

Humanities Alumni

Philosophy — My Passport to the World

By Chris Bullsmith



Working as a salesman in Tokyo

I only started working in 2002, overseas and in an industry I knew nothing about, so my major achievements in the last five years have been moving back to NZ, paying off my house, and changing to a working style that has me surf kayaking or walking in the mornings while still getting to sleep at a reasonable hour. I'm involved in the managing of a British e-learning company that operates mostly in Asia, so I still spend two or three months a year overseas, but it's good to be back!

I studied at Canterbury for four years, leaving in 1997, and continuing on to study at the University of London and then in Tokyo. I've been studying part time pretty much ever since, from languages to stay afloat in a new country, to computer science to stay afloat in a new industry. This month, I'm finishing an MA taken by distance in applied linguistics. Including all the various independent colleges I studied at in London, I think I've studied at about eleven tertiary institutions in four countries. Interestingly, in all that, Canterbury stands out as my clear favourite.

Now, I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Canterbury — I took courses across a range of departments, met a great group of friends, still keep in touch with some of the staff, attended seminars and guest lectures from a stream of famous visiting academics, made full use of the gym and the field stations across the country, and got two degrees almost as afterthoughts. In fact, I still have enough credit to get a third degree if I just take one more course at stage 3 (OK, I guess it might have expired by now ...).

Those are the points I would have emphasised in 1997, at least, and while they still stand, I'd like to pick out three more that seem very important to me now after my often disillusioning experiences elsewhere.

First, Canterbury has a very collegial atmosphere — staff are very approachable, and there's a sense of shared

enterprise. This might be partly thanks to the staff and students, but I think it also has a lot to do with the campus buildings — most are fairly open, with departments spread across one level, often with tea facilities etc. open to students. Particularly at postgraduate level, opportunities in discussion to overhear and be overheard are hugely valuable.

Second, Canterbury is in Canterbury — complete with clean green image, ski fields, and trout-filled rivers. Now, I'm not a big skier or fisher, but an awful lot of those famous visiting academics are — which I'm sure helps no end with attracting top talent. Put those two together, and they go some way toward explaining why I got to hear (and argue with) more of the top people in my field while I was at Canterbury than I did in two years of access to all 31 universities and institutes within the University of London federation!

Third, the education at Canterbury really is world class. I left NZ at the same time as a small group of school friends heading off to their own postgraduate courses (engineering to Southampton, math to Stanford, and biology to New York; and me, philosophy, to London), all wondering how our Canterbury educations would stack up. The consensus over email a couple of months later was clear — we're the ones explaining to our classmates, not vice versa.

Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, I'd like to take a moment to sing the praises of Humanities in particular. I had a fair few friends in other schools (commerce, science) suggest that my choice of a Humanities major (Philosophy) was ill-advised in career terms. Happily, I've seen them proven wrong.

I heard the appeal of Humanities graduates explained nicely by a room full of McKinsey & Company (the top global management consultant firm) high-ups. They invited a bunch of final-year grad. students from London University



With Chinese police at the Summer Palace in Beijing

to a villa in Spain (with an open bar over a long weekend as inducement), and at first I was sure I'd be the only Humanities major in a room full of commerce graduates. As it turned out, we were all thinking the same thing. The head recruiter explained that 'You know how to learn and communicate and think through novel problems. We can give you the necessary business knowledge easily. We've had less success trying to develop those critical and communication skills in people who are already products of a particular business school.'

Interestingly, no-one there, so far as I know, ended up applying for a place at McKinsey, where apparently they work you so hard that you're essentially dead to your family and friends. I rather suspect that studying Humanities subjects can help give you not just those critical abilities, but also a little wisdom about how to apply them!