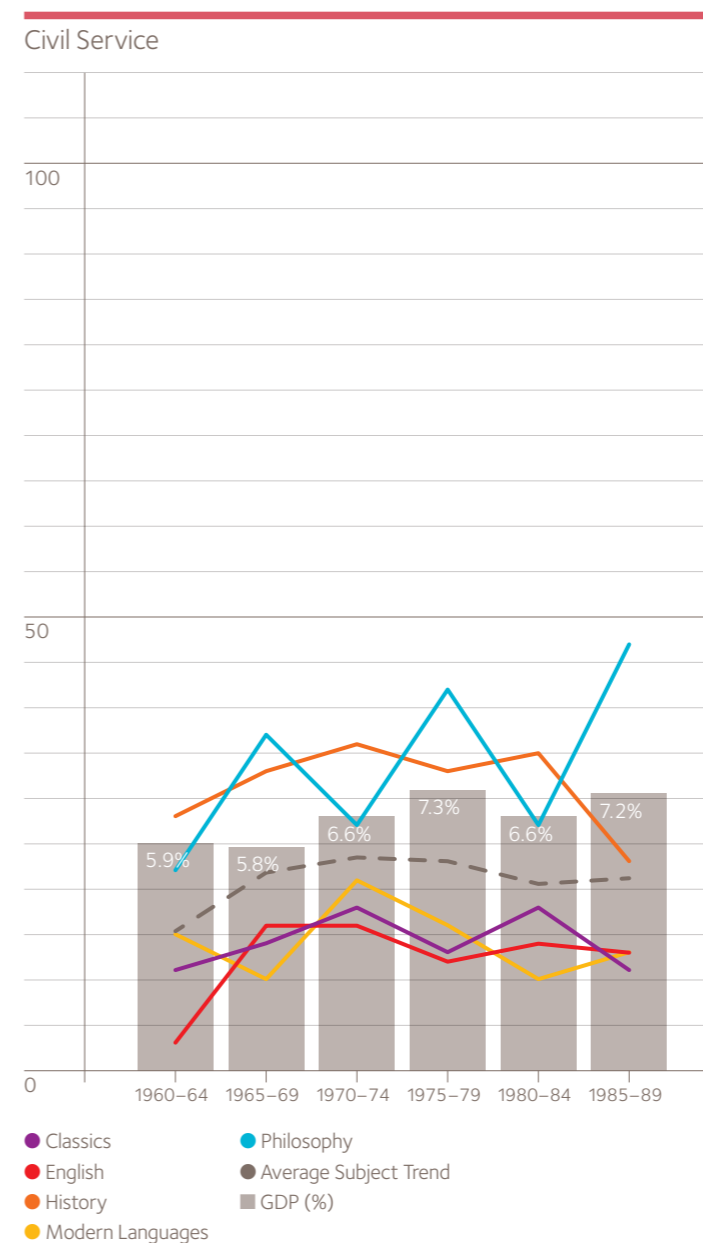
# 1.5 Linking Graduates' Degree Subject Choices to GDP Growth by Occupational Sector

The last two Figures place these employment trends against the background of contributions by Civil Service and Finance sectors to GDP growth. Figure 22 shows that there is no consistent relation between Civil Service employment of Humanities graduates in particular subjects and the changing level of the sector's contribution to national growth – suggesting that this relationship is not a clear consideration in either graduates' choices or employment practice. The overall rise in Humanities employment (indicated by the average subject trend) parallels the fluctuating rise in GDP contributed by the sector, at a level commensurate with about half of the aggregate contribution to GDP. The average, however, disguises the fact that there are two different groups of subjects: Philosophy and History have higher employment levels much closer to the overall trend in GDP contribution; Modern Languages, English, and Classics all rise up to the mid-1970s, then moving in contrary directions towards a modest decline in Civil Service employment. As we shall see in the case studies presented in Part II of this report, Civil Service employees often move into finance and other areas of commerce and civil society employment at some point in their careers: the contributions of Humanities graduates to British economic growth is thus not confined only to their periods in public administration. Their occupational mobility is a reminder that life course data are crucial to interpreting the significance of economic trends.

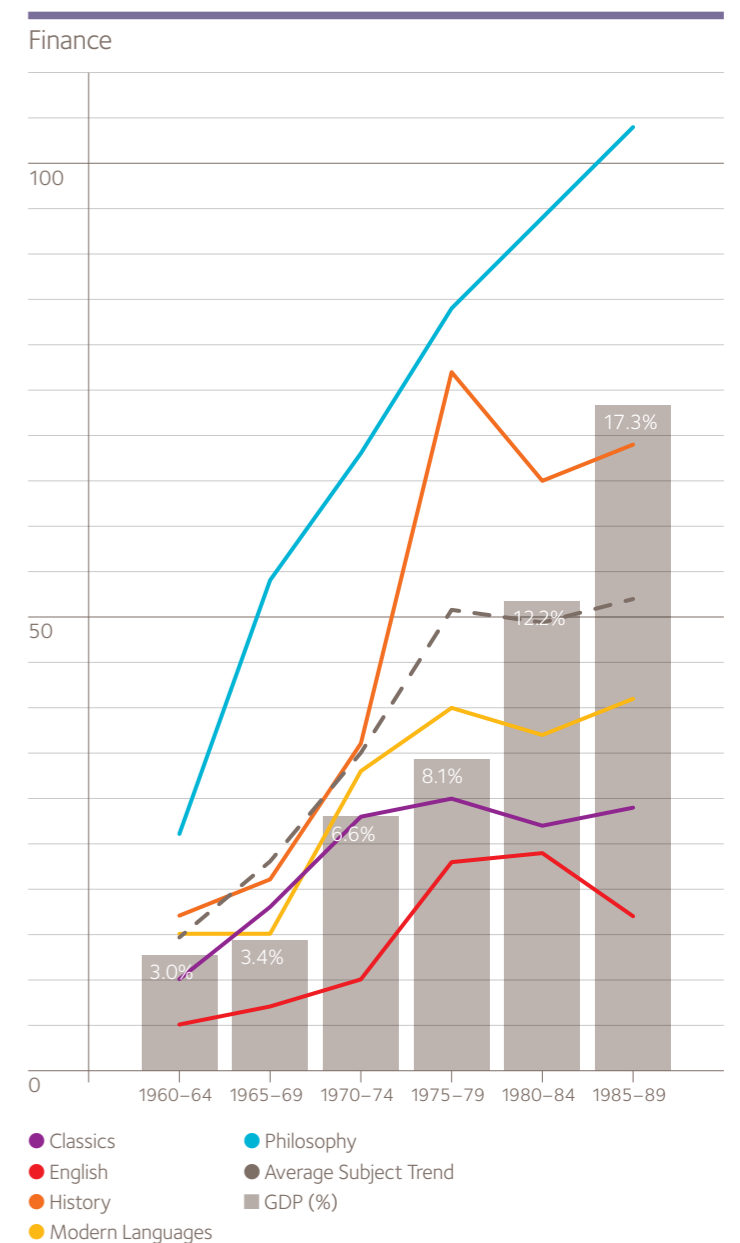
As Figure 23 shows, the five largest Humanities subjects have all participated to a greater or lesser degree in the marked increase in Financial sector contributions to the economy over the period. Employment trends in the two biggest subjects (Philosophy, History) reach 100 and 65 per cent of the rise in GDP in the sector by the end of the period. Modern Languages, Classics, and English also show rises up to 1980, then leveling off or showing modest increases or declines. By the 1985–89 cohort, some 17 per cent of all Philosophy graduates were entering the Financial sector, which is a reasonable approximation of that sector's percentage contribution to the economy at that time. Again, there is an overall rise in Humanities employment (average subject trend), commensurate to about half of the percentage increase in GDP over the period.

The five largest subjects have all participated in the marked increase in Financial sector contributions to the economy over the period.

**Figure 22:** Trends in Oxford Humanities Graduates Entering the Civil Service Sector (Raw Numbers) Compared with National GDP from Public Administration Sector (Percentages): 1960–89<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 23:** Trends in Oxford Humanities Graduates Entering the Finance Sector (Raw Numbers) Compared with National GDP from Finance Sector (Percentages): 1960–89<sup>25</sup>



<sup>24</sup> Source: Figures 11b and 18.

<sup>25</sup> Source: Figures 10b, 18. The aggregate economic contribution of employment sectors to the economy may also be assessed by comparing salary data. DARS registrations do not make this option possible, but this is not necessarily an important limitation. Salary levels provide convenient but very crude average indices of economic contribution, taking no serious account of the heterogeneity of institutional, demographic, and other factors influencing graduates' degree choices or contributions to society and the economy. (O'Leary, N. C. and Sloane, P. J. (2005) *National Institute Economic Review*, 193, 1:75–89; 'The Return to a University Education in Great Britain'; Walker, I. and Vu Zhu (2010) 'Differences by Degree: Evidence of the Net Financial Rates of Return to Undergraduate Study for England and Wales', IZA Discussion Paper no. 5254. Recent financial crises in the national and international economy have, of course, made salary levels a controversial basis for assessing real economic contribution.

## 1.6 Discussion

The main outcomes of this quantitative survey may now be summarised. The statistical profile of Oxford Humanities, based on approximately one in three students for the period 1960–89, gives impressive evidence of their active engagement in the British economy across a wide range of occupations. In the two largest Humanities subjects, the trend of graduates moving into those employment sectors that became a major driving force in the economy either increased at a faster rate than national occupational trends over most of the period, or, in the management sector, was from early in the period already at higher levels than national trends. This is also true for numerical rises in Philosophy and History students working in the financial sector in relation to the rising proportion of GDP contributed to the economy by that sector. As these rises are clearly evident from the late 1960s, Humanities graduates in these subjects actually anticipated the shift in government policies that began to emphasise potential financial sector economic outputs in the 1980s.

Graduates of the main Humanities degree subjects increasingly entered finance, legal, and media professions, without decreasing the steady overall numbers entering the Civil Service. Numbers of course fluctuate somewhat from year to year, but by the end of the period 60 per cent of Humanities graduates of these degree subjects were working in these sectors. The many smaller fluctuations from cohort to cohort would require in-depth interview data to explain adequately. Later in the period, for example, rising entry into financial, legal and media occupations appears to have occurred in preference to management destinations. The educational sector, whilst remaining the largest in absolute terms for the whole period, nonetheless experienced the greatest percentage declines as an occupational destination in all five major degree subjects, and this trend increased as the period continued. By the 1985–89 cohort there is a remarkable balance in Humanities graduates' occupations across the several commercial or largely commercial sectors: management (17.8%), media (15.6%), law (19.6%), and finance (17%). Levels in public service are either above the average (Civil Service, 7%) or slightly below (education, 23%) for the whole period as given in **Figure 14**. The Humanities, in other words, have maintained their long term role as a public good, and on top of this have substantially expanded their involvement in main economic growth sectors.

These data enable us to address several of the main tenets of current higher education policy, and to do so in terms of the priorities expressed in the government's 2011 White Paper<sup>26</sup> and its subsequent implementation. More particularly, the data provide evidence to evaluate a central tenet for which policy was formulated without an evidence base. The purposes of current policy, as stated in the White Paper, are to enable people to benefit from higher education throughout their life courses. The Paper proposes that the best way to do this is to assist those educational and occupational sectors that can make the strongest contributions to the economy, and to enable students to make more informed degree choices which, it is expected, will reflect the greater opportunities for financially rewarding employment that exist in such occupational sectors. In this context, removal of direct funding from the Humanities implies, at least, that this traditional core of British higher education is of secondary importance to the economy, and that, *ipso facto*, a policy aimed to help students to find more remunerative employment should have the effect of steering them away from the Humanities. The evidence shows, however, that contrary to these assumptions, the period 1960–89 saw increasing numbers of students who chose Humanities courses able to find employment in financial and other rising service sectors.

In raising the need for evidence-based educational policy, we noted the absence of life-course data that would support the assumptions that underlie current higher education policy, and also the need to assess the true state of British higher education and its relation to the economy. To provide the most basic information necessary for this assessment we needed data on Humanities graduates (their degree subjects and career data indicative of their main occupations later in life) together with national employment and income trends relevant to their employment. We have therefore tracked three series (occupational trends of Humanities graduates who are now twenty or more years beyond matriculation; trends in the degree subjects in which they graduated; and trends in key sectors of the national economy), and then related these series to each other. These data, presented in **Figures 1 to 23**, can now be used to give succinct answers to the four specific questions raised in the Introduction (see p.5). We will then consider the two final questions posed at the end of the Introduction (i.e. criteria appropriate to assessing educational impacts, and higher education's contribution to individual life courses) more fully in Part II of this report.

<sup>26</sup> White Paper (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, p.4.

The four questions and answers are as follows:

**Q** What is the relationship between the degree subjects that young people choose and the occupational sectors in which they ultimately work?

**A** A striking outcome of this research is that, while some Humanities subjects have more graduates entering high profile economic occupations than others, four of the five main subject degrees show significant increases in the principal fields of finance, law and media over most or all of the period. By the end of the period between 16 and 20 per cent of graduates of these subjects worked in these sectors. A further 23 per cent were employed in education, 18 per cent in management, and 7 per cent in public administration. The Humanities thus opens the door to an extensive range of opportunities in the economy without prejudice.

**Q** Is there a necessary relation between the different degree subjects and graduates' economic contributions to society?

**A** A second striking result is that Humanities graduate employment expanded rapidly into key growing economic sectors in advance of government policy that encouraged these sectors. Rising rates of employment by sector in some degree subjects not only track but exceed increases in GDP contributed by those sectors. Four out of five main degree subjects show rising employment in growth sectors over the whole period. There is no uniform percentage increase across rising economic sector contributions to GDP and rising graduate employment by degree subject in those sectors. All of the five main subject areas appear to make major contributions to the economy.

**Q** Are graduates who choose courses that do not prioritise special technical skills of current and immediate use in the marketplace actually at a disadvantage in the development of their careers?

**A** Employment trends indicate clearly that Humanities higher education is not a disadvantage for graduates in a highly competitive economy. Employers, for example in financial and legal sectors, drew steadily on all five main Humanities degree subjects over the whole period. The responsiveness of Humanities graduates to emerging economic trends suggests that the literate, critical, and communication skills that have long been the core of Humanities-based higher education continue to stand graduates very well.

**Q** Are employment trends a sufficient indicator of graduates' economic contributions?

**A** The trends shown in preceding pages provide a useful starting point for discussion of the economic contributions of Humanities-based higher education. There are many key factors, however, that these trends cannot address. How graduates actually face the challenges of a changing economy, the reasons why they have the capacity to respond to needs for new skills and innovation, their reasons for career moves within and between occupational sectors, the nature of their social mobility – all of these key issues can only be guessed from employment trends. The trends certainly suggest that a Humanities degree can be a significant *advantage* in the current economy. Types and trends of graduate employment by themselves, however, are crude indicators, since they cannot tell us how and why Humanities-based higher education has been able to prepare students so well.

## Part II

# In-Depth Interview Data: Tracking Individual Life Courses and Collective Impacts on the British Economy and Society

In the second part of this report we turn to what is arguably the key issue: the need for a more rounded understanding of Humanities higher education and its contribution to society and the economy. The quantitative employment record analysed in Part I established the active and increasing involvement of Humanities graduates in key growth sectors of the British economy. We need now to ask *how* and *why* their knowledge and skills enabled them to contribute to its success. The statistical profile suggests that general, critical, and literate skills fostered by the Humanities have proven to be a continuing advantage for graduates. But what, in fact, are these skills? And how are they developed?

We turn, in short, to the two remaining questions raised in the Introduction. The stated objective of current government policy emphasises the value of education across the life course: “the opportunities and enjoyment [higher education] offers should be available to people throughout their lives.”<sup>27</sup> Evidence necessary to assess the impacts of higher education thus needs to move beyond data on first ‘destination’ or job after graduation, to encompass the whole life course. We need not only *trends* in employment, but a record of graduates’ *experience*. In many ways this shift simply acknowledges the obvious. Graduates’ contributions to society and the British economy may not be a function simply of their current job. Graduates commonly accumulate skills over the life course, which give them multiple career options. Their involvement in other important spheres – civil society, performing arts, charities, fundraising, religious organisations, providing technical expertise to community organisations, welfare – is also opened up by adopting a life course approach to graduates’ economic and social contributions. Evidence collected in this fuller perspective is, in consequence, likely to be much more useful for deciding what criteria should be employed to assess educational impacts.

<sup>27</sup> White Paper (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, p.4.

## 2.1 Thinking in Life Course Perspective

Any attempt to address the life course needs to make serious allowance for the much greater complexity which comes with a longitudinal picture of people's work experience. As noted in Part I, individual careers are in the majority of cases not linear paths; graduates move between occupations over time and space, and as a population their behaviour is more like a diaspora that spreads into many niches in the economy than a kind of sprint along a single career track from *a* to *b*. How can we specify the role of higher education in this process, given that its influence as a practical and intellectual resource may enter at many subsequent points during a person's lifetime? As people often pick up further skills after graduation, to what extent is it even possible to say specifically what difference higher education in the Humanities makes? Surely its influence is mixed up with all sorts of other factors, and cannot really be separated out? Other factors might include, for example: differing advantages and disadvantages inhering in the organisations or employment sectors graduates enter; individual differences in personal drive and communications skills; network connections, whether from family, school, or university; the possible advantages or disadvantages of the Oxford 'brand' (i.e. regardless of degree subject taken); and that incalculable factor, sheer luck.

There is an obvious and direct way to bring these and other factors into consideration: *ask the graduates themselves*. They are, after all, entitled to a say in attempts to assess the value of educational attainment and its wider importance. It is *their* attainments, and those arising collectively from the cohorts to which they belong, that we are discussing. Of course, any graduate's reported experience, like all self-reported evidence, is subject inevitably to that person's 'editing'. A body of interviews, however, will throw up recurring themes and patterns of which individual interviewees are not aware: analysis of the content of a body of interviews, together with what we have already learned about aggregate career patterns from the statistical profile, provide critical tools with which to identify and assess individual biases. Combining qualitative and quantitative evidence enables the research to carry out its primary but limited purposes as stated earlier in the report: to ensure that key empirical relationships are identified; to question, where needed, received opinions; and to prepare the way for more extensive research.

A sample of 50 graduates was drawn up using a systematic sample from DARS registration, with care taken to ensure that individuals were drawn as proportionately as possible to reflect relative numbers of graduates in each degree subject and occupational sector.<sup>28</sup> Potential interviewees were contacted by email. Of those contacted, only three refused to participate.<sup>29</sup> In three cases telephone interviews were arranged to accommodate busy schedules, and in one case an overseas graduate was included by having her respond on paper to the questions listed in the interview guidelines (see Appendix for the 'questionnaire' which interviewers used to steer informal discussion, and notes that accompanied the training session for interviewers). The interview team was composed of seven recent graduates of the Human Sciences programme at Oxford, some of whom are currently in their first employment, and some completing further degrees.<sup>30</sup> Human Sciences was considered a good academic locus for the project for several reasons. One is that a fundamental interest in interdisciplinarity, and in the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, are both normative in the Human Sciences. Interviewers were therefore familiar with the kind of approach taken in the research project. Second, the Human Sciences course stands outside the Humanities in the University structure, and is thus not an interested party with regard to the findings.<sup>31</sup>

The following discussion of the fifty interviews is arranged in eight sections. The first three serve as an introduction, reviewing events and topics that came up in all the interviews: the nature of 'that first job', and whether it was a significant factor later on; how career 'paths' vary and what kinds of skills are necessary to them; and the possible influence of networks and the Oxford 'brand'. These three sections thus address the issue of how to understand the influence of general skills acquired in Humanities higher education in relation to knowledge skills and other influences picked up later in the life course. Subsequent sections then take up major themes discussed in many of the interviews, in which individuals' experience of Humanities tutorial and other teaching at Oxford was discussed in relation to specific events and career transitions in their life courses. As we shall see, the benefits of the tutorial system are many and diverse, and were emphasised by all but a few interviewees. Brief anonymised biographies based on eight interviews are included as case studies. These studies are presented with minimal commentary, sufficient only to bring out common issues and differences. The main point is to provide characteristic, in-depth examples which show the complexity and interrelatedness of Humanities impacts. Five principal themes or impact areas emerge from the 50 interviews: the nature of 'mobile' knowledge (i.e. skills flexible enough to meet new challenges, including major shifts between career sectors); creativity and entrepreneurship; communication and negotiation; the significance of competition in Humanities-based higher education; and citizenship.

<sup>28</sup> The 50 interviews were the outcome of the following procedure. A statistically random sample of 50 graduates was drawn for each of the nine degree subjects. Individuals were selected for interview from this sample of 450 by following a conventional selection procedure. Each of the nine degree subjects was expected to have a proportion of the final 50 interviews corresponding at least approximately to its proportion of total graduates, as given in Figure 1. One person was chosen from the random list for each degree subject in turn, until the correct proportion for each subject was reached. Ideally, the proportion of interviews for each degree subject should also be distributed randomly according to the proportion of graduates in each of the 10 employment sectors. Proportional account should also be taken of men and women. The results of the first selection were accordingly adjusted by a second random serial procedure to reflect degree subject employment in the 10 occupational sectors, and gender. However, as Figure 9 shows, proportions from each subject working in the 10 sectors continually changed over the period. Figure 3 notes the same for gender. In view of the small number of interviews possible in the research, the allocation of interviews to occupational sectors simply ensured that no sector was neglected disproportionately, and that women were not under-represented. With only 50 interviews, the four smaller degree subjects received only two or three interviews each, and the first randomly chosen interviewees were adopted in these cases without respect to occupational sector. As we shall see, many graduates made major career changes between sectors at later stages of their lives, and some maintained dual careers over long periods. The graduate diaspora is thus a kind of moving target. While sampling procedures remove biases, precise criteria for a representative sample remain difficult to define, and other procedures deserve to be explored.

<sup>29</sup> While this is a remarkably good response rate (94 per cent), two further factors need to be kept in mind. Every effort was made to confirm the accuracy of email addresses in the registration system, but some invitations received no response. In most cases this appears to have been due to a defunct address, and sometimes a current address was then identified, and contact established. In a few cases, however, it was not possible to tell whether non-response was due a faulty address or whether the person in question chose not to participate. Including all of these cases reduces the response rate to 84 per cent.

<sup>30</sup> The interview team carried out approximately half of the interviews, the remainder being completed by Dr Kreager. Interviewers were instructed to take an informal approach intended to give the interview as much as possible the character of a conversation rather than a formal interview. People were encouraged to digress into areas of their experience that they considered important and wanted to discuss, and to reflect on different stages of their life course and their main achievements and problems in them. Interviews generally took one to one and a half-hours, and some were longer where interviewees had a lot to say.

<sup>31</sup> Since it is important to declare interests, it may be noted that Dr Kreager was not himself an undergraduate at Oxford or Cambridge, and to that extent neither the design of the interviews nor their writing up were shaped by his own experience of the undergraduate tutorial system. Nor was he a Humanities graduate.



## 2.2

# The Reality of ‘That First Job’

In-depth interviews reveal the dangers of relying on data about first jobs as a guide to the ‘destinations’ of graduates. A significant number did move directly into the occupational sector in which they remained 20 or more years later, but this represented only about one-third (32 per cent) of those interviewed. Finding the ‘right’ sector early is not any more characteristic of one employment field than another, as graduates in this group were distributed across education, civil service, finance, media, and law. After another two to five years (and in a few cases, up to ten years), a further 32 per cent were in fields in which they found their main lifetime employment, now including also welfare and medicine. These data are broadly consistent with other recent findings.<sup>32</sup>

The experiences of those graduates who took several years to find a long-term occupational setting make them a very mixed group. For some the first job, as one senior publishing executive put it, “might have been in just about anything”: its main role was to provide some sort of income while he was deciding what he wanted to do. Many graduates in this position stayed in academic-related work (editing, teaching, assisting research), often part-time, reflecting their familiarity with the academic world. Only in three cases were they drawn permanently back into university research and teaching. Others viewed the period after graduation as a time to explore “something new”. The results were sometimes felt to be “horrendous”. Of two graduates who went to work with the Greater London Council, for instance, one took this view, remarking that, “having in a short time become an expert on traffic noise, I decided it was time to move on”. Several took first jobs in the civil service and management sectors, in the process acquiring on-the-job training that was useful – but which either did not interest them, or helped them quickly to find jobs in other sectors. We will run across this sub-group again in later sections.

The period 1960–1989 was one in which there appears to have been relatively less pressure on graduates than there is today to have an explicit career path in mind. Only 18 per cent (i.e. nine) of the 50 knew exactly what profession they wanted to enter or what kinds of jobs they wanted in that sector. This seeming lack of urgency is not only reflected in the nearly one-third of graduates who, as we have just noted, took up to a decade to ‘settle down’. For many a single-sector employment path was not a realistic or desirable constraint. Thus, a further significant group (28 per cent) is composed of those who made major career shifts to other employment sectors at later stages in their careers. This too is a diverse group. Some reached high levels in the civil service or financial and management sectors, and then moved variously into academia, the media, or charity and civil society bodies. Movement between government and financial management is, not surprisingly, a further pattern.

The reasons people give for major career shifts, which will be discussed in several case studies later in this report, were no less various. Three patterns stand out: some had accomplished what they wished to do in one professional area, and their competences enabled them to take on significant challenges in other sectors; for some the abilities developed in their own time in creative arts (variously in writing, music, and theatre) had become sufficiently accomplished for them to make these areas their main occupation; and a third sub-group returned to earlier interests in teaching and the arts from careers in finance and management. A further small group of interviewees (8 per cent) effectively maintained two careers simultaneously over most of their lives, a pattern associated with fluency in several languages or creative arts which facilitated work simultaneously in translation, writing, music, education, and commerce. In sum, information on jobs in the first few years after graduation gives guidance only for about one-third of graduates, and is likely to mislead our understanding in several ways about the majority.

<sup>32</sup> The *Oxford Alumni Careers Study* (2011), an email questionnaire carried out by the University Careers Service and sent to 71,000 graduates, was answered by 15,000; in only one of the above occupational sectors did the mean number of employments in other sectors reach 2, but in all but legal services the mean number of sectors was 1.5 or above. I am grateful to Jonathan Black for these details.

## 2.3 Necessary Skills on the Career ‘Path’

Interviewees were asked whether getting their first main job depended on having specific technical skills and knowledge, and if so, what these were? Here we are concerned both with those who moved directly from graduation into the career they have subsequently pursued over most of their lives, and those who found their profession more gradually. While the idea of a single career ‘path’ aptly describes the former, the diversity of career experiences and career changes makes this image inadequate for many graduates. This is evident in their comments, quoted in this and the following sections, and especially in the case studies in sections 2.5 to 2.9. Some graduates (32 per cent of the sample) made major career changes at later stages of their lives, while others (8 per cent) maintained more than one career simultaneously over much of their professional lives. The need to take account of this continuing economic and social mobility, and graduates’ ability to draw on mobile knowledge skills applicable to new fields at successive stages or ‘moves’ in their lives, suggests more a career ‘diaspora’ than a career ‘path’.

There were some cases in which Humanities teaching fed, in obvious ways, directly into the graduate successfully finding the employment they wanted. One such link occurred where professional qualifications required very strong exam performance, for example, in medicine, accounting, or the civil service. Of course, the advantage here was not specific knowledge of these fields, as they are not taught in Humanities at undergraduate level. At issue, rather, were general knowledge skills required by modern exam culture – mental agility in reading accurately, weighing up choices, writing concise answers, and bringing these abilities to bear quickly in exam conditions.<sup>33</sup>

A second area is languages. Fluent Chinese, for example, was a ticket to media professions in broadcasting and international news services. Ancient languages were an entry to positions in major museum collections and academic publishing in fields that rely on these skills. Financial institutions and the Foreign Office also frequently chose graduates with strong language performance, but in both cases the emphasis was on more general proven capabilities, not knowledge of specific languages. Thus, in the financial world, a graduate in modern or oriental languages (and Classics, where it is common that there is also knowledge of modern languages) might soon have postings to regions where the languages they knew were of direct use. These languages were also of considerable help in London, given the international character of the banking

sector. Yet in almost every case, subsequent postings were to other regions, and here it becomes clear that the importance of linguistic ability was significant in more general terms: the facility for picking up further languages as careers progressed, and the flexibility and adaptability of adjusting to different cultural settings that went with this.

What employers were looking for in young new employees was a readiness and aptitude to engage in effective communication in the wider world which promised to grow and continue to be an advantage to a company or public institution over a much longer period. Humanities subjects, in fostering language skills in conjunction with knowledge of the cultures and histories that accompany languages, were ideal for this. The Foreign Office, as one senior diplomat observed, almost always sent graduates, at least in early postings, to countries which were not those for which they had their language training in higher education: it was understood that a new posting meant learning new languages and cultures. Again, proven linguistic and communication capacities of potential general value were the priority over the graduates’ short-term technical accomplishments in specific fields.

Of course, there were also cases in which Humanities skills like the above were not seen by employers as of interest. One graduate who went to work in defence and security establishments, for example, observed that his employers appeared to think a Humanities degree from Oxford ‘merely looked good’ – a sign of a graduate’s willingness to work hard and undertake difficult tasks, but nothing more. In a first job interview at a ‘big four’ accounting firm, a history graduate was asked politely about his academic course before the interviewer changed the subject, saying “let’s now discuss something important”. Theology graduates entering the ministry found that their academic knowledge looked elitist and was off-putting for some audiences, including some other clergy; ironically, they found themselves using their critical and communication skills to disguise their learning where it was relevant to particular pastoral and welfare issues yet likely to create a misimpression if used too directly. And, of course, Humanities simply does not provide certain skills – mathematical modelling as used in banking, or reproductive physiology in medicine – which some graduates had to undertake post-graduation.

When discussion turned to graduates’ own experience of finding and entering a chosen field, and the skills they found most useful in adapting to, and working in, new and different employment sectors, they remarked again and again on the role of the tutorial system in fostering the flexible skills on which they relied. The economic and social mobility facilitated by capacities to write, think and communicate fluently were a recurring subject. As a female graduate with civil service experience at cabinet level, and later as a corporate advisor, remarked, “employers are interested in how you think, not what you know”. This “how you think” comes down to an aptitude for creative and pragmatic responses to new problems. In the great majority of interviews, tutorials emerged as a model both for this aptitude and for how to relate to other people in professional contexts. It is not difficult to see why. The discipline of weekly essay writing and tutorial discussion – having one’s essay taken apart critically, and having to defend and rearticulate arguments in mid-tutorial – encompasses learning skills of several kinds. As a senior investment banker put it, writing a steady stream of essays over the academic term stimulates the ability “to quickly produce a logical argument”, and how to construct it in a way that is “concise, effective, and clear”. Writing an essay and defending it teaches “how to develop an argument with an eye to its subsequent uses”. It teaches “how to make choices that are more or less effective”. When necessary, a tutor’s critique revealed “exactly where you were going wrong”. The “intimacy of reaction and feedback in tutorial” thus provides students with a model of “how to break things down”, and interpretative and stylistic techniques that “smarten up your ideas”. While graduates in some cases remarked the humiliation consequent on inadequate tutorial work, others noted the sense of responsibility that went with it: “it was important not to let your tutor down”. As one senior National Health Service manager put it, “If you carry quite a lot of responsibility for yourself academically, that then feeds through professionally.”

Most graduates interviewed agreed that a major product of the tutorial system was greater self-confidence. A film producer noted that his work “forces you to think on your feet, to reason and justify positions in the presence of others, and to arrive with them quickly at the most workable solutions – much like a tutorial”. A philosophy graduate, newly hired by a small marketing firm, found herself after two weeks devising market strategies and raising the finance from banks to pay for them. Like another philosopher, who became an international banker, she emphasised that the most fruitful skills that tutorials taught are the ability to multi-task and yet be highly focused. Another recurring theme is the expectation that graduates, soon after employment, are expected to assimilate and work with large bodies of information. Joining one government ministry, a modern languages graduate found that “skimming huge files was not a challenge”. A classics graduate in publishing concluded that tutorials effectively “enabled you to cope with anything [an employer] might throw at you”.

Several interviewees, reflecting experience in diverse fields (diplomacy, banking, marketing, broadcasting, journalism), remarked another extremely useful product of tutorial teaching: it teaches the art of listening. Tutorial discussion is commonly about identifying specific and potentially strategic assumptions and pieces of information. Accurate listening is both about “recognising a priority amongst facts” and “working out what is important to people”. The student learns how to structure problem-solving and the importance of picking up other points of view. As a career diplomat noted, these skills “can be essential to winning people over”. A good tutorial, in the view of a second philosophy graduate in marketing, consists of a balance of being listened to and being pushed: “you learn not only how to sort more or less important bits of information, but how to size up your own impact in an ongoing discussion”.

In sum, graduates’ observations on the tutorial system have an important bearing on how we understand the nature and role of Humanities higher education in preparing people for the life course. Skills applicable in a job ‘right from the start’ may be good, but both employers and graduates recognise that the relation between education and employment involves much more than this. The linear image of a single career ‘path’ is too crude. People expect their careers (and their employees’ careers) to involve changes, and they understand that individual and organisational success are both bound up with personal and knowledge adaptability. Development of a strong and continuing aptitude for learning is the priority. What is at issue is the capacity for imaginative thought which translates readily into practice. General and transferable knowledge skills additionally enable people to shape career changes. They are critical to how specific technical expertise is used, since they enable people to apply and develop technical knowledge learned in university more effectively, and to pick up further technical skills over the life course.

<sup>33</sup> Graduates who embark on qualifications in new fields, or in advanced degrees in the Humanities, often need not only the literate skills they developed as undergraduates, but considerable financial support. The removal of grants covering student fees at undergraduate level – which is a cornerstone of current government higher education policy – has led the British Academy to express serious concern. Occupations that are not in general highly remunerative, notably teaching, may come to suffer lower recruitment if graduates’ debt levels make them opt for better paid sectors. Hence, to maintain academic standards the next generation of university lecturers and researchers may have to be drawn increasingly from other countries. (British Academy (2011) *Response to the White Paper*. 21 September. p.3–4. <https://www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/565>.) The greatly increased levels of individual debt that a student loan system implies for young people raise many unanswered issues that go beyond the future of Humanities teaching. The case studies and qualitative finding reported in Part II of this report show that Humanities skills have in the past facilitated remarkable career flexibility and economic and social entrepreneurship. Whether graduates will be able to pick up new skills that enable this flexibility and entrepreneurship if they face high debt levels is uncertain. United States government data on the economic impact of its student loan programme, released since the implementation of the shift from grants to loans as the basis of undergraduate funding in Britain, show that levels of student loan debt in the United States are now a major check on consumption patterns and have become a significant constraint on economic recovery. [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201305\\_cfpb\\_rfi-report\\_student-loans.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201305_cfpb_rfi-report_student-loans.pdf); ‘A Record One-in-Five Households Owe Student Loan Debt’ Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, 26 September, 2012. [www.pewsocialtrends.org](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org).

## 2.4 Networks and ‘Branding’

To what extent are the findings of this research biased by the influence of the Oxford ‘brand’? Association with a prominent institution is an obvious advantage in many walks of life. Can we attribute the success of Humanities graduates, as shown both by the statistical profile and by people’s comments in interview, simply to the benefits of Oxford’s institutional prestige?

Graduates in the Foreign Office and investment banking, for example, both remarked that in dealing with elites of another country, the international reputation of Oxford as an icon of Western cultural and scientific tradition carried great weight. They went on to observe, however, that when matters turned on a particular diplomatic or financial negotiation, this background was not decisive. ‘Branding’ to be effective, needs to be linked to performance. The image of ‘the old boy network’ in which a deal is clinched simply because ‘who you know’ is shaped by your ‘Oxford background’, or someone gets a job regardless of his or her ability, is now dated. As we shall note in Sections 2.7 and 2.8, below, the old image cannot stand up to the importance of competition and creativity as factors in the professional life course. In the 50 interviews, the only example in which a job was explicitly secured through a network in which a decision was made by other Oxford graduates on the basis of the person’s Oxford training was in a very specialised corner of the art historical world – in which Oxford remains one of the few institutions that offers the relevant skills. Graduates more often expressed irritation that others attributed success to their connections rather than hard work – a criticism that extended to the “effortless superiority affected by some Oxford peers”, which has the effect of keeping the ‘old boy’ image alive.

Otherwise in the sample of interviews, connections were consistently downplayed. In all employment sectors, graduates reported that networks in which they were favoured by other Oxford graduates did not figure in getting their first or later jobs, or in getting on in their profession.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as we have seen, employment trends over the period show significant increases in Oxford Humanities graduates’ professional employment in financial and other sectors. Can we really say that there is no issue of preferment beneath these trends? Reflecting on the issue, a former civil servant (now in the NGO sector) put the matter well: “it can be very hard to measure whether people are not consciously attracted by like people”. “Having been to Oxford”, he continued, “clearly doesn’t do you any harm”. One investment banker estimated that around 50 per cent of senior banking officials he knows have Humanities backgrounds, many of whom were from Oxford: “Oxford or Cambridge or other leading UK university experience gives you a degree of commonality. A key to this is a sense of trust and integrity that goes with those institutions, and for this it is not of great importance which university you went to.” Except where knowledge of useful languages was involved, senior financial officers all agreed that which Humanities subject you studied was not an issue – but the shared culture of teaching and learning at a leading university was. Overall, the difficulty of assigning a precise role to the Oxford ‘brand’ in accounting for employment trends would appear to be related to this. The emphasis on the productiveness of the tutorial system, which emerged clearly in the great majority of graduate interviews, suggests that the real issue is not ‘market recognition’ of an ‘Oxford’ or other ‘brand’. The real issue is the way teaching was structured and actually carried out.

These observations conform to the picture given in **Figures 10** and **11**, which show the active but often fluctuating participation of Humanities subjects in the job market. **Figures 22** and **23**, which put the same data in the context of relative contributions to GDP, reveal that within the undoubted rise of Humanities employment in major economic sectors, there is nonetheless a remarkable fluctuation between subjects from year to year. It is less a particular subject or employment orientation that is at issue than the general knowledge and communication skills that the several Humanities subjects impart. We turn in the following sections to individual case studies which show more specifically what these skills entail.

In sum, explicit network ties linking Humanities graduates to particular professions do not in general appear to play an important role in employment patterns. The so-called ‘branding’ that associates Humanities graduates with leading universities is merely consistent with the general knowledge skills that make graduates in these subjects desirable to employers. What is important, in other words, appears to be the mental agility and communication skills fostered by Humanities-based higher education that enable graduates’ mobility between employment areas and the different tasks they entail. Of course, we cannot completely rule out the influence of the Oxford ‘brand’ without exploring and comparing evidence on the graduate diaspora of other universities. The research thus suggests the need for comparable studies embracing several subjects and institutions.

<sup>34</sup> Networks based on schools were also not influential. Over the period 1970–1989, the percentage of admissions to Oxford from the state school sector rose from 42 to 46%, while the combined admissions of independent and direct grant grammar schools fell from 55 to 46%. (My thanks to Julia Paolitto for data on this.) The sample of 50 interviews, however, is not representative of these shifts. Only 24% of interviews were with students from the state sector and 72% from independent/direct grant. If the popular stereotype that associates ‘old boy’ networks and ‘school ties’ was true, then we would expect many more graduates to cite school networks as significant in employment.

## 2.5

# Case Studies of Mobile Knowledge Skills

A Classics graduate with a long career in academic publishing remarked that what counts as technical knowledge changes from one generation to the next. What was new and difficult gradually becomes familiar, and may also be superseded by other and simpler methods – or by ever more elaborate ones. Often the change is rapid from one cohort to the next. The rise of information technology and development of new financial instruments, notably in the last decade of this study, the 1980s, are good examples. Yet there is seemingly a puzzle here. The Greek and Latin linguistics that this graduate studied at Oxford were long established. How could they be relevant to the new techniques of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? As the graduate noted, however, language teaching in the Humanities is not just about grammar, syntax, and semantics: the lesson is also about “how to be technical”, or “what it means to know exact things and use them”.

In this section we look in detail at two graduate professional biographies (Boxes 1 and 2) that shed further light on the central theme of Humanities-based higher education: the ability to apply learning and communication skills honed at university to difficult challenges in new spheres of professional activity. All of the biographies presented in this and the following sections are highly simplified sketches of an individual’s life course. Simplification is necessary not only for reasons of space, but because more detail would infringe on an individual’s anonymity.<sup>35</sup> Each person is identified by fictitious initials.

The first two case studies speak for themselves, requiring little further commentary. Since each graduate studied a different subject, and went on to work in different occupational sectors, it may be helpful nonetheless to note some important common ground they share. Both case studies are about the fruits of language teaching and analysis. Neither graduate undertook his or her academic course with any idea that over their lifetime they would go on to become specialists in IT or financial regulation. Despite the evident difference between these two fields of expertise, both graduates emphasised that their success depended on a similar combination of mobile knowledge skills – in communication, leadership, and technical analysis – fostered by Humanities higher education, and more specifically by the disciplines of analysis and discussion learned in the tutorial system. Neither career reveals a single linear path. Rather, the aptitude for learning new skills, for adapting to different corporate cultures, for communicating accurately and effectively, and for taking on new challenges at successive stages of the life course, were all shaped by the conjunction of human and technical capacities fundamental to Humanities higher education.

<sup>35</sup> Simplification is regrettable, as the detail sometimes gives fascinating insights into graduates’ involvement in major events and developments of recent decades. Examples include: award winning books, films, and broadcasting; contributions to public policy issues, like financial regulation and counter-terrorism; and involvement in the resolution of international crises.

### Box 1: From Oriental Studies to IT and Pensions Management

PQ moved directly on graduation in the mid-1980s to information technology training with a large insurance company. She went on to work in IT with several firms before settling down for more than twenty years with a manufacturer of industrial equipment. Before coming up to Oxford she took a gap year as a TEFL instructor in Europe, taking advantage of the opportunity to consolidate her knowledge of German. Her love of languages thus preceded her time in Oxford, and shaped her choice of courses. She was aware from very early on that her interests were less in literature than in linguistics – what she calls the combinatorial “mechanics” of how languages work and are structured. At Oxford she found the personal attention to languages as taught in small groups of three or four students most stimulating, and she was able to tailor her course to her interests by specialising in ancient languages in which strictly linguistic issues were foremost. Although she had no knowledge of IT on graduation, the field appealed to her as a straightforward move building on her interests in linguistic “mechanics”. Managing the implementation of a new computer system for her industrial employer made her realise that it was not only analytical techniques that she had learned while doing oriental languages: she had learned a whole method of teaching technical knowledge including personal skills that enabled her to develop a team and made her an effective project leader; she had the ability to rethink her language-learning experience on the job to make it appropriate to the languages and division of labour that computing systems required. She emphasised that what the Humanities taught closely combined technical with personal skills. Her success led her employer subsequently to ask her to embark on a major career change within the organisation to pension management, implementing a new scheme for the company. Again she embarked on a learning curve, in which she transferred her ability to master new technical languages and develop personal skills to successfully establish and run the company’s pension system.

### Box 2: From Classical Languages to International Banking and Back Again

On completing a degree in the mid-1960s strongly focused on Latin and Greek, HP was interested in a career in some international area, possibly the Foreign Office. After his Oxford BA he studied abroad for two years, including an MA in Economic History on a scholarship to the US, learning Italian (“easy with Latin”) and improving his French and German. On return to London he passed the Civil Service Exam, and was offered two jobs, including a position in government finance, which he accepted. His languages and Masters served him well from the start, as he was assigned work which he described as “basically internal financial journalism” reporting and analysing developments in the Common Market in the run-up to the UK’s eventually successful application. Writing on international financial developments drew not only on his Master’s economic training, but also involved the analytical and communication skills that his arts degree had given him. He later worked on the Middle East and other areas. After five years, seeing limited prospects for early enhanced responsibility, he moved on to work for an international bank in the private sector, initially in Europe, later in Hong Kong, finishing his financial career back in London. Early on during his private sector job he was given responsibility for working on loan documentation with the bank’s lawyers. He notes that an indispensable requirement for successful translation into a very different language such as ancient Greek is the ability to understand very accurately an English source text, a skill easily transferable to working with legal documents. Later he employed his analytical and communication skills, acquired in the Humanities, in drafting reports for investment management customers of the bank, and in oral presentations to actual and potential clients. Eventually he became an expert in regulatory compliance, in which analysis of regulation and clear communication with customers and regulators drew on the same skill set. “As Director of Compliance, you could expect regular grilling from clients like large pension funds on how you ensured that your institution was guarding effectively against abuses like insider trading.” When the bank was bought out by a larger institution, HP decided to take early retirement, returning to Oxford, where he now teaches, to complete a D. Phil. in Ancient Languages.



## 2.6 Creativity and Entrepreneurship

The 50 interviews included a composer, a professional musician, a film producer, commissioning book editors, a commissioning television executive, members of major art and museum councils, and an essayist, literary translator and poet. It also included many persons in the financial, marketing and business world responsible for designing media strategies, innovative products, and new enterprises. How comparable all of these activities may be is not our concern here, but life courses that require creative thinking and artful communication are. **Boxes 3 and 4** describe the careers of a public relations specialist and the essayist/literary translator/poet.

### **Box 3:** From English Language to Agriculture and Conservation

LC matriculated at the very end of the period covered in this report (1989), coming from a comprehensive school in which her interests were divided between biology and Humanities subjects. Her family background was in farming, but her real love was in writing. Studying English literature gave her ample opportunity for the latter, and she remarked especially that it gave her insight into “how people communicate both directly and indirectly”. She would have liked to continue to a Masters degree, but could not afford it. She opted instead for a career in journalism, and took an introductory course – but after three years she really needed an income, and this cut short her aspirations. Her abilities in writing and communication, however, together with awareness of farming from her home life, gave her an entry into the field of public relations with a firm working in agriculture and animal health. She started by collecting information and interviewing local farmers, writing articles that went into agricultural magazines and radio programmes. What she gained from her Humanities course was, from the first, “the ability to be creative with language on demand”, both verbally and in print. As the firm expanded, she picked up IT and management skills, becoming the manager of new offices in the emerging European economies. The firm provided no training schemes in these marketing and management areas, and she was grateful for the foundational skills from her degree: “The tutorial system generally makes you more robust, accountable, and confident; it makes you a contributor.” Ten years on she was Managing Director of UK operations when the company was taken over by a larger firm. By this time she had the experience and confidence to go freelance, but after three years she was headhunted to become Communications Director for a statutory regulator in the healthcare field. Her public relations work has now expanded to a range of complex ethical and legal issues surrounding conservation, animal welfare, and regulation. Both in communicating with a range of specialists and in conveying contemporary issues to a wider public, she relies on creative Humanities skills: “understanding how to handle words to communicate in the best way.”

### **Box 4:** Modern Languages, Poetry, and Literary Diplomacy

SK came to Oxford at the beginning of our period, (1961) from a family background that gave him an interest in modern Europe and its languages. In contrast to PQ (above, **Box 1**), literature and technical linguistic aspects were tightly and intimately linked in his interests. On one hand, Oxford provided an ideal freedom to read widely in major literatures, and he was encouraged to choose his own tutors in areas that interested him: “the flexibility of having more than one language in which to think became very crucial to my mental development.” On the other, he found that “languages are living museums of themselves”: there is a great pleasure in the “poly-glottal playfulness” that is built into their phonetic and other linguistic structures, making them an endless source of amusement which informs both reading and writing, particularly of poetry. On graduation, however, his own vocation for writing was less clear than a desire to teach languages, which he began in Africa (for seven years) before returning to teach in secondary schools for 23 years in England. In teaching, the “playful” element of language became a “neat way of smuggling hard core grammar past students”, and of using the sound of languages to help open up layers of meaning in the written word. “Teaching translation opens doors, not only to texts but in people’s minds.” The minds in question were not only his students’, but his own. He began to experiment seriously with his own writing in his 30s, and as his work began to find publishers, both in magazines and books. He also created and edited a regional arts journal. In the 1980s he was approached by an independent foundation, first as a guest reader and then as writing teacher, a role which expanded steadily over the years until he played a major role in its national programmes. By the 1990s his writing was well-known, and he was able to leave teaching, taking on an important role as an international representative of English writing and culture for the British Council, directing a celebrated arts festival, and playing a key role in fundraising for medical charity. The underlying assumption of SK’s teaching, which he shares with his teachers at Oxford, is that “what the Humanities teaches is valuable in itself – mentally it informs everything you do. Like parenting, it yokes together art and experience.”

Once again, these case studies present life courses in which career paths take unexpected turns requiring an active imagination and pragmatic responses. Both LC and SK note the extent to which they have depended on general literate abilities to get on in life, and more particularly to succeed in creative and supportive roles in the several settings in which they have worked. Both acknowledge their debt to Humanities higher education. For both wordplay is crucial, although their chosen fields and the points each emphasised in interview differ. Teaching skills of creative writing, like telling the truth in one’s own writing, is not a skill of composing neat ‘sound bites’. Giving the public a clear and persuasive account of why certain procedures for the treatment of animals do or do not meet ethical standards is no simple matter, and is no less in need of the art of truth-telling.

## 2.7 Communication and Negotiation

All 50 of the interviews were, in one way or another, about the support Humanities higher education gives to becoming a good communicator. The question of what good communication really involves was not asked directly, but became a topic that in most interviews was returned to again and again. Some graduates, as we have seen, found that tutorial teaching provided a kind of model which showed how analysis, careful listening, and presentation skills could be brought together. Others felt the importance of what they learned at university was not so direct, and only emerged gradually over the life course. Graduates who went on to very different professions often said the same things: a philosopher in international banking, a linguist in the National Health Service, and a musician in asset management all remarked that “you grow into [communication] skills”, and “only later come to realise what uses your learning can be put to”. At issue are not just means to better self-expression, but the ability to draw out others. A History graduate who became a solicitor and District Court Judge observed that his role was often to “allow people to tell their own story and get help”, something affirmed by a modern linguist turned GP, and a classicist in Church Ministry.

At some point, communication overlaps with negotiation, or perhaps more pointedly, persuasion. We might expect the most obvious cases to be professions like marketing, diplomacy, investment banking, and the media. Graduates in several subjects who went on to roles in these areas noted that on occasion they were involved in speech writing, fundraising and lobbying. One Philosophy graduate became a union negotiator. Another, in health management, faced the challenge of sustaining a mental health institution that had come under enquiry for malpractice while at the same time undertaking a staff review that resulted in many job losses. More generally, as noted in earlier sections, leadership and good relations with colleagues often come down to communications skills in which the issue is, at base, a thoughtful negotiation between people who need to get along with each other.

Good communication skills, as several of these instances suggest, also translate into public goods. The two case studies chosen for this section take up this theme, drawing on careers in publishing and diplomacy. Both professions might be described in terms of their limited visibility. When we pick up a book we think in terms of authors and subject matters – the editor who commissioned the book, or whole series of books across a subject area, is unlikely to catch our attention, if their name and identity are on the publication at all. Yet his or her task is both to recognize and to take risks on potential authors and audiences. He or she needs to gauge the importance of topics in the public sphere, as well as in specialist areas of knowledge. To see the light of day, a book or series must be both a credible marketing proposition and have a contribution to make to public, scientific or other discussion. Civil servants in the Foreign Office likewise work largely behind the scenes. The public face of politicians achieving a breakthrough in peace or economic negotiations, and the reality of potential social and economic benefits that it is hoped will follow, rely not only on critical assessment and negotiation of many points of logistical detail which are civil servants’ responsibility, but on the informal processes by which each side in a negotiation arrive collectively at how best to negotiate.

### Box 5: Publishing: A Common Ground of Scholarship and Commercial Viability

On finishing his degree in History, AC considered an academic or a publishing career, taking a research assistantship with part-time teaching at a London university. After three years he began to look around for other options, and after several attempts was hired by a large academic publisher. He then realized how solitary and introverted he had found research. His new job thrust him immediately into a very different environment which emphasised working with other people and required attention both to intellectual substance and commercial value. He liked the extent to which others relied on him and the decisions he made, and the diversity of people with whom he had to deal effectively, from university vice-chancellors to distribution personnel who were school leavers. On one hand, scholarly habits which owed to tutorial discipline remained fundamental: “I was very grateful to have been made to write all those essays – that was where I really learned to think”. An unexpected benefit of tutorial discipline was speed: he found he could easily dictate complex editorial letters, helping authors who were writing on different subjects and at different stages of completion. On the other, as he gained increasing responsibility as a commissioning editor, he was stimulated by the uncertainty and risk of creating whole new lines of book publication and seeking out new authors for them. “It turned out that what I could offer was the ability to integrate fruitfully scholarship and commercial viability.” The overall impact was plainly a public good – “it materialised values” – affecting the lives of many people in different walks of life. Yet, as he rose in the profession, the personal element that initially stimulated him remained: “the more powerful you are, the more dependent you are on others”. With seniority came wider public roles, for example on government research councils, charities, board memberships with other academic presses in Britain and Europe, and with the British Library. AC sees himself as fairly typical of Humanities graduates – “a generalist, someone who can deal with other people both because of (and despite) having different agendas”.

### Box 6: The Art of Saying Something without Saying It

HR came to Oxford to read Classics from a northern grammar school in the 1960s. On graduation he had no specific career in mind, and applied for jobs both in the commercial and government sectors. In retrospect, he felt he had “drifted into the Foreign Office” simply on account of having done well in the relevant exam. Once there, he found that an advantage of Classics was that “you had studied lots of things – history, literature, languages, philosophy.” Mental agility was necessary, as his early years included work on the developing world, in the EU in Brussels, taking courses in international law, and learning Russian. Humanities prepared him for constant and diverse learning, and his observations on the formative influence of tutorial work in Classics closely resembled comments in earlier biographies (e.g. HP in banking). And, as several graduates in international commerce also remarked, a general Humanities background gave HR advantages over German, French and other European contemporaries: they had received more specialised training, but were more likely to be unaccustomed to thinking across different fields of knowledge; presented with problems that did not fit accepted models, they were less ready to open up discussion to rethinking an issue. Senior diplomatic postings in Asia and Europe followed. HR found greatest stimulus in contributing directly and indirectly to policy formation in London, which included a period in the Prime Minister’s office. In the course of HR’s career, crises broke out in the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and Central Europe, and his usual role, as other civil servants in various government sectors remarked, was to have a deeper and more comprehensive knowledge of contexts and issues than those he was advising. “Influence is really a matter of being there”, providing key information in the course of discussion or in well-written briefing documents. Diplomacy, whether within or without the Foreign Office, is “often a matter of saying something without saying it”. Later in his career, and looking for new challenges, he was appointed to a senior UN position. HR found himself in charge of a very different kind of organisation, including hostile team members who had to be won over, talking to terrorists (“you had to be able to talk effectively to anybody”), and raising money from governments for humanitarian purposes. On retirement from the UN, HR has continued to advise and direct non-government organisations in the international sector.

## 2.8 Competition in Humanities Higher Education

Strengthening competitiveness is a central purpose of current education policy. From its inception in the Browne Review and the government White Paper, policy has defined competition expressly in market terms: universities are supposed to compete in the student market to provide them with the best courses; the education students then receive should make them competitive in the job market, and help to stimulate the competitiveness of the economy as a whole. The quantitative evidence presented in Part I has confirmed that Humanities graduates compete actively and successfully in gaining jobs in major economic sectors as these sectors have increased their share of British GDP. Is this, however, all there is to enhancing competition as an issue in learning, and as a product of higher education? Does competition as a market phenomenon in graduates' lives provide a sufficient model for understanding how and what contributions they make to the economy and society? A further important issue, therefore, is whether the assumptions on which current policy is based accurately portray the nature of competition.

Two further case studies are presented in this section to help answer these questions. In both instances, graduates came up to Oxford to read Classics, but changed to Oriental Studies. One stayed in the education sector, successfully combining a career as a teacher of Classical languages and musical director in an independent school with being an Oriental language specialist at university level. The second went on to a diverse and very successful career in theatre, broadcasting, and film media. Comparison of the two is helpful because it brings out similarities as well as differences in the role of competition in two employment sectors that might otherwise seem to have little in common.

A striking outcome of both career biographies is the importance that both graduates give to nurturance as necessary to competition – or, rather, as necessary to competition as a constructive force in contemporary society and economy. Tough competition makes attention to the conditions of learning crucial, for otherwise original talent and personal development may be stifled. Competition is tough, for example, if you are a young person struggling to learn a complex ancient language. Competition is also tough in the creative arts. Actors compete for roles. Authors and directors compete for the opportunity to present new works of art to the public. Producers compete for development money. Final productions compete for public attention and acclaim. Media networks and venues compete against each other for

their share of public attention and acclaim. Competition in all of these instances may be constrained or facilitated by wider market forces and government policy. In the middle of all of this, the role of the Humanities graduate – in these two cases, a teacher and a commissioning editor/producer – requires ingenuity, critical judgment, and multi-tasking.

First, there are skills that provide the ability to assess the materials they have to work with – ‘materials’ in these cases being, for example, young people who need help in learning, or authors and their scripts. Spotting talent, identifying and understanding limitations, bringing out the best in people and their work are, of course, not taught as such in undergraduate Humanities courses – but they are skills that good tutors develop, and which can make their teaching a model or influence on skills picked up by graduates. The medium for developing these abilities at university, as we have seen (Sections 2.3, 2.5, 2.6) is the teaching of general literate and critical skills in tutorial. Many of the phrases used in preceding case studies evoke what is at issue here: “listening”; “knowing how to break things down”; “telling the truth in one’s writing”; “recognising priorities amongst facts”; “dealing with people with different agendas”; and so forth. Second, good communication skills (see Sections 2.3 and 2.7) are plainly necessary, not only for dealing with students and authors but for negotiating institutional environments, i.e. successfully handling media or educational politics so that the teaching of critical skills or producing a given film actually become possible. And third, critical assessment of a given student or text in the institutional environment in which they will compete is likely to extend more widely to market issues, such as whether a media production has a competitive chance, or whether certain degree courses and careers will nurture a young person’s talents. Graduates’ evolving aptitude for developing these skills, for being able to shape the working environment, and for being able quickly to articulate and make clear choices, are ‘mobile’ knowledge skills of which the preceding sections have provided many examples.

### Box 7: The Importance of Competing Interests

Knowledge of Classical languages is a normal track into Oriental Studies and comparative philology, and TJ found the opportunity to study ancient eastern languages especially appealing. A talented musician, he combined Oriental Studies with active involvement in the University music scene (he continued to contemplate a career in music), and following graduation in the early 1970s spent a year in Germany as an organist. On his return he took a teacher training course “as an insurance policy”, and was hired by the independent school in which he had taught Classics and German during the course. After two years he

### Box 7: *cont.*

returned to Oxford to undertake a D. Phil in Oriental Studies. While completing his doctorate he became the senior librarian of one of the principal oriental libraries in Oxford, and was later a college research fellow. His several interests began to compete with each other – or rather, they led several institutions to compete for him. He was offered distinguished posts in the secondary school and university sectors. He opted principally for the former, which over the next 30 years he combined with shorter periods of writing and research as a visiting fellow at Oxford and American universities. His motivations in returning to school teaching were several, as it enabled him to combine a love of teaching Classics with responsibility for the pastoral side of school life and directorship of its musical programme. Interestingly, he thought that he had never been a particularly outstanding student himself. What his Humanities course at Oxford enabled were skills “necessary to independent thinking: weighing up evidence, tutorial argument, and how to present”. They also made clear the importance of peers, as well as teachers, for the models they provide. Language classes involving a few students, like tutorials, interested him in part because learning a language brings into sharp relief the practicalities of learning more generally, and the marked differences between individuals in the way they learn and the particular difficulties they have. The nitty-gritty of learning a language with other people is inevitably competitive: not only do you become aware of what makes you better or worse at some things, “it makes you compete with yourself”, and “teaches people to understand their limits”. Even in teaching the ‘nuts and bolts’ of a language, the issue is seldom merely technical: learning has a strong ‘lateral’ component, in which the ability to speak and think effectively in a language brings in many other sorts of knowledge, combining experience with more strictly academic disciplines. All of this has informed his own teaching and, more generally, his responsibility as a mentor for children who will go on to university subjects and professions that are not chiefly linguistic or musical. A central challenge of teaching is how to manage competition for positive ends when inevitably students have differing abilities and personalities. In part this is a matter of helping young people to find those areas to which their abilities are most suited, and to accept that although they may be less able in some things they really want to do, they have very good potential in others. The core, however, is teaching critical thinking which, as a central objective of the Humanities, comes down to identifying those transferable skills which are best suited to individuals in competitive settings.

### Box 8: Uniting Artistic and Commercial Criteria of Excellence

RT’s academic path led from Classical languages to modern oriental language studies. Asked about the main contribution of her Humanities course, she emphasised “the freedom to study something non-vocational... It seems to me completely mad to say that is not the purpose of education – learning for itself”. She chose to study oriental languages in the early 1980s because she “thought this is the hardest thing I’ll ever be able to learn”, and added that this refers not merely to the language but to traditions, notably “a different way of thinking about art”. Like TJ, she did not consider herself an outstanding student. And like TJ, she found that her interests were allowed to multiply in a Humanities context. RT’s focus at university, however, was very different, turning strongly toward the theatre, first in acting and then increasingly after graduation in directing and producing. She worked in various theatre companies, gaining experience by example and practice of both good and bad directing. More than three years on she took her first big job as a literary agent, developing her own list of writers and selling it. In dealing with writers and directors she found that “it was working on the material that chiefly interested me”. She moved increasingly into the highly competitive field of film television, working successively as a script editor, commissioning editor, and finally as head. Several dimensions of competition recurred in the course of the interview. One, echoing AC’s (Box 5) experience in publishing, was “the fantastic experience of risk” in looking for truly original authorship, and deciding “to commission things that the market hasn’t said it wanted yet”. She also found herself enmeshed in the competitive politics of television, involving not only some substantial egos and a good deal of sexism, but compliance with new government media policies. Not all went well (“I learnt a lot from the failures”), but one main outcome was a sequence of international award winning films that also made lots of money. “It’s all about growing ideas...development money is there for helping projects that no one else will...our duty is to protect talent and to feed the culture of this country”. There is an analogy here to her attitude to taking oriental languages: “As a country we’re good because we’re creative at the high-skill end. If you concentrate on basic skills you won’t beat the others. You need blue-sky thinking.” The media outcomes that RT thinks are her most important thus lie in opening up possibilities for people and new artistic projects: “The talent is in the author and director, I just open the door.” She would like to do more to change the way creative organisations are run, so that they have more collaboration.

## 2.9 Citizenship

The eight case studies in preceding sections are all, one way or another, illustrative of a further basic value of Humanities higher education: that the knowledge and aptitudes it fosters have wider social and humanitarian value, and open up opportunities for graduates to participate in civil society and contribute to the country in a great many ways. Section 2.7, on communication and negotiation, noted that in some professions a graduate's wider contributions to society, although of major importance, have limited visibility. This is true for many professional areas, not just the two (publishing and diplomacy) discussed in that section. One particularly striking example was given by a graduate whose work involved him closely in planning and implementing counter-terrorism measures. Reflecting on several recent events, he noted mildly that the whole point of the exercise was that hundreds, if not thousands, of people were completely unaware of the danger they were in. Much the same could be said of the protection of pensions via financial compliance (noted by HP, Box 2), checks on unhealthy or cruel environmental and animal husbandry practices (LC, Box 3), or the close relation between teaching and pastoral care in individual human development (TJ, Box 7).

The 50 graduate interviews contain many further examples of economic and social contributions that go far beyond the proposition that higher education should be aimed at market competitiveness. A complete account of these would greatly lengthen this report. A short list of many graduates' involvement in civil society organisations and related activities will hopefully suffice. These include: expert assistance to protect and rescue archaeological and other treasures in natural disasters; legal and media advice to civil rights and environmental NGOs; major fundraising for Great Ormond Street Hospital; development of music therapy for depression and other mental health issues; management and participation in international choir tours; running athletic charities for poor children; patronage of major art collections and festivals; management and direction of foundations for the arts and cultural diplomacy; financial and management advice to charities addressed to problems of social deprivation; manning the Samaritans helpline; directing Church charitable foundations; and organisation and fundraising for vocational education charities in Africa.



# Conclusion

The research summarised in this report has addressed central questions posed by the implementation of current government higher education policy: *How and what does higher education contribute to individuals' life courses? How can we understand and assess the overall impact of higher education on people's life course development as a factor in British economy and society?* This research project is a first step to addressing these questions. As is normal in pilot research, the research project does not pretend to be the final word on the subject. Its aim is to provide evidence that can inform and generate discussion. Arguably, the stated aim of current policy – to put students “at the heart of the system” – requires that young people in education are consulted systematically and that an independent database on their experience over time at university and in employment is compiled. We can scarcely claim to put students at the heart of the issue without documenting in depth graduates' own views as to how and how well higher education has prepared them. We also need to track the aggregate outcomes of their experience in employment trends in the economy. The project provides the first substantial, if inevitably tentative, body of evidence for this purpose.

This research has drawn on one of the few extensive quantitative records suitable for such inquiry, containing information on 11,000 Humanities graduates who matriculated during the period 1960–1989. The records cover a critical era of economic transition in Britain, and the two decades that have elapsed since 1989 enable us to assess graduates' career experience of 20 to 50 years' duration. Both a statistical profile of degree courses linked to careers and a systematic sample of in-depth interviews with 50 graduates have been achieved.

As in any research, there are limitations to the findings which need to be emphasised. The project is based on records of one in three Humanities graduates drawn from the Development and Alumni Relations System (DARS) at University of Oxford. No claim can be made for the typicality of Oxford graduates in a national context. Although very extensive, DARS was not created as a research database, and therefore the representativeness of the 11,000 graduates included in the sample cannot be guaranteed. As noted in the report, *there is a clear need for research on the experience of graduates from a range of universities, and in the Sciences and Social Sciences, to complement the findings reported here. Data which continue the series 1960–1989 up to the present would also be very desirable.*<sup>36</sup> Despite these limitations, the evidence reported here makes a considerable leap forward from existing 'destination' data on jobs post-graduation, which are short term and assume a simplified view of professional development as a single career path. The long term picture introduced by the project reveals considerable occupational mobility and new skills development across occupational sectors, which play a crucial role in individual and national economic performance.

This evidence, and the several other main quantitative and qualitative findings, are summarised at the end of Parts I and II, and in the Executive Summary. By way of conclusion, the following four points deserve emphasis:

- Humanities higher education was an informed choice for young people in the years 1960–1989, which prepared them for a wide range of potential careers in the economy, government, education and civil society. Trends show their ready access and movement into occupational sectors that contributed an increasing share of the nation's economic growth. Their own reported experience emphasises Humanities-based higher education as key to their success.
- The system of direct grants to support young people's higher education in the Humanities was thus a sound investment in their lives and futures, which has paid ample dividends to the British economy and society.
- The decision to make the experience and professional contributions of Humanities graduates the primary focus of this research reflects the longstanding central place of the Humanities in British education and society. University education as a public value is intimately associated with what the Humanities are well known to do: to clarify, develop, and transmit traditions of teaching, history, philosophy, language, literature, music, and visual arts which are essential components of our national identity and place in the world. Modern science is likewise grounded in these traditions.<sup>37</sup> Young people from Europe, America, and the developing world come in their thousands to study and learn in this system.

This report, in reviewing patterns of graduate recruitment to the economy and into many other important social roles, has shown just how fundamental the Humanities-based system of higher education is to Britain. A life course perspective, while based on individuals, is also about collective potential and outcomes. Recruitment structures are fundamental to the whole fabric of society. We have a responsibility that any major reform of the system is designed and assessed on the basis of careful, systematic, and independent in-depth research.

<sup>36</sup> There is growing awareness of this need. While this report was being revised, the ESRC Centre for Population Change has published the results of an online survey, including a sample of 963 graduates of Southampton University in the period 2001–2007, which confirms the diversity of the graduate diaspora described here, placing it in a regional geographic perspective (J. Sage, M. Evandrou, and J. Falkingham, 'The Complex Migration Pathways of UK Graduates', *CPC Briefing 9*, October 2012 ([www.cpc.ac.uk](http://www.cpc.ac.uk)) I am grateful to Jane Falkingham for calling my attention to their work.

<sup>37</sup> The Scientific Revolution, to take only one single instance, was grounded in traditions of critical thinking fundamental to Classical Humanism. A good example is the central value of objective observation as a basis for knowing about nature and society. This requires: close attention to the language of observation and measurement; open and critical discussion; critical examination of contexts of observation, especially where established sources may be biased by social interests; and the use of knowledge to achieve wider benefits to society. These precepts are no less fundamental to teaching and research in the Humanities and Sciences today, and were, of course, promulgated in this country by Sir Francis Bacon, whose renowned formulation of scientific method drew directly on his experience as one of the most distinguished classical scholars of his time, and led to his seminal text on Humanities higher education, *The Advancement of Learning*.



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The 50 graduates who participated in the in-depth interviews provided a range and depth of insights which are truly remarkable, and made them very interesting to interview. While I cannot cite them by name here, I hope they will feel that their contributions are well-represented, and that this is some recompense for their time and attention.

The research carried out is a product of the Institute of Human Sciences at Oxford, as the team was composed entirely of its graduates. Hannah Knight, now of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, provided the Figures as well as assisting in checks on the reliability of the DARS registrations. Discussions of the evidence with her very much improved the report. The interviewing team of Human Scientists needed both imagination and tact to carry out their work, and gave me their own useful feedback. My thanks here are to: Katherine Borg, Zoe Burgess, Philippa Davies, Hugo Ernest-Jones, Julia Koskella, Holly Krelle, and Elinor McDaniell.

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Dr Philip Kreager



# Appendix

## Humanities Graduate Pilot Project: Interview Format and Permission

### Preamble: Purposes of this interview

The University wishes to know about the career and life course experience of its graduates. This will help us:

- 1 to assess the contribution of teaching and experience gained at Oxford to people's subsequent lives;
- 2 to better define and document the impact on society of Oxford courses in the Humanities;
- 3 to learn about how to improve what we do in teaching the Humanities.

As currently reported in the press, public funding for the Humanities is under threat, on the argument that Humanities graduates contribute less to the economy than the Sciences. But is this true? So there are two further purposes of this study:

- 4 to explore and clarify what is meant by 'impact', and how such 'impacts' should be assessed;
- 5 to provide evidence to inform public discussion about what education in the Humanities achieves.

The study will also give the University the opportunity to consider whether it should maintain a database on a sample of its graduates to better understand changing relationships between education and society.

### Security

In this interview we will ask you about your experience during and since leaving Oxford. We are interested both in your career history and in how your education and employment have related to other aspects of your life (e.g. subsequent professional qualifications, marriage, voluntary work, networks of friends and colleagues). At many points in the interview we will ask for your views, and give you the opportunity to reflect on your experience while at Oxford, and after.

All of the information we collect will be held securely by the principal investigator, and your identity will be kept anonymous. The purposes of the pilot project, as indicated above, are unrelated to University alumni and development projects. Nor will University staff have access to what you say in interview. A public report will be prepared by the principal investigator on the basis of the interviews and of quantitative analysis of employment and other trends.

As a normal part of ethics policy, you will be asked if you wish to sign a form confirming our agreement to these arrangements. Individuals have the opportunity on the form to tick a box if they are happy to be quoted by name in the report.

# Appendix

## Agreement to Participate in Pilot: Signature Form

In conformity with the British Educational Research Association guidelines ([www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/)), participants in interviews have the right:

- 1 to sign (or not sign) this form, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of their comments in interview; and
- 2 to withdraw from the interview at any point.

This form confirms these rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Interviewee)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Interviewer)

Date:

Date:

Interviewees who are happy to be quoted by name in the report arising from interviews should tick here:

Note: This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. If you have a concern about any aspect of it, please speak to the researcher concerned who will do his/her best to answer your query. If you wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford ([ethics@medsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@medsci.ox.ac.uk); Medical Sciences Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee, Medical Sciences Divisional Office, Level 3 John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford, OX3 9DU, UK).



# Appendix

## The Interview

### 1 Basic degree data

*[Write a-c in beforehand, and recite to them to get things going]*

a Confirm year of matriculation

b Degree

c College

d School prior to University

### 2 Further Professional Qualifications

*[Did you take any further degrees or gain subsequent qualifications?]*

a Further academic (with date(s))

b Professional (with date(s))

*[As they answer, you may draw out how and why these qualifications were needed, and e.g. — Had you decided to do this during your time at Oxford? — What influenced you? — Was your humanities background relevant? — How?]*

### 3 Employment

a Did you go directly from your degree to your first main job? Did you know what you wanted to do professionally?

b Following graduation:

What was your first main job?

How did you come to know about the job?

Was contact made via:

— your College?

— Department?

— Oxford Careers Service?

— Other Contacts?

NB: were these other contacts people at Oxford? (e.g. friends in College? Your teachers? in same degree subject?)

Were school contacts relevant?

c The nature of the work: What skills were you expected to have?

*[Try to draw out issues such as the following: Why do you think you got the job? (Then: So your [degree subject] was/was not an asset in this? Was it crucial? Why or why not?)]*

d Main subsequent employment

*[This may be changes of organisation, or main moves within an organisation) Over the life course there may be many changes, so you will need to encourage focus on the principal ones – principal either because of the nature of the occupation or the person's interest in it). NB: It may be easier to go quickly through the career stages, and then come back to questions such as:*

*Why did you move jobs?*

*How did you find out about the new position? [e.g. contacts, again may be Oxford relevant]*

*Did this mean picking up new skills? Were skills from your [degree subject] helpful, relevant?*

*NB: do not ask these Qs for each – pick some of what seem to be the most interesting posts]*

a. i. *[i.e. second job]*

ii. *[third...]*

iii. *"*

iv. *"*

e Clarifying 'impacts'

*[An important part of this interview is to explore what the 'impact' of Oxford humanities teaching is on British society and economy. This may, for example, have to do with particular linguistic and analytic skills that prepared you for later life. It may have to do with your relations to other people, or the economic and cultural milieu of your career. It may have to do with shaping your interests in life more generally.]*

A Employment in relation to

*[degree subject, time at Oxford]*

a Which job was the most important to you? Why?

b Could you give a specific example of the kinds of problems and issues that you needed to address and/or solve in your work?

c What do you feel are your main accomplishments in the work you did? Do you feel your work has been beneficial to society? How, or Why?

d How did your work come to be more widely known?

e Could you summarise the main contribution which your Humanities background at Oxford gave to your work?

f Was your experience of the tutorial system relevant to this?

B Potentially Relevant Networks

*[These may have come up earlier – if not, then ask]*

a Were links to other Oxford graduates important in your work? How? Why?

b How many Oxford graduates are or were part of your professional network?

c How would you characterise your relationships with these people? (e.g. Was the Oxford connection incidental? Were shared interests and experiences from the Oxford background important to friendships?)

d Were School links also important? More important?

C Family and Civil Society

a Are there other activities and areas in your life in which your humanities background has been important?

(For example: in voluntary and community activities, politics, media, the arts...draw out)

b Does your humanities background influence your reading habits? How, and what?

c Relation between career patterns and family, e.g. Has your employment or career path ever required changes in employment for your partner (or vice versa)?

Did your partner also study at Oxford? Is this something that in important ways you share?

D One Last Question

Do you think your experience in Oxford, and its subsequent role in your life, are typical of Oxford Humanities graduates?



