THE VALUE OF THE HUMANITIES:

UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER DESTINATIONS OF OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY'S HUMANITIES DIVISION AND AUTHORED BY:

Dr James Robson | Dr Emily Murphy | Nuzha Nuseibeh | Alice Tawell | Ben Hart
Jonah Stewart | Professor Ewart Keep | Professor Simon Marginson

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INTRODUCTION

By Professor Dan Grimley, Head of Humanities at Oxford University
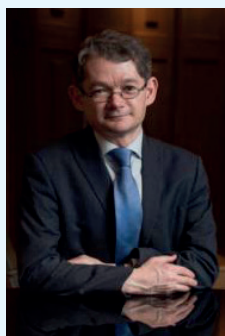
I am delighted to introduce our new report into the deep value of studying the humanities. It is the most detailed study of its kind, bringing together data analysis of the career destinations of over 9,000 humanities graduates and government data on graduate outcomes and salaries. The findings from these numbers confirm what I and so many humanities graduates will already recognise: that the skills and experiences conferred by studying a humanities subject can transform working life, life as a whole, and the wider world.

The data analysis spans careers of graduates from 2000 to 2019, after which, of course, the world entered a pandemic. So we carried out further interviews with employers which revealed that the effects of COVID-19 have only reinforced the report's findings about the resilience and adaptability of humanities graduates. We have seen an acceleration in trends towards automation and digitalisation, most notably in the emergence of ChatGPT. Our report shows that the critical skill set possessed by humanities graduates means they are particularly well placed to navigate this changing environment.

The 9,000+ graduates we followed studied Humanities at Oxford, because that is the data that was available to us. However, I am convinced that our findings are not exclusive to Oxford, and apply more broadly to the study and teaching of humanities across the sector as a whole. Indeed, on 30 March 2023 the Higher Education Policy Institute released a report demonstrating the strength of the humanities in the UK, and found a strong correlation between the skills of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) graduates and key skills valued by employers, noting that eight of the ten fastest growing sectors employ more AHSS graduates than other disciplines.

The benefits of the humanities extend far beyond the financial: they give meaning to life, and help us understand ourselves and our place in the world. Nonetheless, it remains important to demonstrate that they also offer tangible "real-world" skills and a diverse range of outstanding career outcomes. I often hear young people saying that they would love to continue studying music or languages or history or classics at A-level and beyond, but fear it would compromise their ability to get an impactful job. I hope this report will convince them – and their parents, guardians and teachers – that they can continue studying the humanities subject they love and, at the same time, develop skills which employers report they are valuing more and more. We all stand to gain from that continued investment.

I'd like to end by offering three notes of thanks:

Firstly, to Dr James Robson and his colleagues in Oxford University's Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) for researching and writing this report. Not to mention the interviewees who helped to shape its findings.

Secondly, to Emma Walmsley, a graduate in classics and languages who has gone on to become CEO of GlaxoSmithKline. She kindly provided a supportive quote for our report, noting that "being a humanities student at Oxford was foundational - to the curiosity, reserves of courage, and appetite for connectivity I have relied on deeply in life so far".

Finally, to my predecessor, Professor Karen O'Brien, who initiated this project while she was Head of Humanities in Oxford. Karen has since become Vice-Chancellor at Durham University, and so, like Emma, she represents yet another example of a humanities graduate (in English literature) who has gone on to one of the highest positions in their field.

Dan Grimley
May 2023

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arts and Humanities degrees are increasingly criticised in policy contexts for failing to provide students with the knowledge and skills that are valued in the labour market and for failing to provide graduates with adequate financial returns on their educational investments. However, this mixed methods study of Humanities degrees from the University of Oxford found the opposite: that Oxford Humanities graduates are able to navigate the labour market very successfully and flexibly, choosing their career pathways based on their own interests and ambitions; that financial returns on Oxford Humanities degrees are some of the highest in the sector, with a clear Oxford premium, and rapid rates of growth; and that the skills developed during Oxford Humanities degrees are highly valued and sought out by employers, even in the difficult economic contexts that followed the 2008 recession and the challenging COVID-19 labour market. Employers from a wide range of sectors interviewed in this study particularly emphasised the communication skills and creativity that Oxford Humanities graduates bring to places of work and the importance of having multi-disciplinary teams for problem-solving and avoiding 'groupthink' in almost every work context.

Analysis of labour market destinations showed that Oxford Humanities graduates work across a very wide range of sectors and roles, while examination of individuals' longer-term career trajectories showed graduates were able to move freely and flexibly across the labour market, often deliberately changing positions and sectors to progress in their careers. Participants attributed this flexibility to the transferable skills (particularly communication, critical thinking, and research), the confidence, and the resilience they developed during their time at Oxford as well as the signalling power of the Oxford brand. In a labour market increasingly characterised by job churn and 'gigification', participants particularly emphasised the importance of these transferable skills in navigating a relatively unstable labour market. Although the future of work is hard to predict, the lockdowns of COVID-19 appear to have accelerated trends towards automation, digitalisation and flexible modes of working. The transferable skills, confidence and resilience of Oxford Humanities graduates appear to be well suited to navigating this febrile jobs market, in both the short and longer term.

However, while the study found Oxford Humanities degrees afforded individuals with a significant positional advantage in the labour market and strong financial returns, the majority of the graduates and students that participated in this study reported that they selected their degrees based on interest in the subject, rather than for financial reasons, and all graduates emphasised that they felt the wider value of an Oxford Humanities degree was equally important to their labour market outcomes. They highlighted that engaging with and being inducted into subject-specific bodies of knowledge had a transformative impact on who they were, their values, their cultural points of reference, and how they understood and acted in the world. At the same time, all participants (students, graduates, and employers) emphasised the wider contributions the Humanities make to society, particularly emphasising the role the Humanities play in framing debates and bringing understanding to key issues in society, from problematising fake news to providing insight into the ethics of artificial intelligence. Although the bulk of the fieldwork was conducted before the pandemic, a number of employer interviews were undertaken in spring of 2021. These participants used COVID-19 as an example of how important the Humanities are in framing and communicating the narrative around the pandemic, providing critical and ethical discourse around policy approaches, and in analysing the wider social, economic, and political issues.

Therefore, this study found that Oxford Humanities degrees were highly valued by both graduates and employers across a wide range of sectors, providing individuals with the transferable skills needed to successfully navigate difficult and changeable labour markets. At the same time, the private contributions of Oxford Humanities degrees include the transformative value of being inducted into bodies of subject-specific knowledge and the formative impact this has on individuals' identities and lives. However, the value of an Oxford Humanities degree can also be seen in terms of public goods, with graduates contributing to critical parts of the economy and the labour market and, more broadly, as a common good, with participants emphasising the role Humanities subjects play in the public sphere and in public discourse.

Establishing cause and effect between specific degrees and these public and private contributions can be challenging, and a number of compounding factors are important to consider, including pre-existing social networks, cultural capital of graduates, and a range of social, economic, and political structures. However, the innovative, mixed methods approach taken in this study (combining quantitative analysis of graduates' destinations and salaries, in depth interviews with graduates and students, and employer interviews) showed that all participants viewed the skills and knowledge developed during an Oxford Humanities degrees were fundamental to graduates' abilities to successfully navigate the labour market and lead fulfilled lives.

Although the skills employer participants reported as being particularly valuable in the labour market are closely aligned with other recent reports on Arts and Humanities degrees (see for example BA, 2020; Robson et al., 2021), these findings are at odds with current policy discourse which increasingly criticises Humanities subjects for failing to meet labour market skills demands or for providing graduates with adequate financial returns. These findings clearly show that Oxford Humanities graduates are successful at navigating the labour market and financially rewarded, but also see value as existing beyond measurable returns and linked with knowledge, personal development, individual agency, and public goods. Therefore, the findings highlight the need to take a more nuanced approach to analysing the value of degree subjects in order to take into account longer term career trajectories, individual agency within the labour market, the transformative power of knowledge, and broader public contributions of degrees within economic, social, and political discourses.

SHORT SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

This report details an independent research project commissioned by Oxford University Humanities Division and undertaken by researchers at the Centre for Skills Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE) at Oxford University Department of Education. This study aimed to examine the value of Oxford Humanities degrees in broad terms by analysing:

- the labour market destinations of Oxford Humanities graduates and the financial returns of Oxford Humanities degrees;

- the career trajectories of Oxford Humanities graduates and the ways in which they experience and navigate the labour market;

- the knowledge and skills graduates developed at Oxford and how they felt these shaped their career trajectories and employment experiences;

- Employers perceptions of Oxford Humanities graduates and the skills they bring to the jobs market;

- Oxford Humanities graduates' and employers' views on the wider value and contributions of their degrees.

Focusing on both undergraduate and taught post graduate Humanities degrees, the study adopted an innovative mixed methods approach in order to capture the nuance and complexity of individuals' lives, career trajectories, and labour market experiences, as well as analysing employer perspectives and labour market demands. This had three main phases:

(1) quantitative analysis of alumni labour market destinations data (covering individuals who had graduated over the last 20 years), Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data, and Graduate Outcomes (GO) data;

(2) in depth interviews with a selection of nearly 100 graduates (graduating over the last 20 years) and students (across all Humanities subject areas);

(3) interviews with employers and secondary analysis of skills demands surveys.

This approach offered a more nuanced understanding of how graduates' careers develop over time than studies that focus purely on earnings data at a fixed point soon after graduation. The study therefore provides detailed insight into the relationship between degrees, knowledge and skills, graduate outcomes, and labour market experiences through quantitative analysis and rich qualitative data from students, graduates, and employers.

The bulk of the fieldwork took place in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although graduate data does not include the cohort of students that graduated into the extremely challenging COVID-19 economy, it does include the graduates who navigated the 2008 recession. Parallels can be drawn between the current COVID-19 economic situation and that of 2008. Students graduating into the post COVID-19 labour market are likely to experience some of the same challenges that their peers did a decade ago. In order to gain greater insight into this issue, we have undertaken further interviews with a selection of employers in spring 2021 to examine the COVID-19 labour market and the challenges Oxford Humanities are likely to face over the next five years.

THE KEY FINDINGS ARE:
DIVERSITY OF DESTINATIONS AND STRONG FINANCIAL RETURNS

Oxford graduates from all Humanities degrees work within an increasingly diverse range of sectors and roles. The majority of Oxford Humanities graduates work in the sectors that have traditionally been associated with Oxford Humanities degrees: management consultancy, law, finance, the civil service, and education/ academia (Kreager, 2013). However, there has been significant growth in the diversity of destinations, with graduates working across a wide range of sectors and taking on a variety of different positions. This is particularly visible in the marked growth in the number of graduates working in the ICT sector, notably in digital roles related to journalism and communications, as well as, increasingly, in start-ups.

When controlling for degree subject, analysis showed PPE graduates were more likely to enter into financial and civil service roles, while English graduates were more likely to work in education and the creative industries. History and Modern Languages graduates were most evenly spread across sectors, suggesting these degrees offer the most labour market flexibility. Evidence suggests that female graduates are entering the digital industries in greater numbers than their male peers and so may be particularly benefiting from the general growth in this area. Importantly, although roughly equal numbers of male and female Oxford Humanities graduates are working in management consultancy, this is not reflected in the national picture, where almost twice as many men than women are in these roles, suggesting that Oxford has a neutralising effect on the gender disparity in that industry.

Oxford Humanities graduates, at an aggregate level, engage in the top end of the labour market with the majority working within higher managerial and professional occupations, distinguished in terms of their levels of prestige, autonomy, and earnings. This finding closely corresponds with a number of other studies that have similarly highlighted that Oxford graduates are highly represented in these roles compared with graduates from other institutions (Hecht et al., 2020; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Savage et al., 2015; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Analysis of earnings data showed a significant Oxford premium across all Humanities subjects when compared with graduates from both Russell Group institutions and post-1992 universities, with on average Oxford graduates from all Humanities subject areas earning significantly more than the sector median. Oxford Language degrees and History degrees showed highest rates of financial returns and the highest figures above the national median in these subjects. However, gender pay gaps exist between male and female Oxford Humanities graduates, reflecting the national picture. This

was most marked for History graduates, with males earning more than £10k more than females, suggesting a number of potential compounding factors, including the nature of History admissions, the pre-existing social and cultural capital Oxford History graduates may or may not have before graduation, and the structure of the labour market

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE YOUR OWN PATHWAY

Many participants felt their experiences within the labour market were characterised by flexibility and a wide range of employment opportunities available to them after graduation. They described how this flexibility was rooted in a combination of transferable skills they developed during their degrees (particularly communication, critical thinking, research skills, confidence, and resilience), work experience and extra-curricular activities taken at Oxford, and the signalling power of the Oxford brand. Many emphasised that this flexibility remained throughout their career trajectories, supplemented by skills and experiences they developed at work, allowing them to move with agency, freely, and sometimes radically, across roles and sectors. For some, this ability to 'hop' between positions was key to ensuring rapid career progression into more prestigious, autonomous and highly paid roles. Other participants emphasised that this freedom enabled them to feel able to choose career trajectories that fitted their values or life goals best, even if the financial returns were lower than in other employment contexts (e.g. working in international development, the charitable sector etc.). This is reflected in high levels of job satisfaction reported in Graduate Outcomes data.

This flexibility of opportunity and freedom to move across roles and sectors was highlighted as being particularly beneficial in a labour market increasingly characterised by competition for graduate jobs, precarity, job churn, short tenure, and self-employment. Participants who graduated in the years immediately after the 2008 recession largely felt they had successfully navigated a highly challenging labour market, avoiding the economic scarring effect that many young people and graduates from other institutions experienced. They largely put this down to the knowledge, skills, experience, and credentials they received through their Oxford Humanities degrees which provided them with a positional labour market advantage and enabled them to adopt an agile approach to employment challenges.

COVID-19 AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

Parallels can be drawn between the challenging economic context of the 2008 recession and the years that followed it and the economic difficulties following COVID-19. The pandemic and associated lockdowns have caused a youth unemployment crisis, that, as in the 80s and 2008, will likely extend beyond wider economic recovery. At the same time, the pandemic appears to have accelerated changes to the nature of work related to digitalisation, automation, AI, and flexible working arrangements, that were already taking place. The labour market in both the short and longer term is likely to be characterised by competition for graduate jobs,

shifting skills demands (with an emphasis on digital skills), and occupational change as traditional jobs become automated and new jobs develop.

It is hard to predict the exact shape of the jobs market in 5-10 years. However, the way in which Oxford Humanities graduates navigated the 2008 recession and challenging employment context in the subsequent years suggests that the transferable skills and resilience associated with Oxford Humanities degrees will serve graduates well in a competitive and changeable post-COVID-19 labour market. Employers involved in this study emphasised this point, highlighting that strong communication skills, critical thinking, and research skills will always be required in the labour market. In fact, many employers argued that, with increased digitalisation and automation in work, these 'human skills' will only become more important as they are critical to human relations and interactions, which cannot be automated.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LABOUR MARKET TRANSITIONS

Despite Oxford Humanities graduates' positional advantage in the labour market, our analysis of career trajectories indicated that graduates experienced transition into employment differently, with participants describing entering the labour market in a variety of different ways, some smoother than others:

- Many followed traditional graduate recruitment routes, gaining information about their first jobs through careers fairs, the Milk Round, or the University's Careers Service, then applying to organisations' graduate programmes. When students, these individuals often leveraged their time at Oxford strategically to develop skills and gain experiences they felt would be beneficial to the labour market. These graduates described the benefits of having acquired these skills in transitioning into the labour market, as well as in relation to progressing through their careers, both in terms of signalling their abilities within competitive recruitment processes and managing challenges in the early phases of their working lives.

- Other graduates described being less focused on labour market outcomes when they were students, not engaging with employment-related discourses, and transitioning into the labour market in less planned and sometimes messier ways than some of their peers. They described experiencing shock and difficulties on leaving university. However, many noted that, in retrospect, this was an important phase in their career trajectories and instrumental in helping them decide what they wanted to do for work.

- Smooth transitions, particularly into professions associated with high financial returns, prestige, and autonomy, were associated with individuals undertaking internships while at university. Several participants from low socio-economic backgrounds described feeling unable to engage in these opportunities due to financial constraints or other issues. However, these experiences are likely to reflect a previous internship structure since much work has been done within Oxford to address this issue with, for example,

the Crankstart Internship Programme, which provides means tested grants to support low SES students to take internships.

- Many participants who experienced messy transitions described undertaking 'internships' after graduation as a way of 'breaking into' their chosen professions. This is reflected in the quantitative data where a relatively large number of graduates reported their job titles as 'intern'. Interviews showed that participants conceptualised these 'internships' differently to the formal definition used within Careers Service-related discourses. Participants often referred to these 'graduate internships' to describe entry level roles, seen as gateways into desired careers. Several participants who identified as coming from low SES backgrounds described struggling financially when taking on these roles and alternating between these kinds of 'internships' to access their longer term career goals (e.g. in creative industries such as advertising, theatre etc) and employment that was more immediately lucrative as they attempted to establish themselves in their desired careers.

KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS:

Oxford Humanities graduates saw their degrees as being fundamental to the formation of a wide range of skills, primarily transferable skills, particularly: communication and argumentation, critical thinking, research skills, and the ability to process complex information quickly, as well as creativity, empathy, and strategic thinking. Sitting across all of these graduates also highlighted the importance of confidence and resilience that they felt were integral to the Oxford experience. These skills are broadly similar to skills other recent research projects have highlighted as being associated with the Arts and Humanities and these project have shown that such transferable skills are particularly valued in the labour market (see Lyonette et al., 2017; BA, 2017; BA, 2020; Robson et al., 2021). Graduates viewed all of these skills and capabilities as critical to the way in which they first transitioned into the labour market, to their wider ongoing experiences at work, and in successfully navigating employment as part of an ongoing trajectory. In particular, as highlighted above, the transferable nature of these skills gave many graduates the confidence to change occupations and move fluidly across sectors, often accelerating their career progression into more senior positions.

Employers, across a wide range of organisational sizes and sectors, similarly highlighted these transferable skills, viewing them as essential to their current employment needs. Many employers also highlighted that, with increased automation and digitalisation, and disruption from COVID-19, skills needs, occupational identities, and the nature of work will likely change significantly in the next 5-10 years. There will be a need for skills related to human interaction, communication and negotiation – very similar to those produced through Oxford Humanities degrees. Therefore, there appears to be close alignment between skills formed through Oxford Humanities degrees and current and future employer demands.

Several participants highlighted some key skills they wished

had been developed at Oxford, primarily: collaboration and the ability to work in a team; presentation skills that go beyond the traditional academic format; more digital skills; a workable knowledge of the labour market; and the ability to ask for help more often. In recent years, Oxford University has explicitly introduced a number of activities that aim to foster these skills. This was confirmed in interviews with current students who particularly highlighted how they have been developing collaboration and digital skills through both taught work and extracurricular activities. Moreover, research suggests that such skills may best be formed in places of work, rather than university settings. More work may, therefore, be needed to continue to encourage students to take advantage of extra-curricular opportunities and gain work experience through internships to ensure they leave with as wide a range of skills and experiences as possible.

MECHANISMS OF SKILLS FORMATION

Graduates and students saw key employability skills as being developed in a number of different ways during their time at Oxford. Tutorials were particularly highlighted as a key mechanism, with the structured, high-pressure format of a tutorial being seen as fostering key communication skills and the ability to present and defend arguments clearly and concisely, while providing individuals with a deep sense of confidence in their own abilities and resilience to challenges and critique. At the same time the wider academic structures of the courses were viewed as providing a critical, high pressure, high stakes environment for skills development, particularly the ability to process information quickly and efficiently. Many graduates also highlighted the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, including clubs and sports as a way of developing a range of skills, particularly those associated with leadership roles in the labour market, including specific technical skills such as financial management.

Internships were particularly emphasised as being critical to further developing key skills (particularly collaboration, communication, and digital skills), understanding how academically oriented skills translate into the workplace, and gaining a deeper understanding of the labour market and what it means to work in professional contexts. Modern Languages degrees were particularly highlighted as supporting this kind of work-based skills formation, skills transfer, and experience since BA students spend a year abroad, often in employment. We found that the Modern Languages graduates in this study generally reported smooth labour market transitions which may be associated with this time spent in the workplace during their degrees. Innovative approaches to helping students develop relevant skills and gain employment experiences have been developed during the pandemic using the affordances of digital technologies and we recommend these be extended to enhance accessibility for all students.

TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF KNOWLEDGES

While all participants emphasised a range of key skills they developed during their degrees and how they were successfully deployed and valued in the labour market, many

were also particularly keen to emphasise the importance they attributed to the substantive subject knowledge they developed during their studies. Several argued that they deployed their transferable skills in the workplace through an epistemological framework developed through their degrees: skills were contextualised through subject specific knowledge, from history, theology, philosophy, to English literature and languages. For the participants in this study, transferable skills were not conceptualised as devoid of content. Rather, they were intimately tied to graduates' learning experiences and the knowledge they engaged with during their degrees.

However, participants also emphasised the transformative power of knowledge in shaping who they were. The majority of participants emphasised that their motivation for undertaking their degrees was firmly rooted in their interest in their subjects and saw the transformative induction into subject-specific bodies of knowledge that they experienced during their time at Oxford as the most important part of their degrees as the process of learning and engaging with Humanities knowledge was critical to the construction of their identities, values, and how they behaved in the world.

SELF-FORMATION

Broadly speaking, Oxford can be conceptualised as an embedded skills formation system where opportunities for students to develop their skills exist in standard teaching practices and extracurricular activities but students must exert their own agency to develop the skills and gain the experiences they are most interested in. Many described the agency that they exerted in their Oxford Humanities degrees as being key to forming the sense of confidence and resilience that served them well in the labour market as well shaping the way in which they engaged with knowledge and developed their identities. Participants described the agency their degrees afforded them as critical to navigating their Oxford experiences based on their own sets of interests, ambitions and values. Students described feeling empowered to balance developing the skills and experiences they felt they needed for a career and deepening their own knowledge in any way that wanted to depending on their own interests and ambitions. For many, this freedom to exert agency and form oneself was the defining aspect of an Oxford Humanities degree.

While some graduates described strategically leveraging the opportunities available to them at Oxford to enhance their employability, others described preferring to focus on other aspects of their degree experience. The latter group tended to have messier transitions into the labour market, which some found problematic. However, these participants generally felt they ultimately found a fulfilling career and particularly valued the space their degrees provided them to agentically form themselves in a way that most reflected their interests and values, whether they were focused on socialising, sports, knowledge, or employability.

WIDER VALUE OF HUMANITIES DEGREES: BEING HUMAN IN A CHANGING WORLD

Beyond the contributions an Oxford Humanities degree makes at an individual level, many participants were keen to emphasise the wider social, political and economic value of the Humanities and emphasised that they felt their degrees were a key part of propagating the public contributions of the Humanities in society.

A number of participants emphasised how they were, themselves, social and economic actors and made significant contributions to the economy and to society as active citizens, all of which could be traced back to their degrees. However, many particularly described feeling that Humanities knowledge enabled deep thinking and debate around the big issues affecting humanity. These issues included navigating a post-truth world dominated by fake news, social media and manipulation, the impact of technology on the labour market, climate change, energy needs, the growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and, currently, the social and economic issues related to COVID-19. Participants emphasised the role the Humanities had to play in shaping the narrative around these critical issues and democratising debate. Humanities subjects were emphasised as providing conceptual lenses and analytical tools for ensuring narratives and debates include human and relational aspects, beyond mere technicalities. Many participants emphasised that these kinds of conceptual tools and subject specific Humanities knowledge were essential to help people to be human in a changing world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In a policy context that is increasingly hostile towards Arts and Humanities subjects, it is important to note that all Oxford Humanities degrees are linked with positional advantages in the labour market and above average financial returns. At the same time, graduates emphasised the importance of being inducted into a transformative relationship with Humanities knowledge through their degrees which shaped their identities, values, and how they acted in society. Oxford Humanities degrees are particularly associated with freedom and empowering students to choose their own pathways during their degrees, with agency, focusing on a balance of relevant skills, experiences, and subject knowledge based on students own interests and ambitions. These findings highlight the limitations of narrow conceptualisations of degree value and the need to think about the value and more broadly the contributions of HE in more nuanced terms, that take into account complex career trajectories, graduates' agency and values, and wider public and common goods. We therefore make the following key recommendations

Institution-level Discourse

- The value of degrees and contributions of Higher Education should be thought of in broad terms. These should take into account private contributions of HE in terms of graduate outcomes and their transformative relationships with knowledge, and wider public contributions. This should be reflected in institution-level discussion of degree value.

- Graduate labour market outcomes and career trajectories are complex, evolve over time, and are rooted in varied ambitions that go beyond financial returns. Discussion of graduate outcomes should adopt a nuanced approach that draw on multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources to focus on graduates' abilities to meet their ambitions and the way in which they navigate the labour market over time, rather than attempting simply to determine the number of individuals in graduate jobs or only measuring salary data.

- Oxford Humanities graduates particularly valued the freedom to exercise their own agency in engaging in opportunities and activities that best suit their own interests, values, and ambitions. The university should attempt to maintain a balance between ensuring equity of access to opportunities that support students to develop relevant employability skills and experiences and ensuring student autonomy and agency to determine that their degree experiences align with their own interests, values, and ambitions.

Curriculum Design, Pedagogy and Subject Level Issues

- Students, graduates and employers all highlighted the importance of current teaching approaches for skills formation. It is, therefore, essential to ensure that very small group settings, including tutorials, remain at the heart of the Oxford Humanities pedagogic approach and that they remain a key part of Oxford University's skills formation and graduate employability strategy.

- Skills development and employability enhancement opportunities exist for students across a range of curricular and extracurricular contexts, often linked with subject-specific pathway. Therefore, a co-curricular mapping exercise should be undertaken for each Humanities subject to benefit teaching and learning and support students to understand how their experiences relate to their own employability and the labour market.

- Evidence suggests that graduates with language degrees have greater financial returns than their peers and transition into the labour market in a smoother way. This is likely to relate to the value of having technical language skills within the labour market and individuals spending a year abroad gaining valuable experience. Therefore,

  o all students taking Humanities degrees should be encouraged to use the opportunities available to them at Oxford to develop and evidence foreign language skills.

  o At a subject level, educators should explore ways in which opportunities for experiences relevant to the labour market could be embedded in the curriculum.

- Tutors and peers (as well as the Careers Service) shape the way in which students view their career options. Many participants described feeling pushed towards 'traditional career pathways' by these key stakeholders. The Careers Service is working with students to emphasise the wide range of career options available to them. It is recommended the Careers Service also explicitly targets all members of staff to broaden their thinking about careers and ensure they appreciate the diverse range of options available to Humanities Graduates.

Wider Issues

- Our research suggests that while an Oxford Humanities degree may have an initial levelling influence on graduates' labour market destinations across different socio-economic statuses, the intersection of SES, class, wealth, and social and cultural capital is complex and may adversely affect the way low SES graduates experience the labour market over the course of their careers. More work is needed to understand the influence of SES, class and social and cultural capital across career trajectories and the role universities can play in ensuring all graduates successfully navigate the labour market.

- This study was unable to engage with the experiences of students learning and developing relevant knowledge and skills during the pandemic or the cohort of students that graduated at into the COVID-19 labour market. The experiences of these students and graduates will be unique; understanding how they experienced their studies and transitions into the labour market, particularly across different minoritized groups, may have important implications for structuring learning, skills formation, and supporting transitions in the future. Therefore, it is recommended that research is undertaken to map the experiences of the COVID-19 generation of students and graduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has recast much of the Higher Education (HE) policy debate in the UK, and particularly England, over the last 12 months. A stretched economy, significant levels of graduate and youth unemployment, and fears over mounting unpaid student loan debt have increased the policy focus on fees and funding in HE and graduate labour market outcomes. Language of 'low return subjects' has come to dominate the HE policy landscape (Belfield et al., 2018; Britton et al., 2020) and recent policy documents have increasingly emphasised the value of a higher education in instrumental and largely economic terms, measured in graduates' salaries (e.g. DfE, 2021; H.M. Treasury, 2021). With policy attention increasingly focused on measurable financial outcomes, commentators are already highlighting that the Arts and Humanities are face increased criticism, reductions in funding, and limits on student numbers (Adams, 2021).

Underpinning this policy trend is a view that as the number of graduates within the labour market has grown, the value of the 'graduate premium' appears to have declined (Boero et al.'s, 2019), and that the lack of a graduate premium is disproportionately affecting some subjects. Analysis of financial returns on degree subjects using Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data has highlighted subjects that, given the increased HE fees and increased levels of student debt, do not appear to provide appropriate returns on students' initial investments in their education either in the short term (Belfield et al., 2018) or when attempts have been made to project earnings over individuals' life times (Britton et al., 2020). Arts and Humanities subjects are often highlighted in these analyses as providing poor financial returns to graduates.

However, a range of research projects have argued that closer analysis of UK labour force data has shown that average higher earnings of STEM graduates are driven up by a few highly paid specialists in medicine and dentistry (London Economics, 2020) and that LEO data used to analyse financial returns struggles to capture the nuances of messy career trajectories, further study, part time work, and self-employment. A number of research projects have also recently challenged assumptions about the Arts and Humanities and the labour market but showing that there is a strong demand by range of employers across all sectors for the skills that are often associated with Arts and Humanities Degrees (BA, 2017; Lyonette et al., 2017; BA, 2020; Robson et al., 2021). At the same time, an increasing number of commentators are critiquing the current dominance of employability within HE-related discourses, viewing it as reductive and failing to acknowledge the primary educational function of HE (Ashwin, 2020; Nussbaum, 2010), as ignoring the wider importance of degrees for individuals' formation (Marginson, 2018; Small, 2016); and failing to take into account the broader impact of the Humanities on society, politics and the economy (Bate, 2011; Belfiore & Upchurch, 2013).

Thus as the Humanities are facing increasing scrutiny, they are becoming a battleground for how value in Higher Education is conceptualised. This demands a detailed and nuanced discussion that takes into account economic conceptualisations of degree value in terms of private returns (as is currently emphasised in HE policy; DfE, 2021), as well as broader conceptualisations of educational value, the importance of knowledge and public and common goods (Marginson and Yang, 2021). Therefore, this project, undertaken on behalf of Oxford University Humanities Division, aims to examine the value of Oxford Humanities degrees in a way that captures this complexity: analysing the relationship between Oxford Humanities degrees and graduates' labour market destinations and employability, as well as individuals' perceptions of the wider personal, social, political and economic value of their degrees. This aims to combine conceptualisations of employment outcomes, employability, and broader contributions of Oxford Humanities degrees to graduates lives and, more generally, the economy and society.

In simple terms employability can be understood as graduates' capacity for getting and keeping fulfilling work (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). However, in broader terms, employability can be conceptualised as graduates' capability to 'move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment' (Hillage & Pollard, 1998: 2). As such, there is much more to employability than simply gaining a job within six months of graduation, a measure which underpins much of the current policy-related discourse on graduate employability. Such measures say little about the kind of work graduates take on or how skills, knowledge, and experience developed at university may be deployed. Similarly, analyses of initial destinations rarely acknowledge the fact that many graduates' first jobs may be simple gateways into the labour market, with individuals taking on low level jobs initially to deal with financial pressures and debt. Therefore, a key part of this study is to examine Oxford Humanities graduates' transition into employment and their wider career trajectories in order to understand the ways in which these graduates have navigated the labour market and how their degrees have shaped their trajectories and experiences.

This project builds on previous work undertaken on Oxford Humanities graduates, notably Kreager's (2013) study. This examined the life courses of individuals, relating career trajectories back to their Humanities degrees. The report highlighted key sectors Oxford Humanities graduates have worked in, primarily the civil service, law, education, and finance, and emphasised that successful career trajectories were often dependent on skills developed through participants' Humanities degrees, particularly the capacity for succinct and persuasive written and verbal communication coupled with critical analysis and synthesis.

However, the study focused on graduates who matriculated in the period 1960-1989. Such graduates studied and developed their careers in Higher Education policy contexts, political economies, and labour markets that are all significantly different to those experienced by Oxford's current students or even individuals who graduated in the last two decades. As described above massification, marketisation, changes to university funding models, and increased tuition fees have radically transformed the HE landscape. At the same time, increased emphasis on digital skills, growth of the

knowledge economy, and the increasing prominence of the gig and platform economy have all reshaped the ways in which traditional career trajectories are conceptualised and experienced, while COVID-19 has provided futher disruption and accelerated the changing nature of work. As such the way in which individuals' degrees intersect with the labour market has been fundamentally reconstituted since Kreager's study. There is, therefore, a need to re-examine the professional experiences, destinations, career trajectories, and employability skills of a more recent cohort of Oxford Humanities graduates in a way that takes into account this changed landscape and further problematises the concept of degree value in broad terms.

There is also a need to extend the scope of Kreager's (2013) research to provide a deeper and more rigorous analysis. Previous work did not control for the effect of joint honour degrees where one of the degree subjects falls outside of the Humanities Division. The impact of non-Humanities degrees on wider trajectories may influence analysis at an aggregate level and it is possible that the effect of Economics for students taking PPE may be particularly pronounced. As such greater analytical attention to joint honours degrees is required. There is also a need to gain a deeper understanding of employers' perceptions of Oxford Humanities degrees as distinct from Humanities degrees from other institutions in order to engage in more depth with signalling and Human Capital Theory when assessing educational sorting and job assignment (Keep, 2018). Finally, there is a need to examine issues of gender, access, and mobility by socio-economic background, to understand how different kinds of graduates experience employment.

1.1 AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The project therefore has the following key aims:

- To examine Oxford Humanities graduates' labour market destinations.
- To examine the relationship between Oxford Humanities graduates' degrees and their career trajectories, employability skills, and how individuals experience and navigate the labour market.
- To examine the potential wider personal, social, political and economic value of Oxford Humanities degrees.

The project has been guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main destinations and career trajectories of Oxford's Humanities graduates?
2. What employability skills do relevant stakeholders see degrees in Humanities from Oxford providing?
3. Beyond labour market outcomes, what wider value do relevant stakeholders see Humanities degrees from Oxford providing?
4. What do relevant stakeholders see as distinct in an Oxford Humanities degree?

For this study, 'relevant stakeholders' refers to Oxford Humanities graduates, current students, and employers.

The project has focused on undergraduate and taught post-graduate (PGT) degrees and addresses the research questions at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. While understanding the experiences of Humanities doctoral students is critical, Post Graduate Research degrees (PGR) have not been included in this project as the issues experienced by doctoral students and graduates vary significantly from those experienced by PGT graduates, particularly as many engage with a largely academic labour market (EmmioÐlu, et al., 2017). It is recommended that a future, separate study of graduates from Oxford Humanities research degrees be undertaken to examine these issues in sufficient depth.

1.2 PROJECT TEAM

The project team has brought together expertise from two globally recognised research centres in University of Oxford's Department of Education: the Centre for Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) and the Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE). Staff in both centres have extensive experience of undertaking research on the graduate labour market, graduate destinations, and HE policy, using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The team and their roles in the project were:

- Dr James Robson (Principal Investigator), Director of SKOPE and Associate Professor of Tertiary Education Systems. Robson had overall responsibility for the project, research design, fieldwork, analysis and writing the report.
- Dr Emily Murphy (Co-Investigator), SKOPE Research Fellow (until 2020) and Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Luxembourg. Murphy led the quantitative design and analysis and co-wrote some sections of the report.
- Professor Simon Marginson (Co-Investigator), Professor of International Higher Education and Director of CGHE. Marginson provided expert advice on HE systems, policy, and the intersection of HE and the labour market, and contributed to the report.
- Professor Ewart Keep (Co-Investigator), Emeritus Professor of Education, Training and Skills and previous Director of SKOPE. Keep provided expert advice on graduate employability, skills ,and the labour market, and contributed to the report.
- Nuzha Nuseibeh, Research Assistant and DPhil Student. Nuseibeh undertook quantitative data cleaning and analysis, qualitative fieldwork and analysis, and co-wrote sections of the report.
- Alice Tawell, Research Assistant and DPhil Student. Tawell undertook qualitative fieldwork and analysis.
- Ben Hart, Research Assistant and DPhil Student. Hart undertook qualitative fieldwork and quantitative analysis.
- Jonah Stewart, Research Assistant and DPhil Student. Stewart undertook qualitative fieldwork and quantitative analysis.
- Nicholas Levi-Gardes, MSc student, undertook a number of graduate interviews.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research questions outlined above have been addressed through an innovative overlapping, three-phased, multiple-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of alumni and graduate outcomes data with in-depth qualitative interviews with a sample of graduates, drawn from alumni records and through open calls for participation, and current Humanities students. This was triangulated with data from a range of employers, focused on perceptions of Oxford Humanities graduates, gathered through interviews and a questionnaire distributed through the Oxford University Careers Service, and analysis of skills demands surveys.

In order to capture a range of graduate experiences, this project has particularly focused on individuals who matriculated after 1996 from both undergraduate degrees and taught post graduate degrees (PGTs). This provided a focus across a 20 year period of time. This afforded an overview of individuals' immediate destinations and transitions into the labour market (or further study) following graduation as well as their wider trajectories and more settled career destinations after the immediate challenges associated with leaving university had been navigated. Although this focus does not provide information on individuals in the later stages of their lives and careers, it offers rigorous and rich information on a group of graduates that is most likely to have experienced a policy and economic landscape similar to current and the next generation of students.

This mixed-methods approach offered a more nuanced understanding of how graduates' careers develop over time than studies that focus purely on earnings data at a fixed point soon after graduation. The study therefore provides detailed insight into the relationship between degrees, knowledge and skills, graduate outcomes, and labour market experiences through quantitative analysis and rich qualitative data from students, graduates, and employers.

The bulk of the fieldwork took place in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Although graduate data does not include the cohort of students that graduated into the extremely challenging COVID-19 economy, it does include the graduates who navigated the 2008 recession. Parallels can be drawn between the current economic situation and that of 2008 and students graduating into the post COVID-19 labour market are likely to experience some of the same challenges that their peers did a decade ago. However, as detailed below, in order to gain greater insight into this issue, we undertook further interviews with a selection of employers in spring 2021 to examine the COVID-19 labour market and the challenges Oxford Humanities are likely to face over the next five years.

2.1 PHASE 1: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ALUMNI DATA

2.1.1 Data and sample

In order to understand variation in Humanities graduates' educational and labour market transitions and destinations, in-depth quantitative analysis of data drawn from the University's Development and Alumni Relations System (DARS) was undertaken. Our sample consists of graduates who matriculated after 1996, and for whom valid information on their work status was available in DARS. For each case, we analysed individuals' latest observed occupational status. To get an accurate picture of careers which unfolded at a time of expansive change in the UK labour market as of the 2000s, we imposed a maximum age range of 54 years for our sample of the working population. We took all individuals in the alumni records system who were recorded as having graduated from an undergraduate Humanities degree at Oxford (N=8,022), and a further sample of those who had matriculated on a (taught) postgraduate Humanities degree at Oxford (N=1,289). This provided us with a unique dataset containing a balanced sample of male (49.5%) and female (50.5%) Humanities graduates.

2.1.2 Analytical strategy and measures
Additional data sources

It was important to understand how the educational and employment items in our dataset linked with the broader employment landscape. This required us to utilise data from current government statistical releases, the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, Office for National Statistics data extracts, and Graduate Outcomes (GO) data. These provided us with the latest, nationally representative estimates on annual gross earnings (in GBP) and graduates' sustained employment rates five years after having left higher education, as well as overall numbers of jobs in the context of the UK labour market. Crosswalks were generated between these data sources; the LEO degree subject list was harmonised with the DARS list of degree subjects, leaving us with six categories matched to LEO data.

Analysis focuses on graduates who, following full-time education, would have entered the labour market from 2000 onwards. The estimates presented refer to labour markets globally, as graduates are employed both in the British labour market and abroad, although the limitations of the available data have meant that mapping geographical destinations with certainty has proved to be problematic, although an attempt has been made using GO data. The analytical sample covers data from the period 1996 to 2019, representing the job profiles of 9,001 individuals aged between 21 and 54 (N=9,311).

Underpinning the analysis is the idea that while, through the DARS data, we observe individual graduates at a single point in time, by focusing on a 20 year window, we gain a sense of graduates' trajectories at an aggregate level. This provides an indication of how, in a generalised form, graduates progress through the labour market based on how long ago they completed their degrees. On average, the Humanities graduates observed in the following statistical analyses report being 3 years since graduation (with a standard deviation of 4.2 years).

Aggregation of categorial data: occupation and industry coding schemes

Every effort was made to categorise the occupational and industry destinations in a way that is comparable with national and international classification systems. An extensive analysis of employment status was therefore undertaken. Occupations were categorised into International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO, developed at the International Labour Organisation), initially by ISCO-88 1-digit major occupations, then into ISCO-minor occupational 3-digit codes to enable more fine-grained detailed analysis. In total, 61 occupational codes appear in the data, and for any with less than 40 observations per category, we collapsed these into neighbouring cells. A classification system of 16 occupations was thereby generated. ISCO codes were used as they provided more fine-grained detail and analytical flexibility when analysing the DARS data, particularly in relation to international destinations, when compared with SOC (Standard Occupational Codes), which are used in GO data. Appropriate crosswalks were developed across datasets to harmonise analyses.

For identifying sectors of economic activity, we re-coded DARS categories into an international industry schema according to NACE (Nomenclature des Activités Économiques dans la Communauté Européenne). These were subsequently aggregated into a 10 sector schema which allowed for sufficient numbers per category in our analyses. To gauge the robustness of our employment categories within our analytical sample, we undertook comparisons with the loosely grouped job categories and other available job codes in the entire DARS dataset, and found these were roughly in alignment.

Limitations

Though the DARS at Oxford collates a rich set of data sourced across Colleges, Departments and individuals self-reporting, alumni data in general are known to represent a more positively selected sample of the general population referenced. In this case, this means those willing to provide information on their current work lives may also be those least likely to report less favourable work scenarios, something which must be borne in mind when making any inferences from the analyses contained in this report. However, the alumni data provides richer insight into the graduate careers than ONS, LEO and GO data. While these datasets provide important information on salaries, they come with their own set of limitations. For example, as highlighted in a recent report on Arts, Humanities and Social Science graduates by the British Academy, LEO does not account clearly for region of employment and can mask a range of underlying characteristics related to socio-economic background, structural disadvantage, and prior attainment and cannot offer insight into career trajectories in a meaningful way (see Guild HE, 2018; Lindley and McIntosh, 2015; London Economics, 2020).

In other words, all the data sets have limitations and so are most valuable when they are used together and in conjunction with detailed qualitative work with graduates and employers.

2.2 PHASE 2: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

2.2.1 In-depth interviews with a representative sample of graduates

In order to contextualise the quantitative analysis and deepen understanding of the value of Humanities degrees, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selection of Oxford Humanities graduates (n = 70). These interviews provided in-depth information on graduates' career trajectories, the ways in which they navigated transition, the relevant skills they felt their degrees had provided them with, and their perceptions of the wider value of a Humanities degree from Oxford. Interviews were undertaken with individuals who had graduated at different points within the study window, ensuring participants at different stages in their careers were included in the study. Participants were also selected to represent the key employment sectors in which graduates worked as highlighted through the quantitative analysis phase, and the different Humanities degrees taught at Oxford University.

Participants were recruited in two main ways: an email was sent through the university's Alumni Office to all Oxford University Humanities graduates that had shared their details with the university; and an open call for participants advertised through social media, targeted specifically at Oxford Humanities graduates. The use of social media as a recruitment tool was aimed at ensuring participation from a wider group of graduates than only those willing to engage with the Alumni Office. As described above, although Oxford University's alumni data are extensive, individuals who have shared their details with the Alumni Office are necessarily self-selecting and so may represent a group of graduates who feel positive about the university and/or their subsequent experiences in the labour market. By recruiting participants through social media as well as alumni networks, we aimed to diversify the voices within the study, acknowledge the existence of both negative and positive voices, and ensure a selection of participants that represented Oxford Humanities graduates as a whole.

Both the Alumni email and the social media adverts contained a link to a short questionnaire that potential participants were asked to complete. Alongside providing background information on the study, this invited individuals to register their interest to participate and gathered data on their current job roles and employment sectors, degree(s) taken at Oxford University, and the dates of their matriculation and graduation. More than 500 graduates responded to this questionnaire. From this group a selection of 112 graduates was made, ensuring representation of employment sectors, subject areas, degree type, and different career stages. These individuals were then contacted and invited to participate in an in-depth interview. This resulted in a final sample of 70 graduates and a selection of participants that maintained broad representation within the parameters of the original sampling frame. All interviews were conducted one-to-one by a project team member, either in-person or over the phone/ online, and lasted between 45 and 85 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

It is important to note that the fieldwork was carried out in 2019 and so did not include any graduates transitioning into the COVID-19 labour market. This is a unique cohort of individuals and, while there was not scope in this study to include them, we recommend that further research be undertaken to follow the COVID-19 graduate cohort, their labour market experiences and outcomes, and what lessons can be learned for future support structures.

2.2.2 In-depth interviews with a selection of current Humanities students

To provide a more rounded understanding of the value of Oxford Humanities degrees and to provide information on the current context, and the skills current students associated with their degrees, semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with a small selection of current students (n = 22). These focused on students' motivations for undertaking their degrees, their aspirations, how they anticipated their degrees would support them, the skills they felt they were developing, and perceptions of the wider value of their degrees and, more broadly, Humanities subjects.

Potential participants were contacted initially via email through individual departments within the Humanities Division. This email distributed a short questionnaire to students providing information about the project, inviting them to participate, and gathering information on subject area, degree type, matriculation year, and expected graduation year. In total, 102 participants responded to the questionnaire indicating that they would be willing to be interviewed. A selection of 22 participants was made representing a range of subject areas, degree types and matriculation dates. All interviews were conducted one-to-one by a member of the project team, either in-person or over the phone/ online, were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

As above, it is important to note that these interviews occurred in 2019 and so provide a snapshot of student experience before the COVID-19. While the pandemic has created a wide range of challenges and a cohort with a different experiences and mechanisms of skills formation. While, examining these fell outside of the scope of this study, we also recommend that further research (ideally longitudinal) is undertaken with this group of students to understand their university and labour market experiences and the lessons that can be learned for appropriate support structures in a post-COVID-19 world.

2.2.3 Analysis of graduate and student interview data

Graduate and student interview data were analysed separately as two distinct data sets. However, the same analytical procedures were adopted. In each instance the transcript data were analysed holistically through a cyclical and iterative process of reduction, synthesis and conclusion building based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytical framework, drawing on a coding framework comprising both inductive codes that emerged from the data and deductive codes based on a review of literature on graduate destinations, graduate engagement with the labour market, and employability skills formation and deployment. To ensure rigour, analysis was undertaken collaboratively across the team. In the first instance, team members all separately analysed a selection of five transcripts and each developed an initial coding frame. These were then collaboratively reconciled, with issues around emerging concepts discussed and clarified, in order to produce a working 'master' coding frame. The transcripts were then divided up across the team to be analysed individually. Team members met regularly to discuss changes to the master coding frame and any issues that emerged from the analytical process. This ensured consistency and inter-analyst reliability.

For the graduate interviews, alongside coding, analysts also produced detailed narratives as vignettes for each participant. These provided a holistic sense of graduates' career trajectories and journeys through the labour market at an individual level. A selection of these narrative vignettes, representing different typologies of graduates' university experiences, career trajectories, and engagement in the labour market, are presented as an appendix to this report.

2.3 PHASE 3: EMPLOYER DATA

Employers are critical stakeholders in terms of the way graduates experience and navigate labour markets. Additionally, within policy discourse, it is often argued that skills associated with Humanities degrees are less valued than STEM skills by employers. Therefore, the quantitative analysis and qualitative interviews with graduates and students were triangulated with employer perceptions of Oxford Humanities graduates. Employer data were collected in three main ways: a questionnaire sent out by the Oxford University Careers Service to all employers within their network; interviews with a selection of employers across key sectors drawn from SKOPE and CGHE networks of partner organisations; and interviews with graduates where those in more senior positions had been involved in recruitment and employment decision-making and so were able to comment about these issues from the perspectives of their organisations.

The questionnaire was deployed and interviews were conducted in 2019, before the pandemic. However, additional interviews were undertaken in the spring of 2021 with employers from the key sectors identified in the quantitative analysis of graduate destinations. These focused on examining employer perceptions of the emerging COVID-19 labour market and the longer-term implications of the challenging economic context for Humanities graduates' employment.

Across both stages, employers from the following key areas of the labour market were included in the study: finance, management consultancy, law, publishing, the civil service, education and higher education administration, creative industries, digital industries, marketing, and start-ups. In all instances, senior members of the organisation were interviewed, including Chairs, CEOs, Partners, C-Suite Executives, CFOs, CTOs, and HR Managers.

When working with employers in this way, there are always questions over reliability and the extent to which individuals are able to represent the strategic approaches of their organisations (some of which will have multiple recruitment strategies in different regional, national, or global contexts). However, although not necessarily fully representative of the labour market as a whole, the data gathered in this phase of the study provided important insight into some of the attitudes of a range of different employers, representing different sized organisations and a wide range of sectors. These perspectives were integrated with larger scale analyses of skills demands across the UK labour market (see, IFS; Edge Foundation) and emerging analyses of skills associated with Humanities degrees (see BA, 2020; Robson et al., 2021 etc.) to give a holistic picture of employer needs and alignment between those and the skills Oxford Humanities graduates can bring to the labour market.

All data were coded thematically and compared with graduate and student interview data to contextualise the claims, arguments and assumptions made by the participants. Employer perspectives on Oxford Humanities graduates and current and future skills needs have been presented in a distinct section within this report.

2.4 ETHICS

The study was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018) and the design was approved by Oxford's Central University's Research Ethics Committee. All participants were provided with details about the project and information on how their data would be used and stored so they could provide informed consent. All information provided by participants (students, graduates and employers) has been treated confidentially and fully anonymised. All data has been stored securely and in accordance with GDPR and a data management plan approved by Oxford University. In this report all names of participants are randomly generated pseudonyms and no personal information that would reveal participants' identities has been included. When using direct quotations from participants, every effort has been made to avoid the inclusion of personal information that might identify the individuals concerned and, in some cases, direct quotations have been deliberately paraphrased to ensure participant anonymity. The names of specific organisations have only been mentioned where there is no likelihood of identifying individual members of staff, otherwise organisations have been described in generic terms or in relation to the relevant sector or key operational focus.

SECTION I
OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES IN THE LABOUR MARKET: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

3. SECTORS

This chapter provides a detailed oversight of the main sectors in which Oxford Humanities graduates work, drawing primarily on analysis of alumni records of 9,311 individuals who graduated between 1996 and 2019. As indicated in Appendix one, analysis has deliberately controlled for the compounding factor of joint honours degrees, particularly where one subject sits outside the Humanities. Particular attention was paid to PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics), where Economics sits within the Social Sciences.
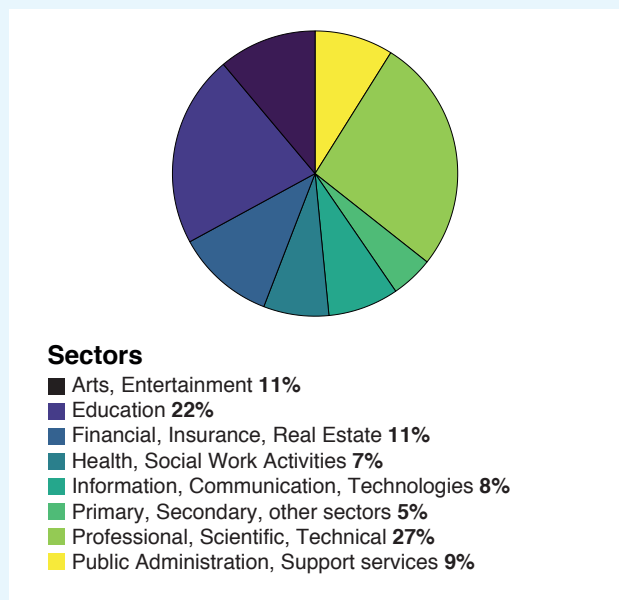
3.1 MAIN SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT

As illustrated in Figure 1, to gain an initial understanding of where the majority of the Oxford Humanities alumni within the sample go following graduation, we analysed the spread of destinations at a sectoral level across matriculation/graduation cohorts (birth cohorts) and gender (See Appendix A2 for more information). This highlighted:

1. Oxford Humanities graduates work in a striking range of sectors

2. 'Education' and 'Professional, Scientific and Technical' sectors were the most common destinations for Oxford Humanities graduates comprising close to half of all the working population of Humanities alumni aged 21–54, at 22% and 27% respectively.

Oxford graduates are almost evenly split between three sectors making up another 31%: the 'Arts and Entertainment' sector draws in 11% of graduates, as does the 'Financial, Insurance and Real Estate' sector. 9% of the sample worked in 'Public Administration and Support Services', and the 'ICT' (9%) and 'Health and Social Work' (7%) sectors together encompassed 16% of Humanities graduate employment over the last twenty years.

Figure 1. Employment destinations of graduates by sector, percentages

Sectors
- ■ Arts, Entertainment **11%**
- ■ Education **22%**
- ■ Financial, Insurance, Real Estate **11%**
- ■ Health, Social Work Activities **7%**
- ■ Information, Communication, Technologies **8%**
- ■ Primary, Secondary, other sectors **5%**
- ■ Professional, Scientific, Technical **27%**
- ■ Public Administration, Support services **9%**

3.2 SECTORS OF EMPLOYMENT BY DEGREE SUBJECT

To provide more fine-grained picture, we analysed sector destinations across different degree subjects, illustrated in Figure 2. This shows each sector broken down according to the thirteen possible degree subjects associated with the Humanities Division (with certain combination degrees collapsed as discussed in Appendix 1). Each subject is shown as a proportion of the total; all subjects combined are summed to a total of 100.

As perhaps might be expected, PPE graduates dominate the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector, although they also represent a large proportion of the Humanities graduates in the Public Administration and Support Services sector, the Professional, Scientific and Technical professions, as well as the Primary and Secondary Services sector. By contrast, there are few PPE graduates in the Education or the Health and Social Work sectors, and a particularly small percentage working in the Arts and Entertainment sector. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, relatively few PPE graduates are employed in the ICT sector.

By contrast, English graduates are very heavily represented in both the Arts/Entertainment sector and the ICT sector (which includes not only tech jobs but also communications roles). They are also relatively well represented in the Education sector, and make up a moderate proportion of the Humanities graduates in the Health/Social Work sector and the Professions, Technical and Scientific sector. The sector with the fewest English graduates is the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector. Fine Art graduates (from the Ruskin School) and Music graduates are most heavily represented in the Arts/Entertainment sector, while Theology graduates are most heavily represented in the Health and Social work sector (which includes the clergy).

There is a roughly equal spread of History graduates across all the sectors, though most prominently in the Public Administration and Support Services sector (which includes Civil Service jobs), the Professional/Scientific sector (which includes researcher positions) and the Primary and Secondary Services sector. Modern Languages graduates take up a smaller proportion of the Humanities graduates across the sectors relative to the History graduates, but are likewise spread roughly evenly across them all. They are most prominent, however, in the Professional/Scientific sector, the Financial/Insurance sector and the Education sector.

A key finding from this analysis is that, by in large, all Oxford Humanities degrees are very well represented across a wide range of different sectors, but that History degrees and Modern Languages degrees appear to provide the greatest flexibility of opportunity for graduates.

Figure 2. Employment Sector Composition by Humanities subjects, relative percentages
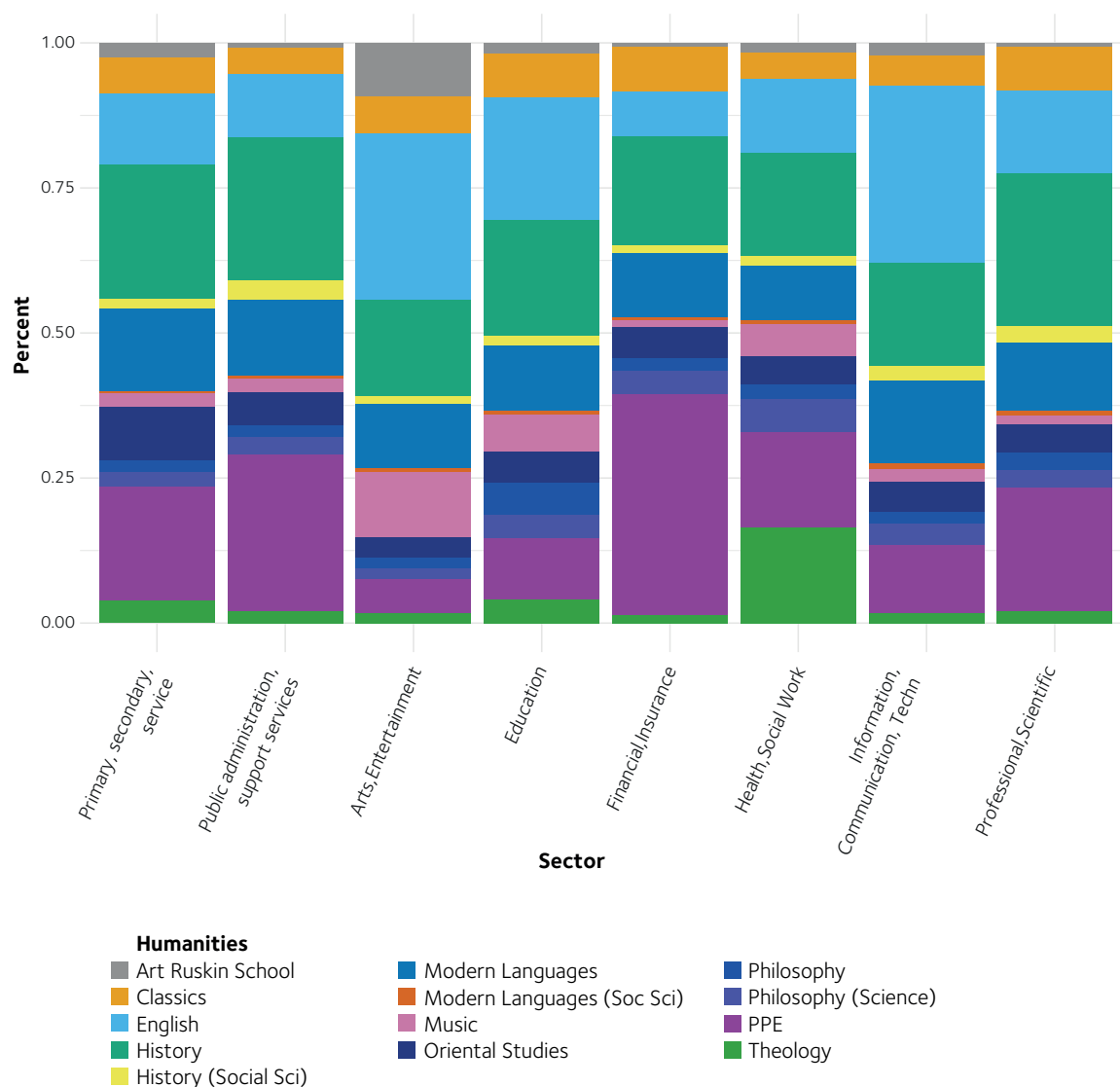
3.3 EMPLOYMENT SECTOR BY GENDER AND GRADUATION DATE

Since the mid-1990s women across the UK, specifically younger women, have dramatically increased both their overall rates of participation in higher education and in sustained employment in the labour market. As a result, it is to be expected that notable differences arise when we come to outlining the makeup of employment sectors according to when Humanities graduates would have entered employment. This can be seen by comparing Figures 3 and 4, which show the total percentage of Oxford Humanities graduates across the eight key sectors: each sector is broken down according to four educational cohorts with percentages summing to a total of 100.

The sectors that have seen the greatest increases in male Oxford Humanities graduates in the most recent matriculation cohort are the ICT sector, the Public Administration and Support Services sector, and the Primary/Secondary Service sectors. The ICT sector in particular saw a large increase of Humanities graduates entering between the 1996–2000 and 2001–2005 cohorts, as did the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector. However, the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector also has a much smaller percentage of graduates

from the most recent cohort (2011–2010) working in it than all previous cohorts; the same is true for the Arts and Entertainment (though this is not the case for their female counterparts) and the Professional, Scientific and Technical sectors. The sector with the most balanced intake of graduates across all cohorts is the Health and Social Work activities sector.

For women, the picture is drastically different—across all sectors there is a much younger composition, with the most recently matriculated cohort (2011–2019) being highly represented in Health and Social Work activities, the Public Administration sector and the Primary/Secondary Service sectors. The ICT sector in particular shows a much higher percentage of the most recently matriculated group relative to earlier matriculation cohorts. This may be due to a combination of the general growth of the technology sector in the labour market, as well as the boom in online journalism. Interestingly, the same is not true for the male graduates, who are employed in the ICT sector with the same frequency as earlier educational cohorts.

A key finding from this analysis is, therefore, an indication that female Humanities graduates have increasingly benefited from growth in the ICT sector.

Figure 3. (Male) Employment Sector by Humanities graduate cohorts, relative percentages
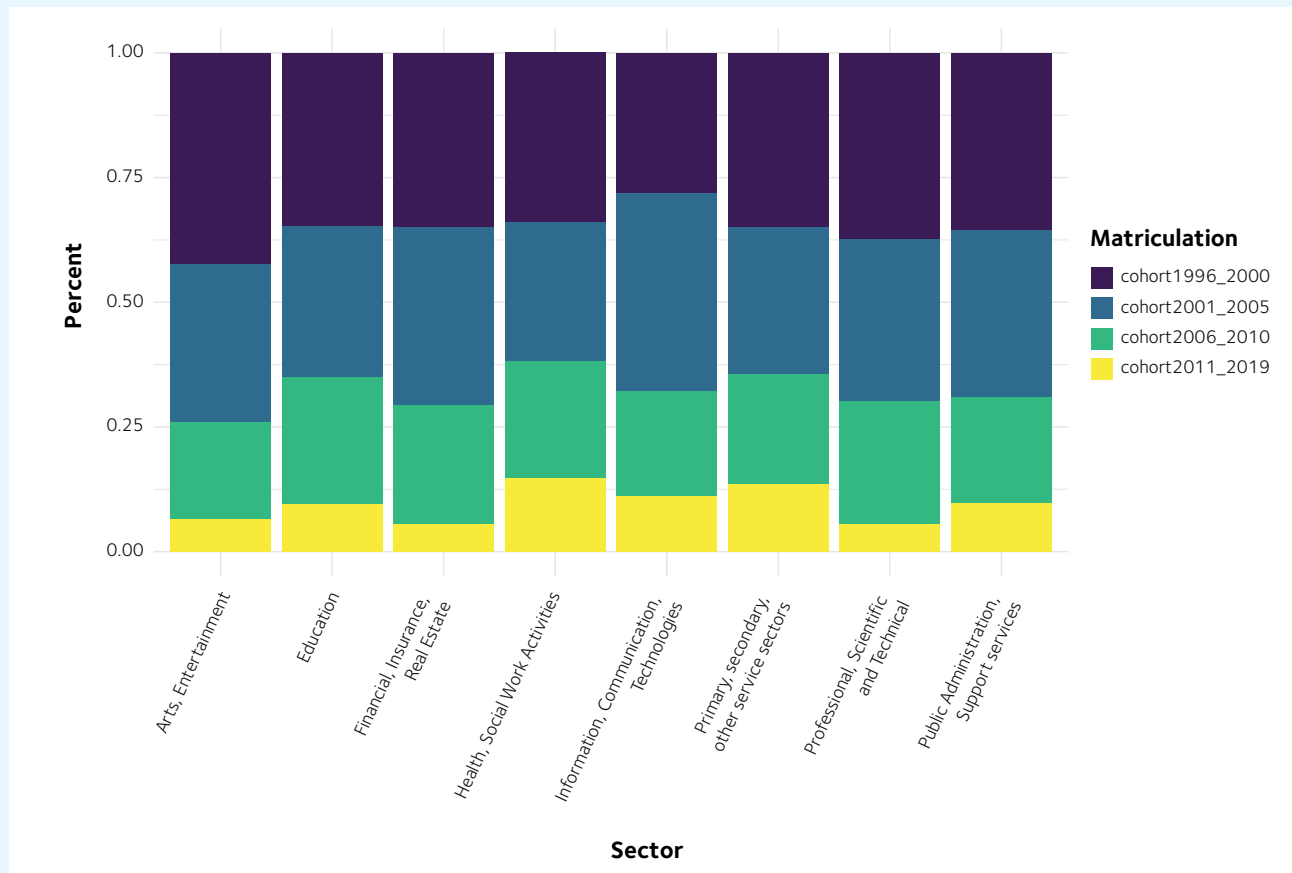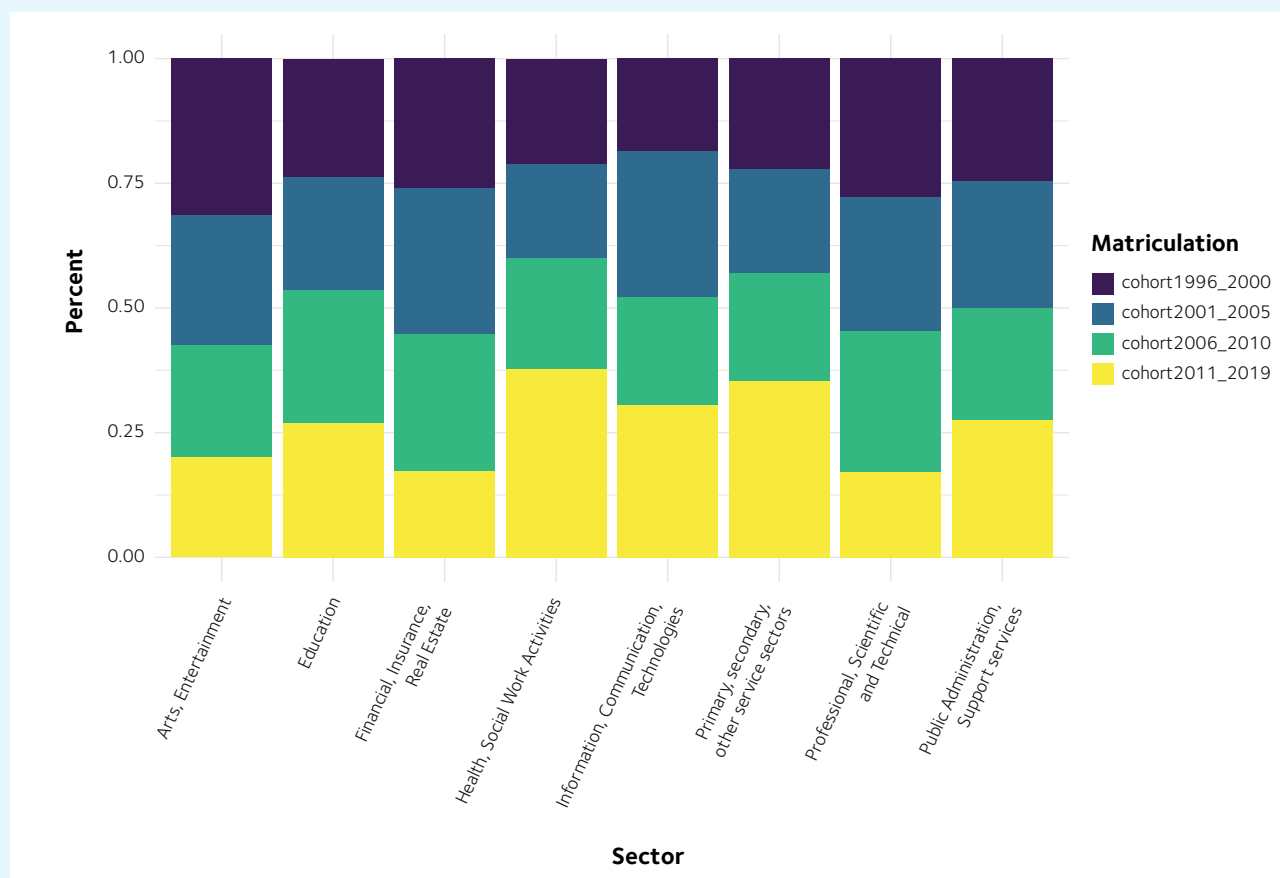
Figure 4. (Female) Employment Sector by Humanities graduate cohorts, relative percentages

3.4 THE PROBABILITIES OF OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES ENTERING DIFFERENT SECTORS

While the above analyses show connections between particular subjects, cohorts, genders and sectors, other confounding factors may contribute to the patterns outlined above. Therefore, it is important to distinguish whether these same patterns are likely to hold when controlling for these compounding factors, for example, in the event that we keep the gender variance in numbers of women between English and Philosophy degrees constant.

We have therefore undertaken a series of multinomial logistic regression. Entering a few strong predictors of employment destinations into our model equations allows for the analysis of how a set of factors that differentiate Humanities graduates, namely demographic characteristics such as gender and age, alongside educational characteristics such as degree type and degree subject area, each combine to shape the likelihood that Humanities graduates enter into particular sectors of the labour market.

Coefficient estimates are converted into average marginal effects (with confidence intervals to indicate how precisely we can say that these predicted average effects for our graduate sample sit within a particular range as displayed). What these marginal point estimates identify is the average effects of each factor on predicting the likelihood of a person being observed

entering into any of the eight defined sectors as opposed to in reference to our baseline specifications. In the model, equations estimated that this translates into the following reference categories: being a 1) male; 2) between the age of 39-54; 3) a history graduate; 4) in the Education sector; and 5) holding an undergraduate degree.

Looking across the two columns in Figure 5, a few key statistics emerge:

3.4.1 Demographic factors

It seems that gender alone is only a critical factor for two employment sector destinations. All else being equal, female graduates were considerably less likely than males to go into the Financial, Insurance, Real Estate sector with a difference of 5 percentage points (pp.), but slightly more likely to go into Health and Social Services.

In terms of age differences, some marked variation is noticeable when we compare those sectors that represent growing versus more stable sections of the employment structure, such as the ICT sector, but which may be considered less traditional routes to employment for Humanities graduates than the Education sector. Findings in this area can be summarised as follows:

- With all else being equal, 21-29 year-old graduates are less likely to work in the Arts and Entertainment sector than 39-54 year-old graduates, but much more likely to

Figure 5. Estimated Likelihood of Entry into each Employment Sector Average Marginal Effects, with 95% Confidence Intervals
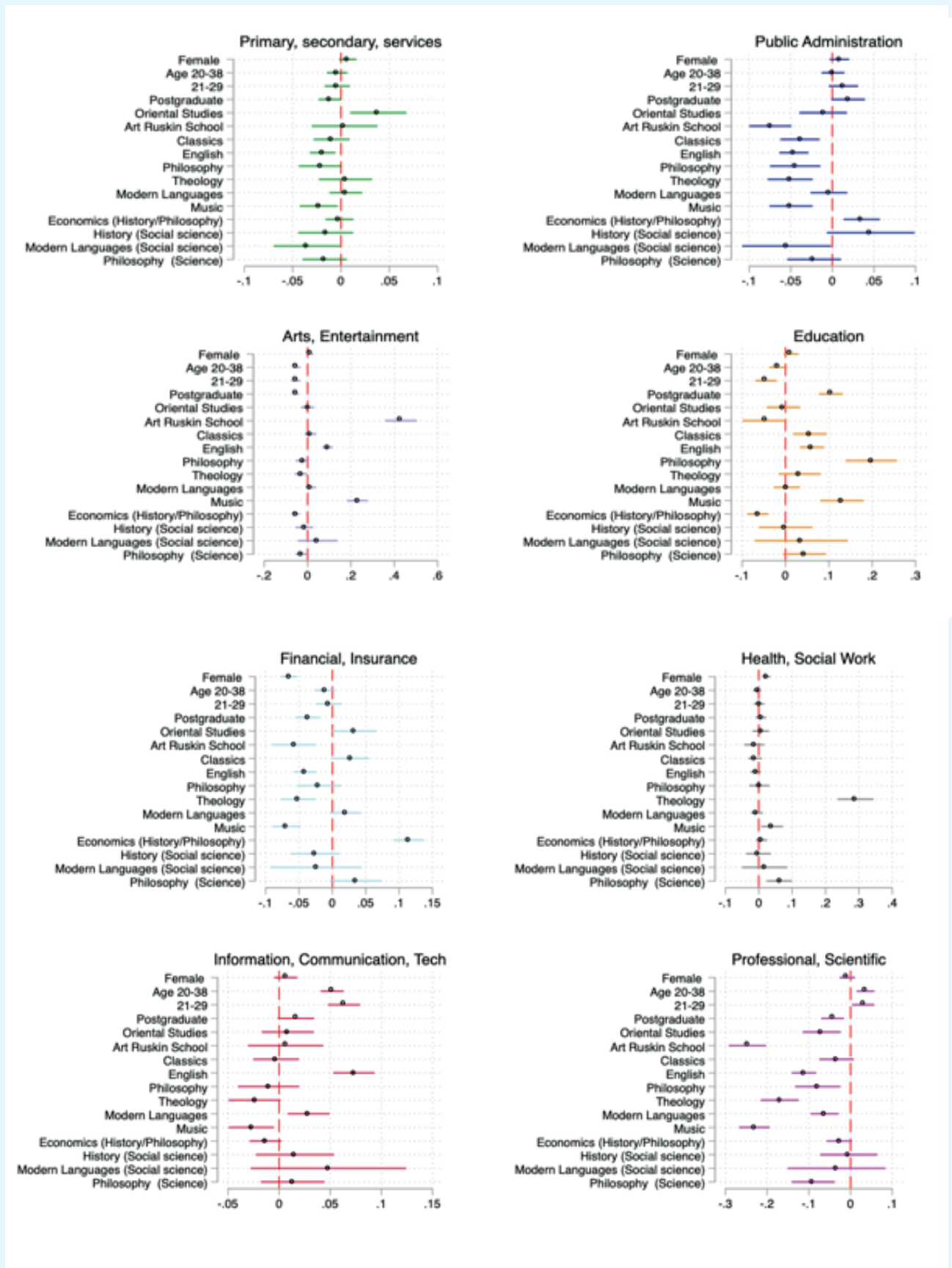
work in ICT (with a difference of 6 pp.) as well as Public Administration and other Administration Support Services, and the Professional, Technical and Scientific sectors.

- Likewise, 30-38-year old graduates are less likely to work in the Arts and Entertainment sector than 39-54-year-olds, but more likely to work in the ICT and Professional, Technical and Scientific sectors.

3.4.2 Educational factors

- Taught post-graduates were less likely to go into almost all sectors, relative to undergraduates. Oxford Humanities graduates have higher chances of having a career in Education, which includes academia, suggesting a PGT Humanities degree from Oxford is, for many the first step on a pathway into academia.

3.4.3 Humanities subject-specific effects

- Oriental Studies graduates are more likely than History graduates to end up in Primary, Secondary and Other Services.

- Classics graduates from Oxford are more likely to enter into Education and significantly less likely than History graduates to go into Public Administration and other Administration Support Services, Health and Social Services, and Professional Technical and Scientific professions.

- English graduates are less likely than History graduates to go into all of the aforementioned sectors other than Arts/ Entertainment and ICT, into which they are significantly more likely to enter. This may be linked to the fact that many jobs within the ICT sector are now linked with publishing and journalism, work commonly associated with English graduates.

- Graduates from the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art were much more likely to go into the Creative industries than History graduates, and less likely to go into Professional, Technical & Scientific professions. This close connection between Ruskin-based degrees and graduates working in the Creative Industries was particularly noticeable.

- Similarly, Music graduates from Oxford were more likely than History graduates to go into the Arts/Entertainment industries, but much less likely to go into all other sectors, apart from Health and Social Services. The close links between Art and Music Oxford degrees and the Creative, Arts and Entertainment sectors is particularly noticeable given that it is often highlighted that there is a significant oversupply of graduates attempting to gain jobs in these areas (Frennette & Dowd, 2011).

- Theology graduates are much more likely than History graduates to go into Health and Social Services, but less likely to go into Professional, Technical and Scientific professions, as well as the Finance/Insurance/Real Estate sectors, Arts/Entertainment industries, and the Public Administration and Other Administrative Services sectors.

- Philosophy graduates are much less likely than History graduates to go into Primary, Secondary and Other Service, Public Administration and Other Administrative Services, and Arts/Entertainment industries. They are also less likely to go into all other sectors.

3.4.4 Combination degree differences

The estimates in Figure 5. suggest that where expansive employment options exist in the financial sector, it particularly draws in Oxford graduates who have combined a Humanities subject with Economics.

- PPE (as well as Economics and Philosophy/History) graduates are much more likely than History graduates to go into the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector, and less likely than History graduates to go into the Arts/ Entertainment sector. They are, however, more likely than History graduates to go into all other sectors, apart from ICT.

- Philosophy and Science graduates, on the other hand, are more likely to go into Health and Social Services than History graduates, though they too are less likely to go into the Professional, Technical and Scientific sector.

4. OCCUPATIONS AND ROLES

4.1 KEY OCCUPATIONS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

In order to get a clear understanding of not only the areas in which Humanities graduates are working, but also the types of roles they occupy, an analytical breakdown of the distribution of the graduates by occupational structure was undertaken. While the coding of these occupations based on available job titles presents a range of well known challenges, Figures 6 and 7 clearly show Oxford Humanities graduates are working in a wide range of professional occupations, indicating Oxford Humanities degrees provide a great deal of flexibility in the labour market.

As the figures illustrate, the majority of graduates work as business professionals (21%), which includes management consultancy as well as more generic roles across business contexts and legal professionals (13%). Certain professional occupations which are commonly thought of as typical career trajectories for Oxford Humanities graduates (Kreager, 2013) — the Civil Service (5%), Law (13%), Finance (1%), Education (7%) and Academia (5%) and Business Professionals (21%) — comprise 51% of total employment across the sixteen occupations displayed. This corresponds with recent research which highlights how the skills Humanities graduates often bring to the work place are particularly valued in business and professional contexts, especially in more senior and strategic roles (Robson, 2021).

Beyond these occupations, an unusually high proportion of Oxford Humanities graduates (13%) work as professional creatives, suggesting that Oxford's graduates are particularly advantaged in this competitive area of work. It is also notable that a large percentage of Humanities graduates (10%) are carrying out work as social scientists and other related

professions (which include research, psychology, and social work). Occupations that are less prominent in the sample include computing and maths professionals, as well as finance and sales associate professionals, which would include jobs such as insurance representatives and estate agents.

A key finding from this analysis is that the majority of Oxford Humanities graduates are working in business, professional, and legal roles, but there is increasing diversification across occupational structures.

4.2 OCCUPATIONAL DESTINATIONS BY GENDER

Breaking down the occupational destinations by gender, we see a roughly similar spread overall — business professionals comprise the largest percentage of the total employment across the occupations for both men (23%) and women (18.7%) (see Figures 8 and 9). This is closely followed by legal professionals, in which there are only slightly more men (14%) than women (12.5%). There are also roughly equally small numbers of male Finance and Sales associated professionals (0.7%) as females (0.8%), as well as male health professionals (0.7%) and female health professionals (0.8%).

The more significant difference is in the creative professional roles, where female graduates comprise a greater percentage (15.2%) than their male counterparts (10.9%). By contrast, there are more male graduates in religious associate roles (2.7%) than females (0.9%), possibly accounted for by the large number of positions held in the clergy, which, across all denominations, remains male oriented. There are also slightly more male graduates employed in CEO or corporate management positions (9%) than female graduates (6.5%), but very nearly equal percentages of male and female legislators and senior officials (1.5% and 1.2%, respectively).

Figure 6. (N) Humanities Graduate Occupational Destinations, frequencies
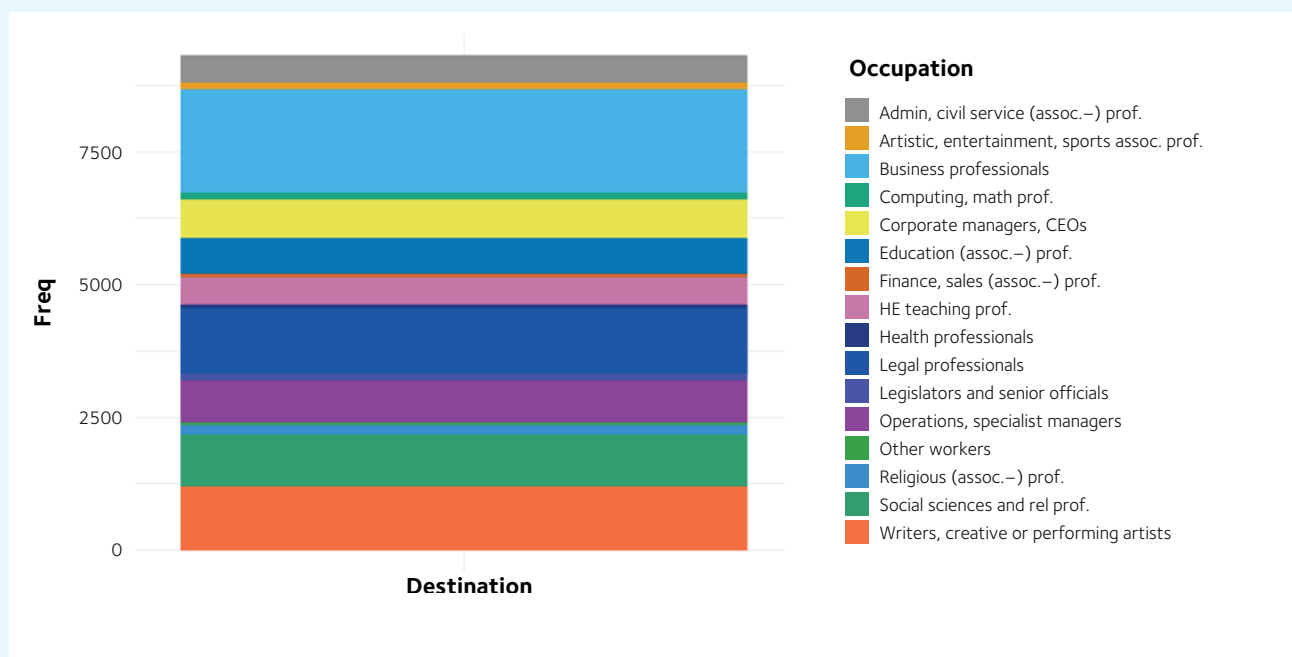
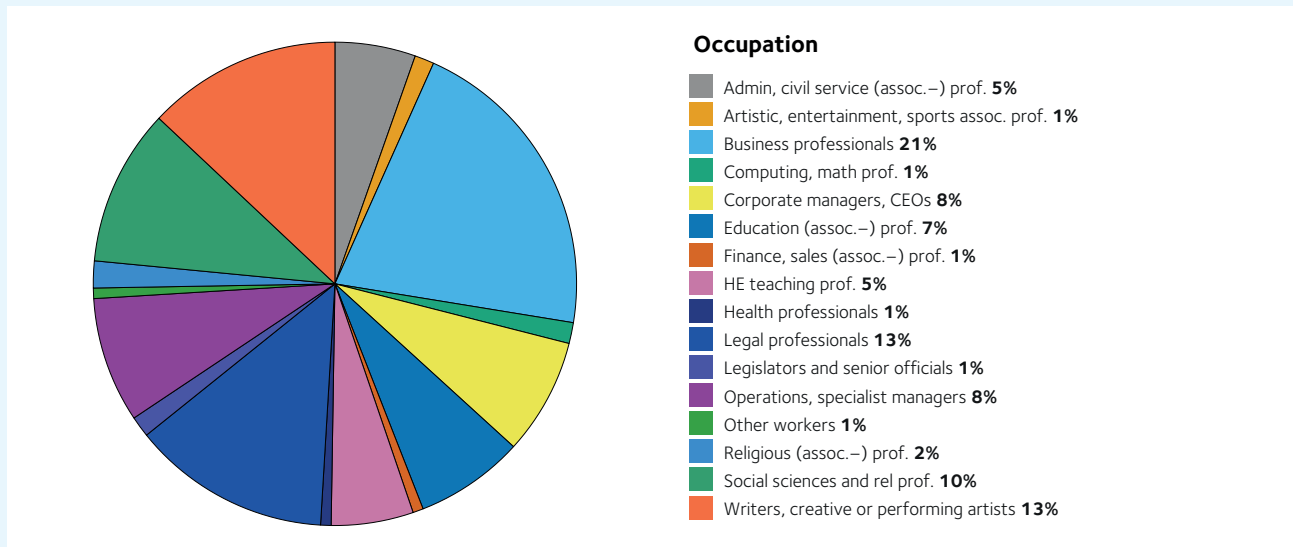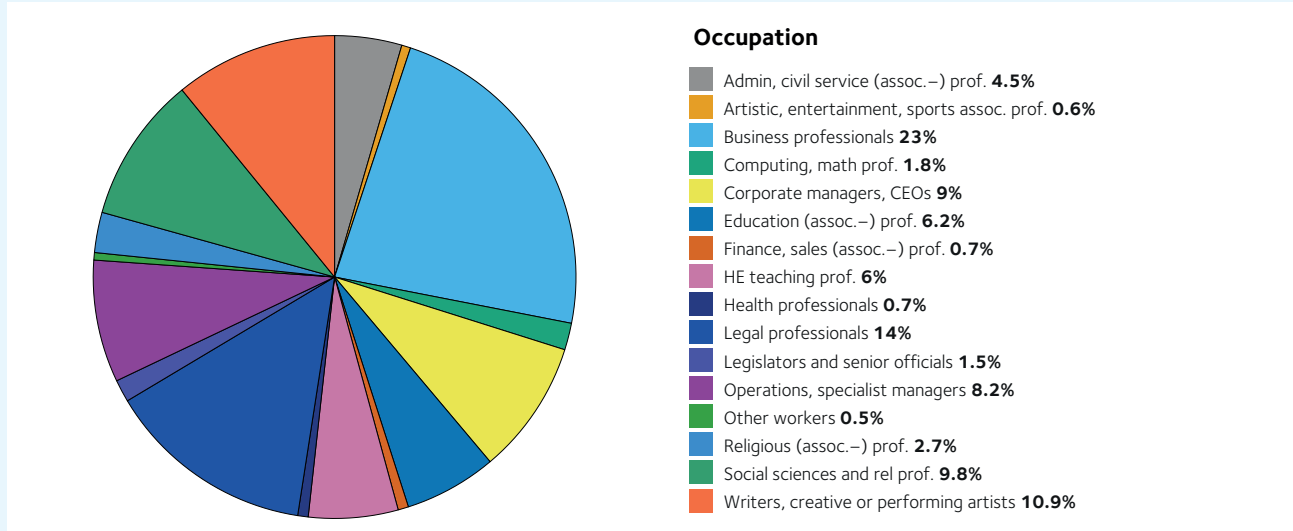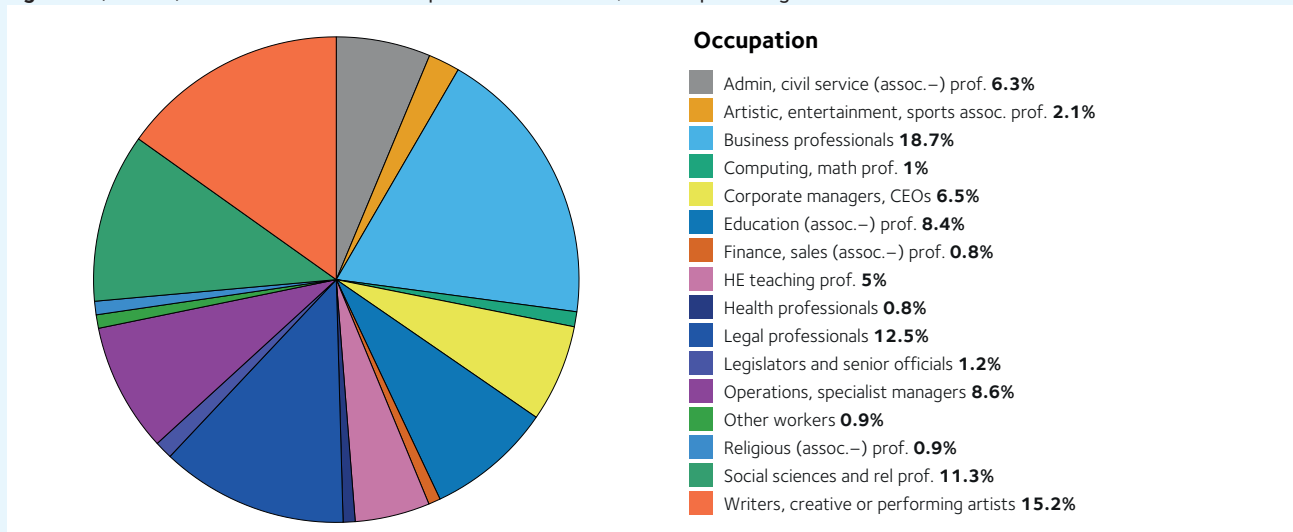**Figure 7. (%)** Humanities Graduate Occupational Destinations, percentages

Occupation

- ⬛ Admin, civil service (assoc.−) prof. **5%**
- 🟧 Artistic, entertainment, sports assoc. prof. **1%**
- 🟦 Business professionals **21%**
- 🟩 Computing, math prof. **1%**
- 🟨 Corporate managers, CEOs **8%**
- 🟦 Education (assoc.−) prof. **7%**
- 🟧 Finance, sales (assoc.−) prof. **1%**
- 🟪 HE teaching prof. **5%**
- 🟦 Health professionals **1%**
- 🟦 Legal professionals **13%**
- 🟪 Legislators and senior officials **1%**
- 🟪 Operations, specialist managers **8%**
- 🟩 Other workers **1%**
- 🟦 Religious (assoc.−) prof. **2%**
- 🟩 Social sciences and rel prof. **10%**
- 🟧 Writers, creative or performing artists **13%**

Figure 8. (Male) Humanities Graduate Occupational Destinations, relative percentages

Occupation

- ⬛ Admin, civil service (assoc.−) prof. **4.5%**
- 🟧 Artistic, entertainment, sports assoc. prof. **0.6%**
- 🟦 Business professionals **23%**
- 🟩 Computing, math prof. **1.8%**
- 🟨 Corporate managers, CEOs **9%**
- 🟦 Education (assoc.−) prof. **6.2%**
- 🟧 Finance, sales (assoc.−) prof. **0.7%**
- 🟪 HE teaching prof. **6%**
- 🟦 Health professionals **0.7%**
- 🟦 Legal professionals **14%**
- 🟪 Legislators and senior officials **1.5%**
- 🟪 Operations, specialist managers **8.2%**
- 🟩 Other workers **0.5%**
- 🟦 Religious (assoc.−) prof. **2.7%**
- 🟩 Social sciences and rel prof. **9.8%**
- 🟧 Writers, creative or performing artists **10.9%**

Figure 9. (Female) Humanities Graduate Occupational Destinations, relative percentages

Occupation

- ⬛ Admin, civil service (assoc.−) prof. **6.3%**
- 🟧 Artistic, entertainment, sports assoc. prof. **2.1%**
- 🟦 Business professionals **18.7%**
- 🟩 Computing, math prof. **1%**
- 🟨 Corporate managers, CEOs **6.5%**
- 🟦 Education (assoc.−) prof. **8.4%**
- 🟧 Finance, sales (assoc.−) prof. **0.8%**
- 🟪 HE teaching prof. **5%**
- 🟦 Health professionals **0.8%**
- 🟦 Legal professionals **12.5%**
- 🟪 Legislators and senior officials **1.2%**
- 🟪 Operations, specialist managers **8.6%**
- 🟩 Other workers **0.9%**
- 🟦 Religious (assoc.−) prof. **0.9%**
- 🟩 Social sciences and rel prof. **11.3%**
- 🟧 Writers, creative or performing artists **15.2%**

This analysis by gender suggests occupational destinations for Oxford Humanities graduates are broadly similar across gender apart from in creative context, where more female than male graduates are working as writers, performing artists, or other kinds of creatives.

4.3 OCCUPATIONAL DESTINATIONS BY SUBJECT

This section breaks down the occupations by subject area to better understand the relative professional destinations of the different Humanities degrees. Figures 9 and 10 illustrate this by breaking down occupation by Humanities subject for males and females. Each occupation is broken down according to the thirteen possible degree subjects associated with the Humanities division (with certain combination degrees collapsed, see Appendix 1). Each subject is shown as a proportion of the total. All subjects combined summed to a total of 100.

When analysed at a subject level, it is possible to see a clear contrast between the male and female graduates that are employed in legal professions. Male History and Classics graduates occupy a much larger proportion of the legal professions than female graduates from these subjects. By contrast, there are more female than male English graduates working in the legal professions, and a slightly larger proportion of female than male Modern Languages graduates. Music graduates are heavily represented in the creative sector for men but not women.

Across the board, there is a greater proportion of male PPE graduates working in all occupations, whereas female PPE graduates tend to be most heavily represented in business and professional occupations. This is mirrored by the greater proportion of female English graduates across all occupations. To some extent, this can be explained by the skewed distribution of males and females graduating from those degree subjects.

Figure 9. (Male) Top 5 Occupations: Composition by Humanities subjects, relative percentages
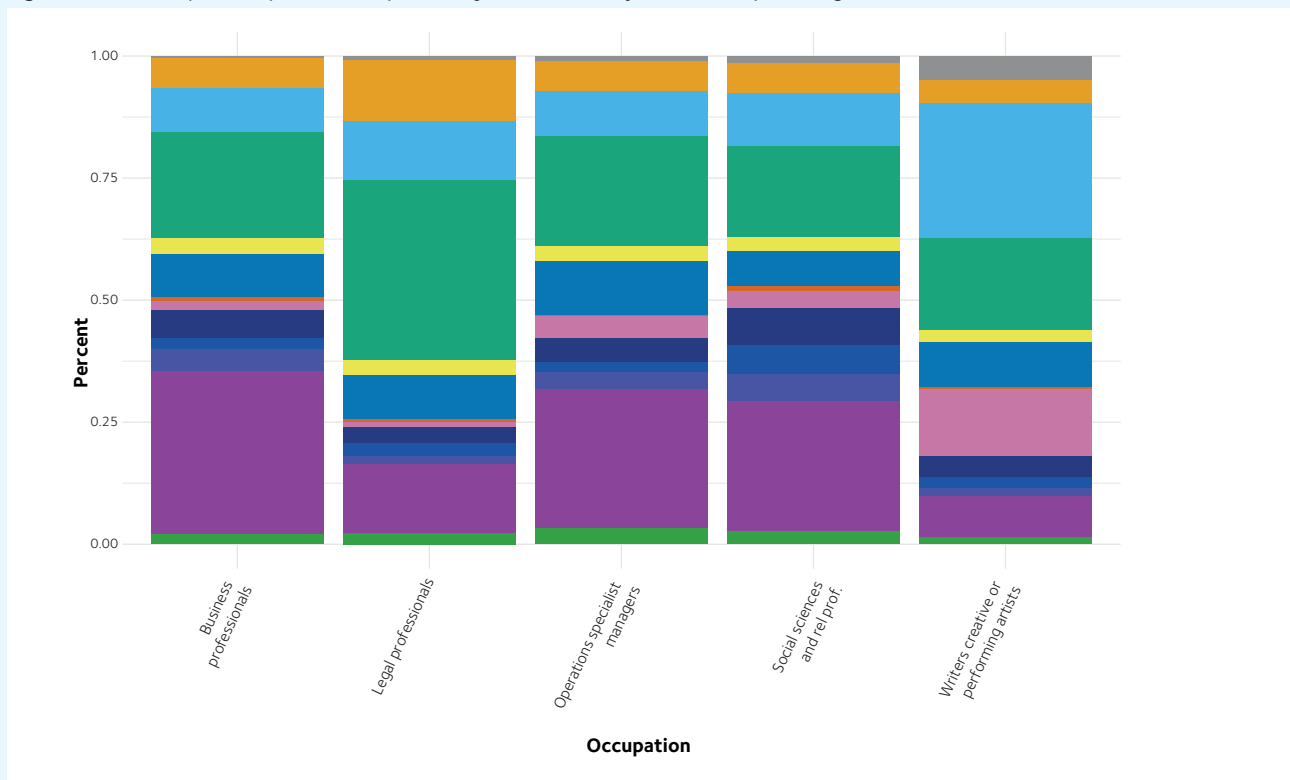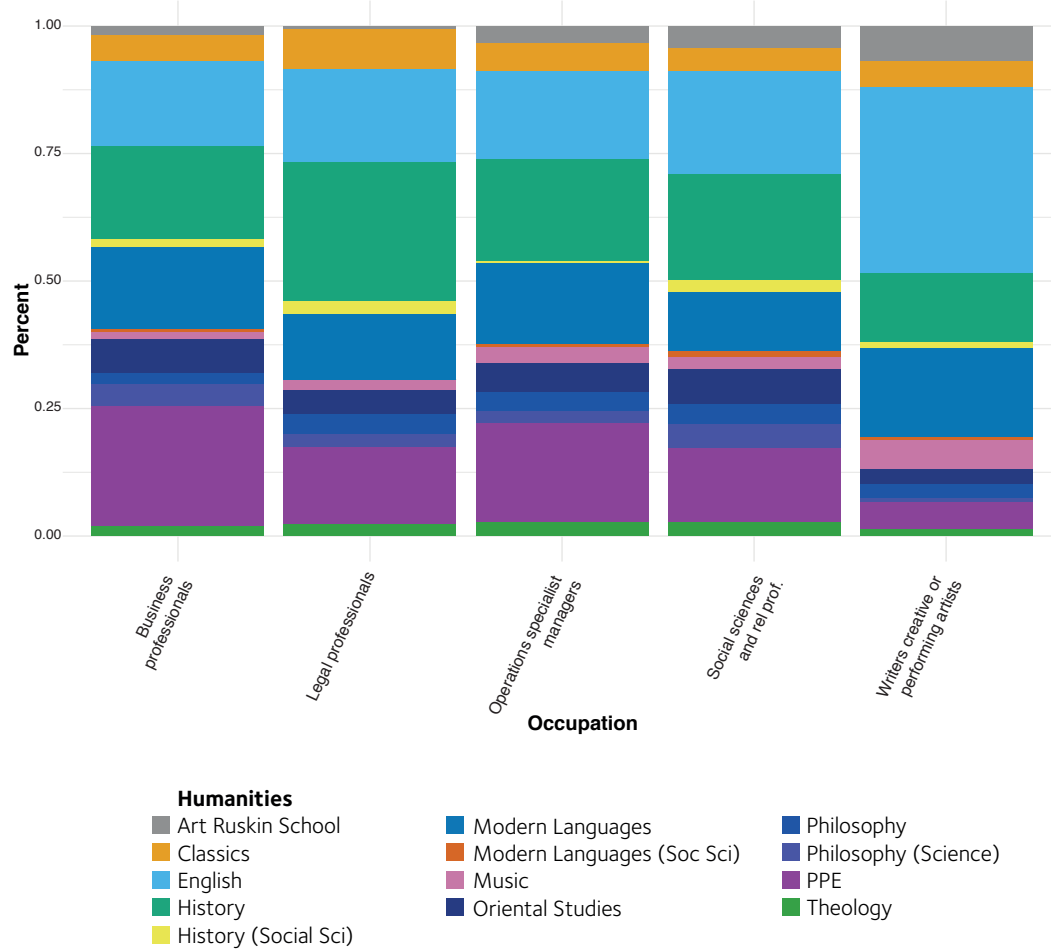
Figure 10. (Female) Top 5 Occupations: Composition by Humanities subjects, relative percentages

To examine further the relationship between occupation, sector and degree subject, we examined the proportion of business professionals (Figure 11) and operations/specialist managers (Figure 12) across sectors for three degree subjects: Modern Languages, History and PPE. These subjects have been selected as they represent sufficient numbers within the sample and cross-sector breadth to enable meaningful comparison.

As the pie charts in Figure 11 show, a greater proportion of PPE graduates (40.1%) relative to Modern Languages graduates (26.9%) work as Business Professionals in the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector. By contrast, more Modern Language graduates working as business professionals are employed in the Public Administration sector (13.2%) than their PPE counterparts (7.6%). While almost no PPE graduates who are working as business professionals are employed in the arts and entertainment sector, 2.1% of Modern Language graduates and 2% of History graduates working as business professionals are employed in this sector.

Figure 12 shows that, again, a large percentage of PPE graduates working in operations/ specialist managerial roles are employed in the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector (33.7%), a much larger proportion than those who graduated from Modern Languages (19.8%) and History degrees (17.4%). By contrast, almost no PPE graduates working as operations/ specialist managers are employed in the arts and

entertainment sector (1.6%), relative to Modern Language and History graduates in the same profession and sector (5.4% and 6.6%, respectively).

Notably, while graduates from all three degree subjects work in business professional roles concentrated mostly in the Professional/Scientific sector and the Financial, Insurance and Real Estate sector, the spread of operations/specialist managers is more even across all sectors. History graduates in operations/specialist manager roles in particular appear to be working in similar proportions across nearly all sectors, suggesting, as highlighted above, that History graduates are able to work in an especially wide range of sectors.

It is also important to highlight the similarities in sector spread between Modern Language graduates and History graduates working both as business professionals and as operations/specialist managers. Roughly the same proportions of graduates working in the various sectors can be seen in both degree subjects. This suggests that Modern Language Graduates and History graduates are using their skills in roughly the same way in the same sectors. PPE, however, is markedly different from these other two, with fewer of its graduates working in the ICT sector, the Public Administration sector and the previously mentioned Arts and Entertainment sector—a result perhaps of the economics portion of the degree, which may provide graduates with more numerically focused technical skills than their non-economics graduate peers.

Figure 11. Business Professionals: Employment Sector by subject area, relative percentages
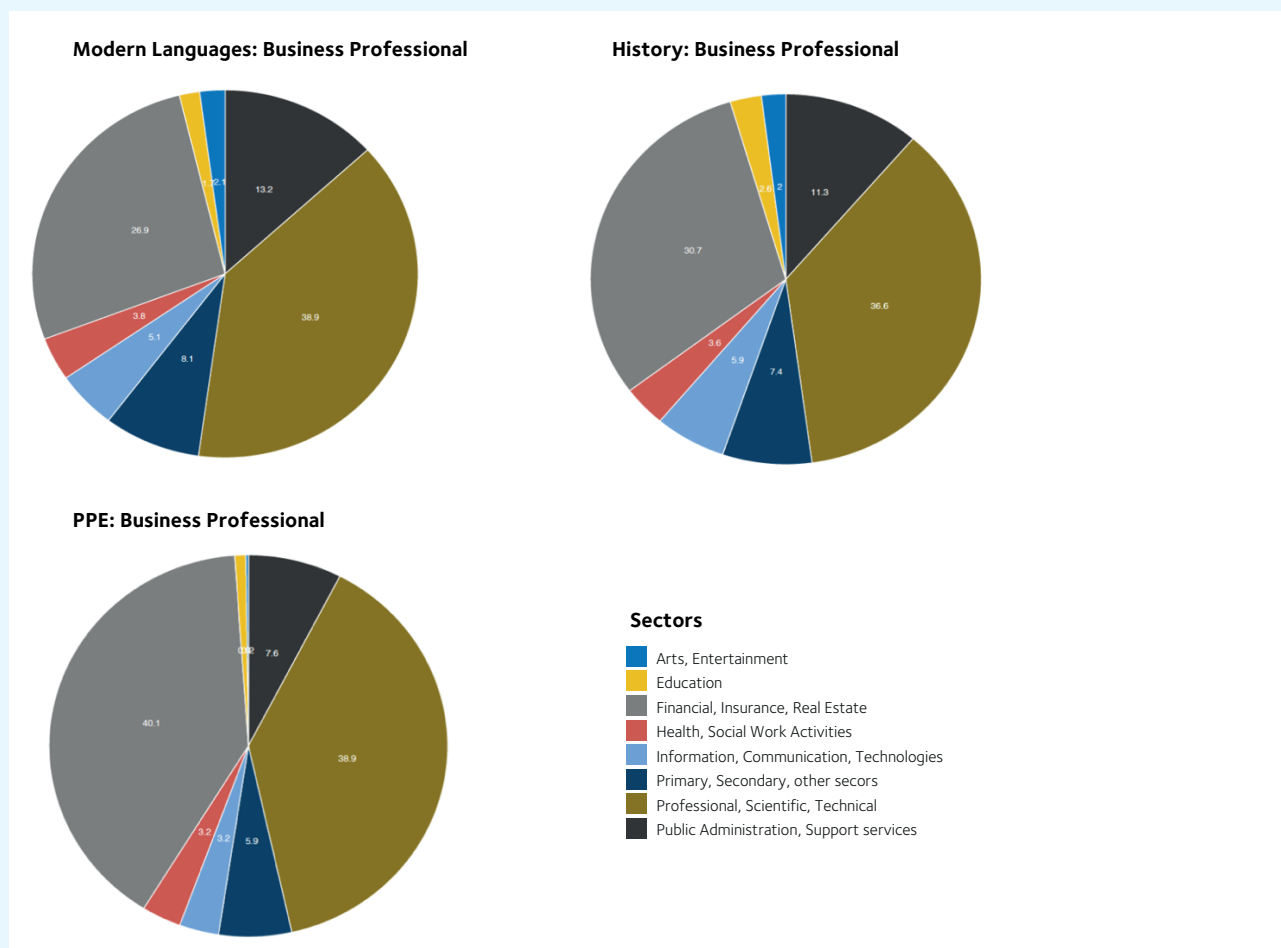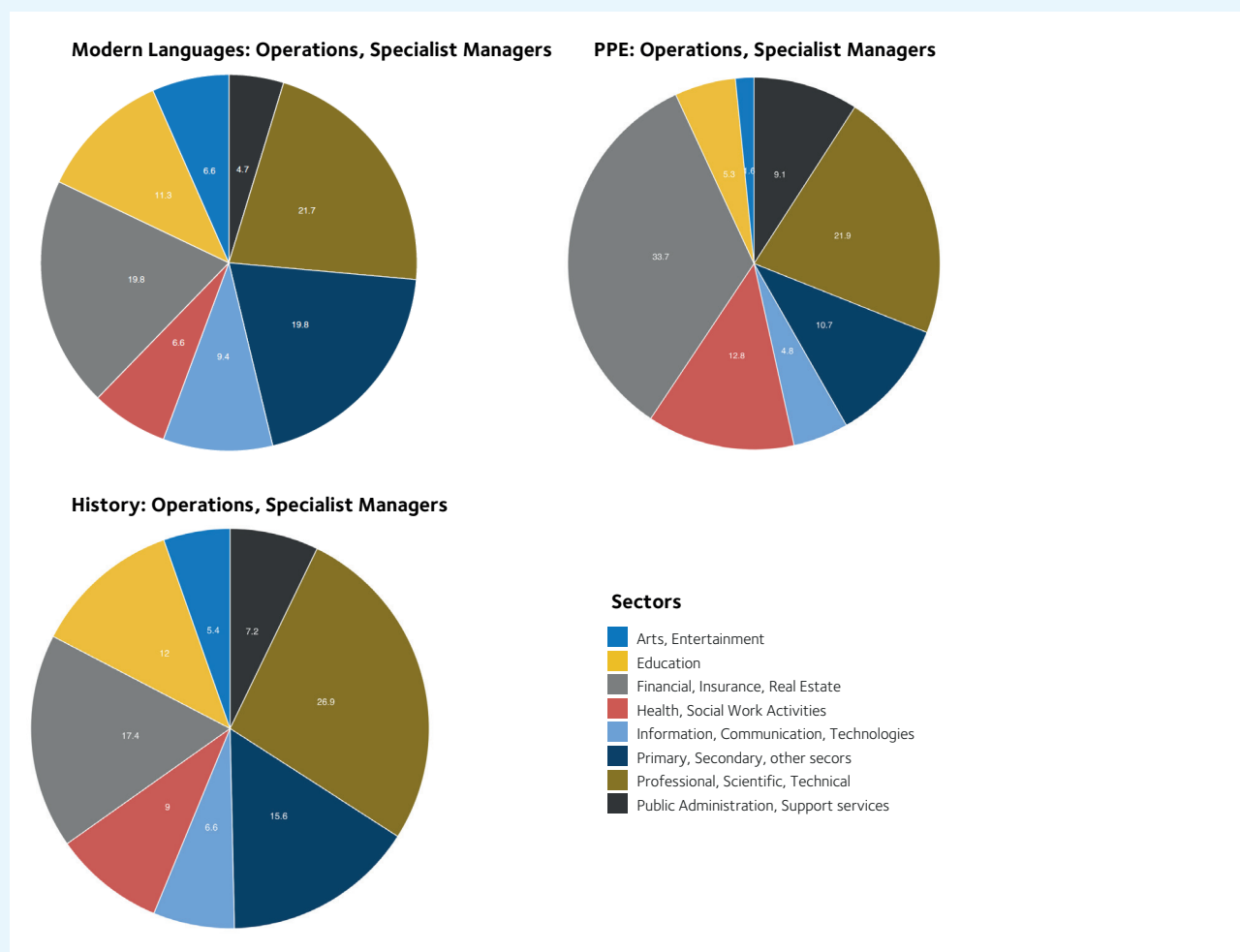
Figure 12. Operations, Specialist Managers: Employment Sector by subject area, relative percentages

Modern Languages: Operations, Specialist Managers

PPE: Operations, Specialist Managers

History: Operations, Specialist Managers

Sectors
- Arts, Entertainment
- Education
- Financial, Insurance, Real Estate
- Health, Social Work Activities
- Information, Communication, Technologies
- Primary, Secondary, other secors
- Professional, Scientific, Technical
- Public Administration, Support services

4.3 WHAT JOBS DO OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES DO?

In order to further understand how Oxford Humanities graduates work across the labour market we undertook more in-depth analysis of self-reported job titles. These indicate that graduates are working in a wide variety of roles. Although, the definition of 'graduate level' job is contested and moveable, there is every indication that the majority of Oxford Humanities graduates are working in roles that would typically be associated with high-skilled labour and graduate levels. In fact, the majority of roles graduates work in appear to be in what is often referred to as the 'elite' end of the labour market (Friedman & Laurison, 2019), that is roles associated with high levels of autonomy, prestige and pay.

A closer look at the specific jobs most commonly held by Humanities graduates (Figure 13) makes it clear that business associate professionals dominate the career landscape, followed by barristers, teachers and solicitors. In part, this can be explained by the generality of the "business associate" role, which, though it is a specific job title, nonetheless captures a wide variety of positions across a range of sectors. Roughly equal numbers of male and female graduates are working as senior associates, researchers, journalists, management

consultants, and interns. However, many more men than women appear to be working in more prestigious roles such as directors and barristers. Female solicitors, on the other hand, slightly outnumber their male counterparts, and there is a greater number of women than men also training to be solicitors, likely due to the large proportion of the most recently matriculated cohort of women going into the labour market and the legal profession in particular. For the most part, though, the differences mirror the national labour market landscape.

It is important to note the high number of Humanities graduates reporting that they are undertaking internships—indeed, there are almost as many interns as there are journalists (see Figure 13). These are self-reported job titles, submitted by alumni, and so the way in which these graduate 'internships' are conceptualised is likely to vary across individuals. For many, the self-ascribed job title of 'intern' may be very differently understood to the way undergraduate internships are conceptualised within careers service-led discourses, where internships are viewed as short periods of work experience, usually between one and three months in duration (often taking place during the summer), designed for those who are hoping to enter a profession. Interviews with graduates suggest a wide range of meanings are ascribed to

the term 'intern' in graduate settings, with many colloquially using the term to refer to low paid or 'under-valued' work, often perceived as menial, that is undertaken as a means of 'breaking into' a particular profession, either to gain experience or as a first step on a 'career ladder'.

The relatively large numbers of individuals reporting their job titles as 'intern' within our data-set may be an indication that Humanities graduates 'try out' different careers by doing short-term 'internships' after graduation or a way in which graduates 'stack' internships after graduation to gain an advantage in the labour market (Wright & Mulvey, 2021). However, it is more likely a reflection of the way in which language of internships is used to refer to a wide range of entry level positions. Such positions appear to be an important feature of many Oxford Humanities graduates' career trajectories.

Hunt and Scott (2018) and Wright and Mulvey (2021) have recently highlighted growth in the number of 'graduate internships' (loosely defined) and emphasised that individuals from more socio-economically advantaged groups can use internships during their degrees and after graduation strategically early on in their careers, to gain relevant experience and contacts to progress more rapidly through

career stages than their peers. Our graduate interviews suggested that some individuals who identified as coming from low SES backgrounds struggled to engage with internships (while at university) and felt unable financially to take low paid entry-level positions after graduation even though they may have eventually led to jobs with high financial returns, prestige and autonomy (see also Hecht et al., 2020; Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

Much work has been done to alleviate issues around accessibility of internships at university. The Oxford Crankstart Internship Programme (formerly known as Moritz-Heyman), for example, offers means-tested grants to undergraduates to subsidise the cost of taking internships while at university and programmes of support exist specifically for low SES students. However, the graduate context is more complex and complicated by the wide range of meanings attributed to the concept of 'internship'. This study, alongside the ongoing work of the Mobility Commission, The Sutton Trust and sociologists of class and labour (Hecht et al., 2020, Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Savage et al., 2015 etc.), suggests that further research is needed to understand how graduates from economically, educationally, and socially disadvantaged backgrounds experience and navigate the labour market beyond the point of transition.

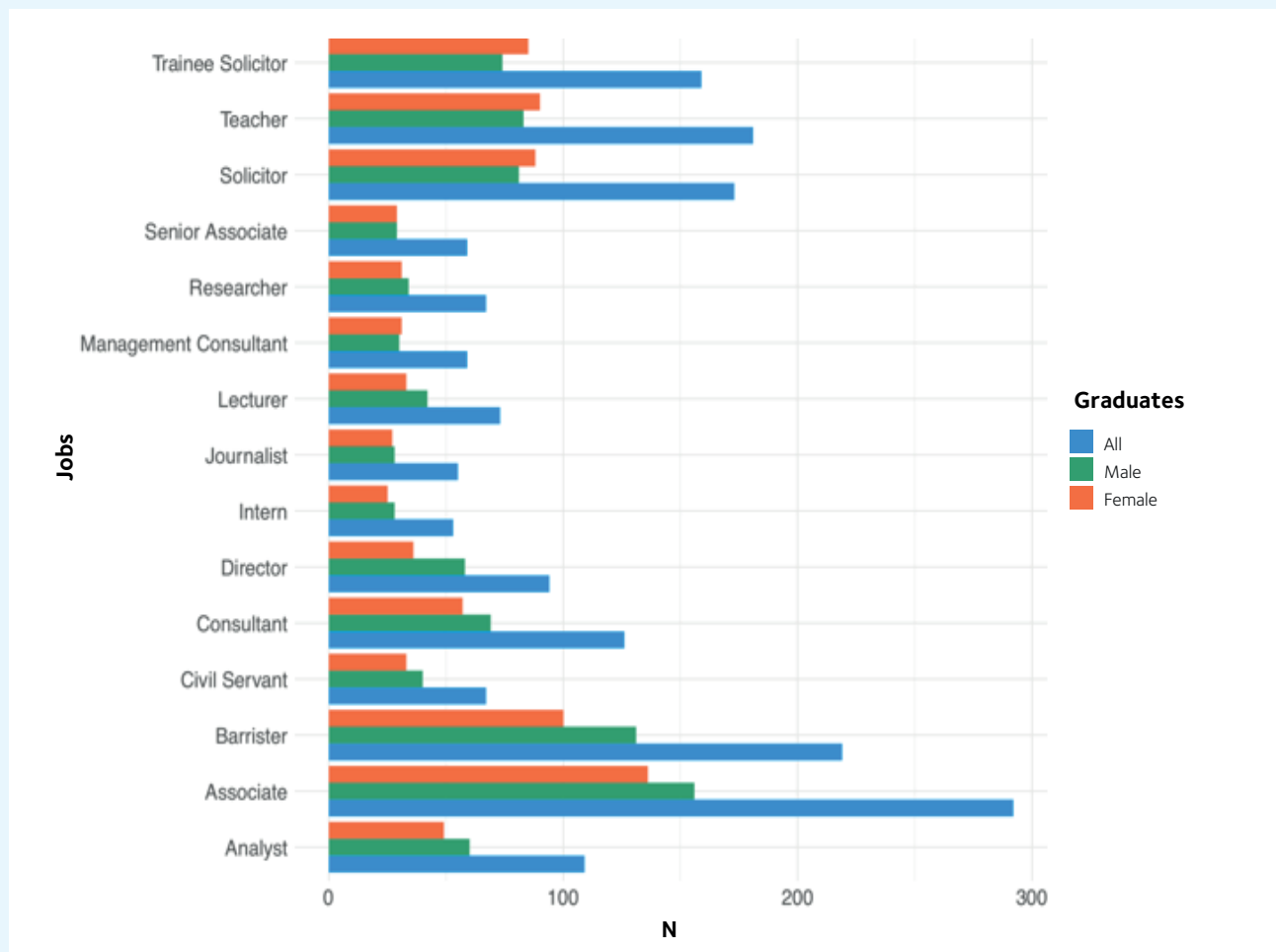**Figure 13.** 15 Most common jobs among Humanities graduates, frequencies

Table 2 displays the most commonly held jobs according to subject area, making it possible to see not only the wider occupational distribution of graduates from the various Humanities degrees, but exactly what types of jobs are most frequently held by graduates of each subject. It is notable that Theology graduates most commonly hold 'higher-status' jobs—such as assistant director—than graduates from other degree subjects. It is also notable that combination degrees with social science or scientific components appear to lead to slightly different labour market outcomes at the level of job role: Philosophy graduates, for instance, commonly work as barristers, associates, teachers, and solicitors (or trainee solicitors), while Philosophy with Science graduates are more frequently working as analysts, consultants, barristers and associates (ordered in terms of commonality).

Similarly, patterns of divergence can be seen for graduates of Modern Languages compared with graduates from Modern Languages with Social Science degrees and graduates from History degrees when compared to those who studied History with Social Science. Reflecting the gender balance of the degree (which skews more heavily towards women), Fine Art graduates working in the legal professions are mostly solicitors or trainee solicitors, rather than barristers.

Table 2. 5 Most commonly held jobs according to subject area

Humanities	Job 1	Job 2	Job 3	Job 4	Job 5
Oriental Studies	Associate	Teacher	Solicitor	Barrister	Analyst
Art Ruskin School	Associate	Artist	Solicitor	Teacher	Trainee Solicitor
Classics	Barrister	Associate	Trainee Solicitor	Analyst	Teacher
English	Associate	Barrister	Solicitor	Trainee Solicitor	Teacher
Theology	Associate	Associate Director	Analyst	Assistant Professor	Barrister
Music	Associate	Teacher	Solicitor	Barrister	Consultant
PPE	Associate	Teacher	Barrister	Analyst	Consultant
Philosophy	Barrister	Associate	Teacher	Solicitor	Trainee Solicitor
Philosophy (Science)	Analyst	Consultant	Trainee Solicitor	Associate	Barrister
History	Associate	Barrister	Solicitor	Teacher	Trainee Solicitor
History (Social science)	Associate	Teacher	Trainee Solicitor	Barrister	Policy Advisor
Modern Languages	Associate	Solicitor	Trainee Solicitor	Consultant	Barrister
Modern Languages (Social science)	Solicitor	Associate	Marketing Assistant	Teacher	Advisor

4.4 OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES AT THE TOP END OF THE LABOUR MARKET

The data presented so far on Oxford Humanities graduates identifies several critical differences that align with differential rates of degree subject uptake between men and women, and their subsequent routes into the labour market according to occupational and industrial categories of work. However, it is necessary to situate these in relation to the larger working population in the UK. Table 3 contextualises the aforementioned occupational and job roles in terms of overall number of jobs in the UK labour market as a whole, as well as matching this to the annual median earnings of individuals in those jobs, again distinguishing between male and female financial returns.

Table 3 Job distribution in UK economy by gender and pay, April 2019

Occupations (specific jobs)	Men		Women	
	Number of Jobs in UK (1000s)	Median Annual Salary	Number of Jobs in UK (1000s)	Median Annual Salary
Corporate managers and directors	1239	49,994	526	41,775
Business, Research and Administrative Professionals	327	45,821	171	37,390
Management consultants and business analysts	86	44,377	44	36,356
Economists, actuaries, statisticians	16	49,869	x	41,324
Teaching and Education Professionals	348	40,566	555	36,210
Higher education teaching professionals	67	51,851	43	45,264
Secondary education teaching professionals	128	39,757	180	36,978
Legal Professionals	52	57,891	51	42,768
Solicitor	30	50,000	31	39,813
Information technology professionals	447	44,484	82	38,117
Programmers and software development professionals	157	43,024	20	36,365
IT business analysts, architects and systems designers	76	50,303	12	38,982
Welfare professionals	44	29,740	74	33,426
Clergy	21	25,830	x	x
Social Workers	18	35,049	55	34,009
Culture, Media and Sports Occupations	88	29,053	46	27,188
Artistic, literary and media occupations	34	32,955	18	30,156
Arts officers, producers and directors	10	41,423	x	35,205

For clarity, we have focused specifically on particularly frequent jobs and occupations amongst our sample, including: business associates (such as management consultants), teaching and education professionals (both secondary and higher education professionals), legal professionals (such as solicitors), IT professionals (such as programme developers and IT business analysts), welfare professionals (including the clergy), and those working in culture, media and sports (including arts officers and producers). This gives us a national picture of the jobs into which Oxford Humanities students are most frequently moving, as well as a sense of the range of economic returns within these occupations.

It is important to note that though legal professionals make up a large portion of Humanities graduates, nationally, it is a relatively small sector. There are only 103,000 legal professionals across the UK, and only 61,000 solicitors. Similarly, though a sizable number of the Humanities graduates in our sample were working in the creative industries, nationally, there are only 52,000 artistic, literary and media jobs (including both genders). Arts officers, producers and directors account for only 10,000 jobs across the country. The fact that high proportions of Oxford Humanities graduates enter into these occupations, in spite of their small sizes, highlights the unusual nature of Oxford graduates in terms of their disproportionate representation at the top end of the labour market.

It is also important to point out that though roughly equal numbers of male and female Oxford Humanities graduates are working in management consultancy, this is not reflected in the national picture, where men account for almost twice as many management consultancy jobs as women, suggesting that Oxford perhaps has a neutralising effect on the gender disparity in that industry. However, the roughly equal gender split in those working as solicitors in the UK is mirrored in the number of male and female Humanities graduates who went on to become solicitors.

In terms of annual salaries, it is also worth noting that there are relatively wide ranges even within occupational groups. Though Culture, Media and Sports occupations more broadly have relatively modest median annual salaries—ranging between £27,188 for women to £32,955 for men—the median salaries for specific jobs within those occupations can be much higher. Arts officers, producers and director roles, for example (in which a sizable number of our sample were employed), are more remunerative, with salaries ranging between £35,205 for women to £41,423 for men (see below for more information on graduate salaries).

Thus, these analyses clearly show that Oxford Humanities graduates are highly represented in occupations typically associated with high levels of prestige, autonomy and pay, and make up a large proportion of the population in these positions. Importantly, female Oxford Humanities graduates are very well represented in professions and roles that are typically dominated by men (e.g. management consultancy) suggesting that Oxford perhaps has a neutralising effect on gender disparity in terms of roles and positions in the labour market.

5. ECONOMIC RETURNS

In this section, further sources of data are used to situate and expand the findings described above. Data extracts from the 2018, 2019 and 2020 releases of Longitudinal Educational Outcome (LEO) data are used to augment our understanding of the types of activities and levels of work undertaken by Oxford Humanities graduates, by examining financial returns associated with degree subjects. LEO combines tax data with educational records and, consequently, provides an indication of degree value as conceptualised in terms of economic returns in the labour market. However, different levels of earnings may also be indicative of and correspond to graduates' positions within the labour market and the kinds of roles and activities they undertake. This section therefore aims to link analysis of LEO data with the previous analysis of DARS data in order to understand where graduates are situated within employment more clearly. It is important to note that subjects used in LEO data do not correspond exactly with the Humanities subjects taught at Oxford, but every effort has been made to cross-tabulate DARS data with LEO headings. It is also important to note that LEO is not a wholly reliable tool to capture varied careers that might include self-employment, part-time work, and post graduate study.

5.1 SALARY DATA

As highlighted in the introduction, economic returns on particular degree subjects are an increasingly important part of HE policy discourse, with Humanities subjects in particular facing increasing scrutiny regarding their economic value. Figure 14 thus provides a snapshot of the median annual salaries of Oxford Humanities graduates by subject group. Perhaps most notable is the moderate-high wages overall, breaking the trend in Arts and Humanities across the wider sector as a whole (Belfield, 2018). There appears to be a clear institutional effect. As seen in previous sections, Oxford Humanities graduates are generally entering relatively high-status occupations, with, according to analysis of LEO data, high financial returns.

As might be expected from the types of roles held by PPE graduates, with a high proportion working in the Financial sector, male PPE graduates have the highest median wages (over £40,000 per annum) of all the degree subjects. This is closely followed by male History graduates whose median annual salary is also over £40,000 per year. It is, however, important to highlight the gender pay gap across degrees subjects, apart from those who studied Philosophy. This pay gap is most significant for History graduates where, on average, males earn almost £10,000 per year more than their female counterparts. This suggests there may be a range of factors at play that account for this significant pay gap, including structures in the labour market, pre-existing social and economic capital of graduates, and admissions approaches.

Figure 14. Oxford Humanities Graduates Median Wages by Subject, (Longitudinal Educational Outcomes)
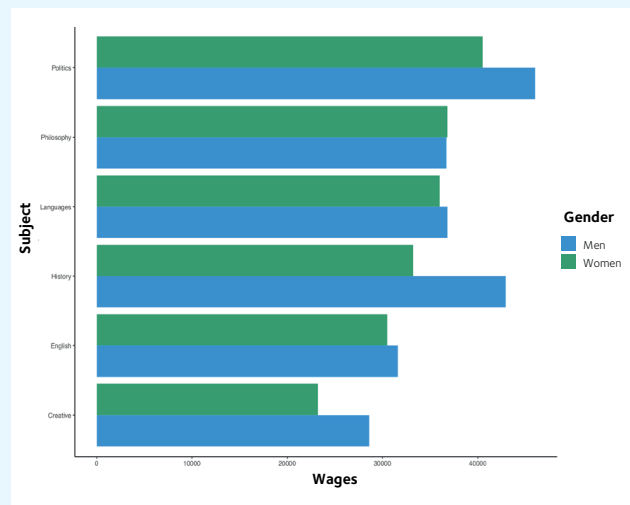

Source: DARS, 1996-2019 matched with LEO data where tax year references 2015/2016 while academic year references 2009/10, authors' calculations. Notes: N=9,311, 'Politics' refers to PPE, 'Creative' refers to Fine Arts, 'Philosophy' includes Theology graduates.

5.2 HOW DO OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATE EARNINGS COMPARE WITH OTHER UK UNIVERSITIES?

To situate Oxford graduates more clearly within the labour market, Oxford humanities graduates' earnings were compared with those of humanities graduates from: Russell Group institutions, other pre-1992 universities (excluding Russell-Group), and post-1992 universities (see figure below). This comparison was achieved using the most recent LEO data (from the 2017-18 tax year). Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the more prestigious occupational destinations of Oxford's graduates described earlier in this report, the mean annual salaries of Oxford's graduates are considerably higher than those of their peers at all other university 'types' (whether Russell group, pre-1992, or post-1992) for all humanities subjects. The average salary three years after graduation for Oxford University Humanities graduates was £29,220. This figure compares with £24,160 for Russell Group graduates, £22,350 for pre-1992 graduates, and £19,730 for post-1992 graduates (as illustrated in Figure 15).

Figure 15. Median Humanities Wages University 'Type' (LEO)
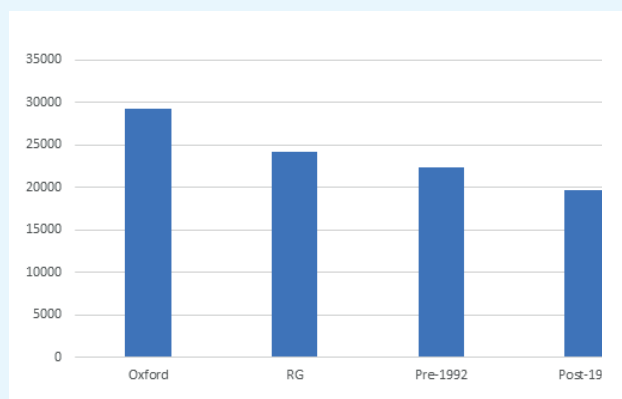
It is important to note that the same general earnings pattern can be seen across each of the university 'types': Language and Area studies are the highest paid graduates at post-1992, pre-1992, and Russell Group universities whilst at Oxford University Language and Area graduates are located just behind Philosophy and Religion (with average earnings of £32,800 three years after graduation). Figure 16 illustrates the differences in earnings for different humanities subjects at different institution 'types'.

As can be seen in the above figure, Oxford University graduates in English, History, Language and Area Studies, Performance Arts, and Philosophy and Religion are the highest earning cohort when compared to their peers at all other institutions. In Modern Foreign Languages, for instance, Oxford University graduates earn an average salary of £32,400, which is £5,500 more than the average for Russell Group

universities, and £9,500 more than the average for post-1992 institutions.

It might be inferred that the higher earning premium of Oxford University languages graduates can be explained by the structure of the Modern Languages degree at Oxford University. This degree structure ensures that students gain valuable experience of a foreign country and its labour market through a year abroad. The course structure thereby enables students to network (thus building social capital) and gain critical work experience, facilitating a smoother transition into the labour market. However, this model is mirrored in a number of other institutions which suggests that the higher financial returns associated with Oxford Modern Languages degrees may involve a combination of a subject-specific premium, the value of languages within the labour market, the value of this type of course structure which facilitates smoother transitions into the labour market, and the signalling effects of the Oxford brand.

A large number of studies have emphasised the importance of social and cultural capital within the labour market, explaining how everything from accent (Kalin, 1982) to dress (Riviera, 2015) can impact upon employment prospects. These factors should not be overlooked and, while a range of projects highlight these issues (Brown et al., 2011; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; O'Sullivan et al., 2018; Rivera, 16), there is a need for further rigorous examination of how issues of class, socio-economic status, and widening participation measures intersect with employment, employability and experiences of transition from university into the labour market at the institutional level.

Figure 16. Median Humanities Wages by University 'Type' and Subject (LEO)
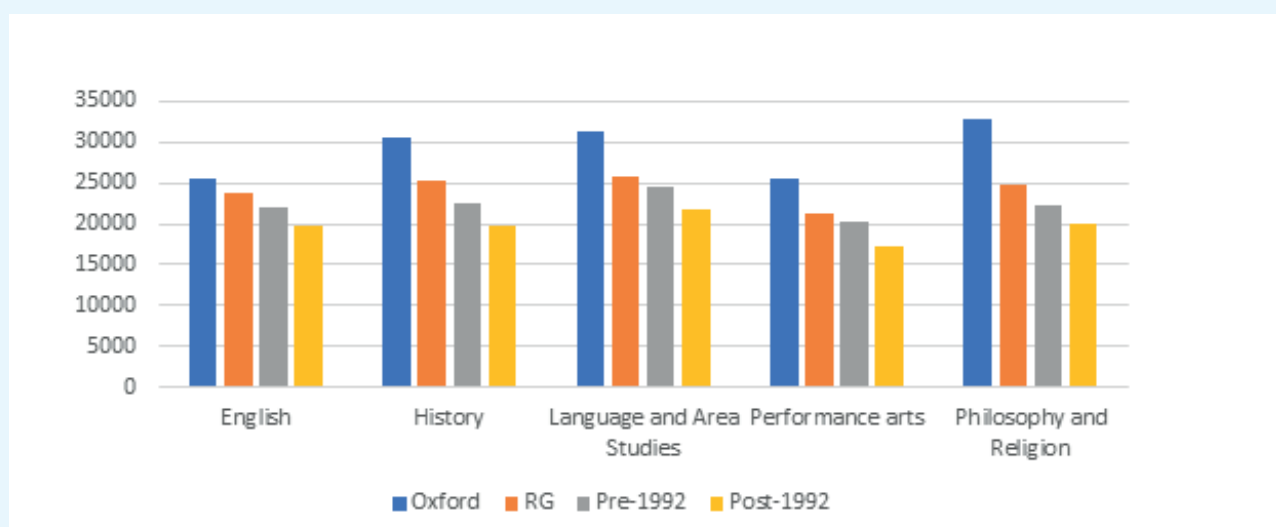
5.3 THE 'ADDED VALUE' OF AN OXFORD HUMANITIES DEGREE

In order to quantify the advantage that Oxford graduates have over other institutions' graduates in the labour market, we have computed a variable that indicates the 'added value' of an Oxford humanities degree. The figures below demonstrate the percentage salary increase that an Oxford humanities degree appears to afford its holders.

Figure 17, perhaps provides a striking illustration of the earnings premium with which an Oxford Humanities degree appears to provide graduates. It indicates that, on average, Oxford humanities graduates earn a salary three years after graduation that is over a quarter higher than the median for sector wide humanities graduates. This added value is even greater when we look at Philosophy and Religion, where Oxford graduates earn almost 40% more than the the sector wide median wage for these subjects (£32,800, compared to the median of £23,550).

In addition to the 'added value' illustrated by the above figure, it is also important to note that the advantage afforded to Oxford students does not end on entry to the graduate labour market. LEO data also indicate that the salary progression of Oxford Humanities graduates is more rapid when compared to Humanities graduates from other institutions. The bar chart below (Figure 18) illustrates the percentage wage increase for Humanities students from different university 'types' at the end of their first year in the labour market, and at the end of their fifth year. University of Oxford students appear to earn 50% more at the end of their fifth year in the labour market, compared to 48.9% for the Russell Group, 42.5% for pre-1992 universities, and 38.1% for post-1992 institutions. Though it may first appear that there is only a small gap between the increase of Oxford graduates and that of Russell Group graduates, it must be remembered that the Oxford salary starts at a significantly higher point and so in this context, the 50% increase is even more striking.
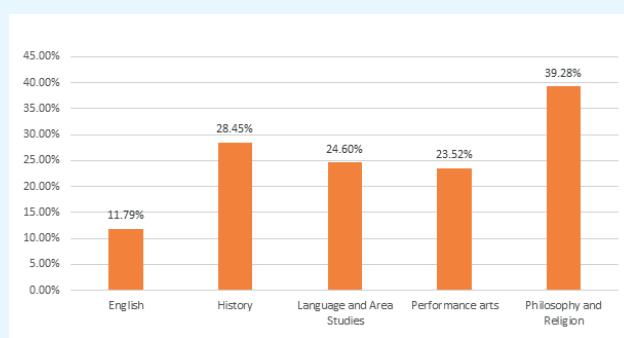
5.4 MORE THAN FINANCIAL RETURNS

Analyses of DARS, LEO and ONS data all clearly show Oxford Humanities graduates have a very strong positional advantage in the labour market and all subject areas are linked with very high financial returns that are significantly higher than subject medians across the sector. However, it is also important to note (as will be discussed in more depth below) that few of the graduates included in the qualitative part of our study valued their degrees purely in terms of financial returns. While many did refer to the importance of labour market outcomes, these outcomes were more usually described in terms of the freedom graduates felt to 'do what they wanted to do', rather than measurable financial returns. All participants emphasised feeling that they felt their degrees provided them with the skills and flexibility of opportunity to navigate the labour market with agency and engage in the kind of work that really interested them.

This sense of agency is partially reflected quantitatively in the Graduate Outcomes data. Graduates were asked why they chose to work in their current jobs and the largest number of Oxford Humanities graduates respondents emphasised that they had taken their current position as it fitted their career plans. It is important to note that the GO data only covers students who graduated in 2017/18 (a subset of our wider Alumni data from DARS) and that respondents to the GO survey could select multiple choices (hence totals adding up to more than 100%).

GO survey respondents were also asked to assess aspects of their satisfaction with their current work on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 5 being 'strongly agree.' On the whole, at an aggregate level, Oxford Humanities graduates emphasised that they found their work meaningful and useful and reported that their work utilises the skills sets they acquired through their studies (Table 4). These data clearly show Oxford Humanities graduates are largely satisfied with their work, but, as will be developed in more depth through analysis of qualitative interviews, also highlight the importance many graduates place on undertaking meaningful work and the fact that many felt their degrees afforded them the flexibility to focus their careers on areas and in roles that had meaning to them.

Figure 17. Value Added from an Oxford Humanities Degree (LEO)

Figure 18. Percentage of Salary Increase by University 'Type' 5-years into Work (LEO)
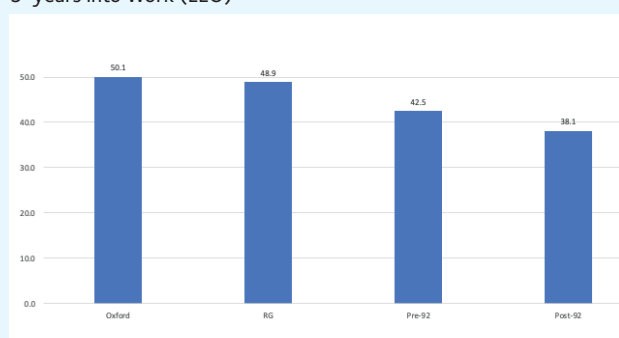
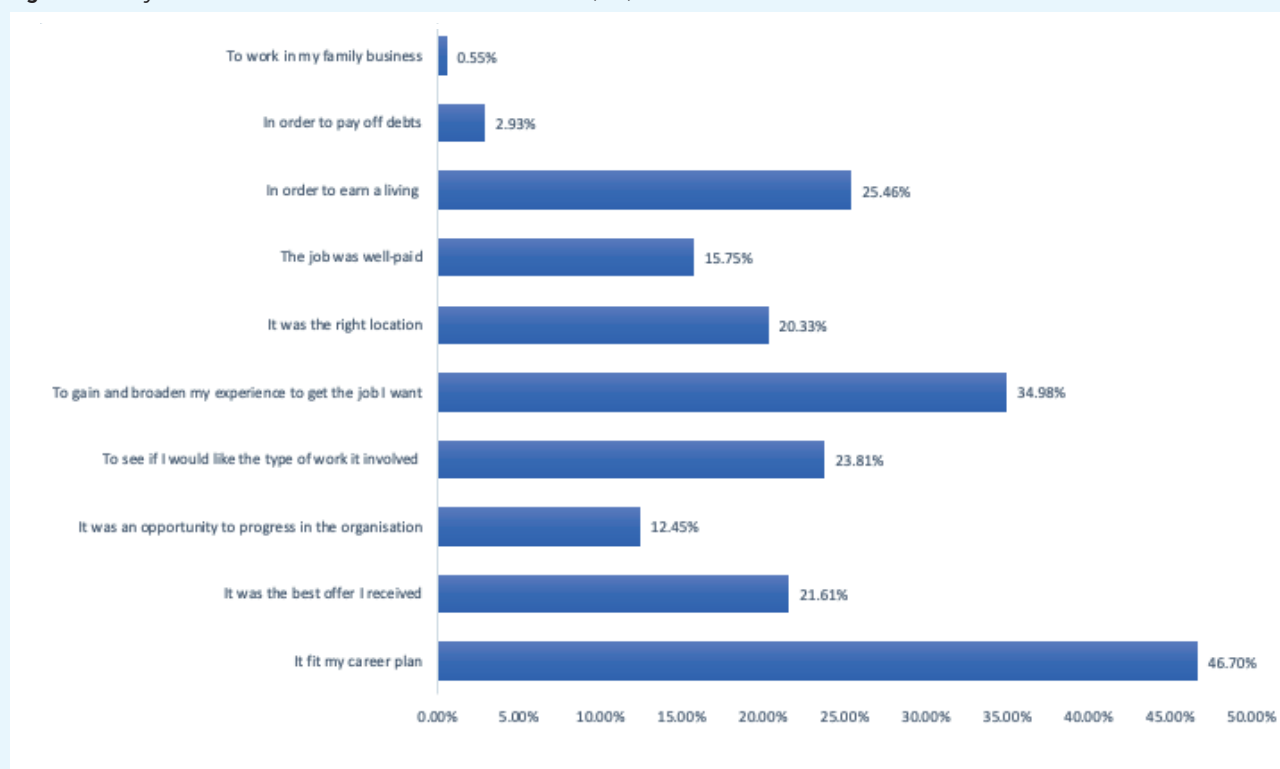**Figure 19.** Why Oxford Humanities Graduates Took Current Job (GO)

Table 4. Oxford Humanities Graduates' Assessment of Current Work (GO)

Question	Mean response	N
Do you find your current activity meaningful?	4.2	812
To what extent do your current activities fit your plan for the future?	4.2	814
To what extent do you utilise the skills you learned during your study in your current activity?	4	651

6. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS: CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The analyses presented in the above chapters have aimed to provide a detailed description of Oxford Humanities graduates' destinations in relation to sector, occupation and job role, comparing the different subjects and controlling for the impact of joint degrees on the overall picture. The analyses have also aimed to situate Oxford Humanities graduates within the overarching structure of the UK labour market and compare financial returns across subjects and a selection of universities. This highlighted the increasingly diverse range of sectors Oxford Humanities graduates work in, with History and Modern Foreign Language graduates most evenly spread across the sectors. Oxford Humanities graduates are working in a variety of job roles, overwhelmingly at the top end of the labour market (in roles marked by prestige, autonomy, and high pay). In fact, Oxford Humanities graduates make up a substantial proportion of employees in these roles when numbers are compared against wider ONS Labour Force data. As might be expected, given the kinds of roles graduates take on, the financial returns associated with Oxford Humanities degrees are significantly higher than the subject medians across the sector, showing a clear Oxford Humanities graduate premium in the labour market. This is reflected in salary growth five years after graduation, indicating Oxford Humanities graduates are able to progress rapidly in their careers.

Thus, analysis of DARS, LEO, GO and ONS data clearly show that Oxford Humanities graduates are able to navigate the labour market very effectively. However, the mechanisms by which this is achieved and the skills they develop and deploy, and the perspectives of employers are not clear from these quantitative data. The following section, therefore contextualises these findings by providing in depth analysis of interviews with graduates, students and employers to understand graduate experiences, skills, and the wider value graduates place on their degrees, as hinted at by the GO qualitative data.

SECTION II
OXFORD HUMANITIES GRADUATES NAVIGATING THE LABOUR MARKET: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

While the quantitative analysis of graduates' destinations and current jobs provides a vital snapshot of how Oxford Humanities graduates are distributed across the labour market at a single point in time, the interviews with graduates and students provide more in-depth understanding of individual's career trajectories and how they conceptualise, experience and navigate the labour market and how these conceptualisations and experiences have been shaped by their degrees. The innovative mixed methods approach adopted in this study provides more nuanced insight into graduate experiences of the labour market, and the value they place on their degrees more broadly, by contextualising analysis of a wide range of quantitative datasets with rich qualitative data.

This section of the report, therefore, provides critical insight into the relationship between Oxford Humanities degrees and the world of work. However, the participants emphasised that this is a complex and messy relationship, closely bound up with the process of transitioning into the labour market, skills formation, skills deployment, the structures of the labour market itself, and the value employers place on skills associated with Oxford Humanities degrees. Therefore, this section is divided into three main parts: firstly, examining graduates' experiences after leaving Oxford – their transition into the labour market, navigating the labour market, and, for some, engaging in further study; secondly, examining participants' perceptions of the kinds of skills they developed while at university and how these connect with labour market demands; and finally, examining key employers' perceptions of the labour market value of Oxford Humanities degrees and how the skills associated with Oxford Humanities graduates relate to current and future skills demands.

7. GRADUATE EXPERIENCES OF THE LABOUR MARKET

When analysing the graduate interviews, a key part of the analytical process involved the production of overarching narratives detailing individual's trajectories and experiences within the labour market over time. Overall, 70 detailed narratives were produced, providing personalised accounts of participants' journeys. A selection of these narratives has been chosen and each one has been written up as a short vignette in order to illustrate some of the key ways Oxford Humanities graduates have entered, experienced, and navigated employment. These have been included as standalone items in Appendix 2 as a means of grounding the following discussion explicitly in the lived experiences of the participants. The following section draws on both these vignettes and the wider analytical narratives to examine graduates' conceptualisations of the labour market, their transitions into the world of work, and their experiences of navigating employment as part of a longer-term career trajectory.

As highlighted in the methodology, it is important to note that interviews took place before the pandemic and the experiences of the cohort of students graduating into the very challenging economic context brought about by COVID-19 has not been captured. In many ways, this is a unique cohort and we recommend additional research be undertaken to examine these graduates short and long-term experiences. This is out of scope for this study, but the experiences on students graduating into the 2008 recession and several years subsequently provide insight into how Oxford Humanities graduates may experience navigating the likely long-term challenges in the youth labour market brought about by COVID-19.

7.1 TRANSITIONING INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

Much of the literature on the relationship between higher education and the labour market emphasises the challenges that many graduates face as they transition from university into the world of work (e.g. Brown et al. 2011). Some have argued that Humanities graduates, as well as those who have not taken vocationally oriented subjects that particularly align with specific roles and sectors, may face particular difficulties as they struggle to secure their first job while also attempting to determine their own career aspirations. For many, the time immediately after graduation is a period of discovery and adaptation and the work individuals do in the first six months to a year may bear little resemblance to the work they undertake more longer term. This is why making judgements about graduate destinations based on data gathered immediately or shortly after graduation is often problematic.

However, while initial graduate destinations may bear little resemblance to individuals' later roles or trajectories across their life courses, the way in which graduates transition from university and initially experience the world of work can have

a profound impact on the manner in which they engage in and navigate the labour market in the future. Transitions are often mediated by experiences, knowledge, and skills developed at university and the relationship can be complex and, as described above, shaped by how individuals conceptualise the labour market. Across the qualitative data and graduate narratives, it was clear that Oxford Humanities graduates enter employment in a variety of different ways, experiencing the transition very differently, often related to how actively they thought about their future employment while at university and how actively they leveraged university-related opportunities to develop advantages in the labour market.

Many participants in this study followed 'traditional' graduate recruitment routes into, for example, the Civil Service, the financial sector or management consultancy. Although not always, these were often associated with smooth transitions into employment as individuals moved from university into a graduate programme. Others, even when not going through structured graduate recruitment routes, experienced similarly smooth transitions, entering the world of work with focus, purpose, and agency. However, at the other extreme, a large number of participants described messier, more challenging and winding transitions, taking longer to settle into long-term roles and experiencing periods of employment where they felt undervalued and that their skills were not appropriately used.

Such graduates often described experiencing a deep sense of shock on leaving university, neither knowing what they wanted to do or what was required of them within the labour market. Such experiences were generally characterised by of a series of unsatisfactory short-term jobs in a variety of sectors for the first few years after graduation, usually alongside a series of failed job applications, before finally finding satisfaction in a longer-term role. These graduates described their experiences as *'chaotic'*, *'frustrating'* and *'confusing'*, with transition characterised by passivity and, as several participants put it, 'naivety'. As Robert describes:

> *In my experience, I know it's different for other people, but my career... it's been a bit chaotic. I know that other people have plans which they put into place and then they carry out and they're all very happy with that, which is fine, but I think for me it's been a bit different. (Robert, English graduate)*

7.2 FACTORS MEDIATING TRANSITION TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Thus, the different ways in which participants experienced transition into the labour market varied significantly. Although there did not appear to be any correlation between different subject areas and the smoothness of transition, many participants explicitly described labour market entry as being mediated (positively and negatively) by their degrees and their time at Oxford. The following sections therefore explore this in more depth.

7.2.1 'Doing your homework'

For those participants that experienced a smooth transition into the labour market, the process began during their degrees when they began to *'do their homework'* about future options and the labour market. In most instances, in addition to personal research, this involved gaining information about work, internships, or graduate programmes in formal ways through careers fairs, events, talks, and the University's Careers Service. Some participants described a very focused and agentic approach, actively seeking information and planning their future careers carefully. Some participants described this process of *'doing your homework'* in more passive terms, based on chance exposure to vocational discourses and opportunities. For example, Joni described chancing upon a summer internship at RBS through a skills-building event that she *'just happened to go to'* that was being hosted at the Careers Service. This led to a successful application to RBS's graduate scheme where she has remained for the last five years. Others described simply being driven by peer pressure: '*all my friends were going on these internships so I just assumed this was the done thing!*' (Tom, Theology).

Whichever way they initially engaged with information about careers, all of these graduates described ultimately leveraging their time at Oxford strategically to build up their awareness of the labour market, and thinking carefully about their place within it and the necessary pathways towards success. From these narratives of smooth transitions it was clear that, in general, such graduates appreciated the opportunities for information about careers, internships, and graduate recruitment that existed in Oxford through the Careers Service, careers fairs, Milk Round recruitment etc. Although some expressed a degree of dissatisfaction at the assumptions embedded in the system that emphasised particular sectors and career pathways ('*a dominance of bankers and management consultants*', as one participant put it), many clearly felt appropriately informed to navigate the process of transitioning into the labour market effectively. This was the case even for the cohort of students that graduated into a challenging and stretched labour market in 2008-2011.

In contrast, those graduates who experienced more challenging transitions rarely described engaging with careers opportunities or information during their degrees. These individuals frequently described a general awareness of opportunities, but had simply not considered them relevant during their degrees and so had not engaged with them: *'It's not like I didn't know the Careers Service was there, I just never really thought about it'* (Eli, History). Eli, and graduates who, like him, had struggled in the year or two immediately following graduation, frequently described their lack of engagement with careers-related opportunities at Oxford with regret. Many described only beginning to think about post-university plans towards the end of their final years, but then feeling overwhelmed by academic pressure and their impending finals and so unable to do anything about it. As Eli continued:

> *when your finals are approaching, it's too late. The sensible people started thinking about jobs in their second years. People like me were too late and there was just too much work to do... I knew I'd be in for a shock at the end of it and I really was!*

7.2.2 Extra-Curricular Activities

Similarly, it was clear from the narratives that those graduates who had experienced smooth transitions into the labour market had taken strategic advantage of the extra-curricular activities that were available to them. In many instances, participants described deliberately getting involved in different clubs and sporting activities, alongside their natural interests in the activity, in order to develop skills and gain experience they felt would be beneficial to their careers. This usually involved taking leadership positions, as for example, treasurer or chair, or as one participant described, being the leader of a big band and booking performances. Missy (PPE) elaborated on this:

> I think being part of societies can lead to jobs and so I tried to get leadership positions. I was treasurer of the African and Caribbean Society, which meant I had something to put on my form when they're asking about 'a time when you've done this and that…' I was thinking if I could have proper management experience looking after finances, you're budgeting, getting commercial understanding… you can show actual skills you're developing to an employer.

Those who took advantage of these opportunities particularly highlighted their importance for transition into the labour market. As one graduate explained: *'When I didn't have much other experience, it was good in terms of next steps out of university to have evidence of being involved in things that were similar to things you wanted to work in when you graduated'* (Kayla, Modern History graduate). Many participants described their extra-curricular activities coming up in their first job interviews and feeling confident that they were able to display skills and experience that went beyond purely academic prowess. This was frequently cited as a significant contribution to a smooth transition into work. This point was echoed by many employers who highlighted the importance of extra-curricular activities on the CVs of recent graduates as indicators of skills and leadership qualities.

However, other participants also emphasised engagement in extracurricular activities as being a key part of helping them develop their long-term career aspirations. Extracurricular activities provided opportunities to explore things that individuals were passionate about, developing lifelong interests that helped set them on particular career trajectories. For example, Jim (Classics) discussed working as a volunteer for the mental health charity, Nightline, while being a student. For him, this experience helped him realise that he wanted a career in the charitable sector. Similarly, Alison (PPE) described getting involved in Oxford University Aid Society, which helped define her aspirations to work in international development. For these students, engagement in extracurricular activities helped them discover their passions and career aspirations meaning that they left university with focus and agency, already knowing what they wanted to do, and so transitioned into the labour market smoothly.

7.2.3 Work Experience

Similarly, many participants that described smoother transitions into employment particularly emphasised the importance of prior labour market experiences while at university. In part, this contributed to participants gaining a sense of clarity about their future aspirations and the career options available to them. For example, Rebecca (Classics) described initially thinking she would work in a museum. However, taking advantage of the opportunity to work with Oxford Museums Service during her second year vacation, she changed her mind and began to explore alternative career pathways, settling on publishing. By testing her career goals while at Oxford she developed clearer aspirations and felt better able to transition in a focused way at the point of graduation.

At the same time, many participants described the importance of gaining work experience during their degrees as an opportunity to develop skills and improve their CVs. As such, they felt that work experience prior to graduation both helped them become more rounded individuals and gave them an edge in a competitive jobs market, enabling them to stand out from other graduates as they went for their first jobs. As Pauline described: *'just having that little bit more experience is so useful to get people to notice your first application'*. The employers who participated in this study similarly highlighted the importance of some experience of the labour market for individuals hoping to secure their first main graduate job.

It is particularly important to highlight those graduates who took degrees in modern foreign languages, where a year abroad was built into the structure of the course. This provided these individuals with a structured opportunity to gain, often very rich, experiences of the labour market during their time abroad. All the participants we interviewed who had taken this degree emphasised how beneficial this year was and, while not everybody used this opportunity to gain work experience, those who did described it as critical for gaining knowledge, skills and experience to successfully navigate their full transition into employment on completion of their degrees. This curriculum-based opportunity to engage in work experience is unique to the modern languages courses and was clearly welcomed by those that took advantage of it.

In contrast, graduates who experienced more challenging transitions into the labour market frequently expressed regret that they had not been more strategic in their approach to work experience while at Oxford. This was most frequently expressed in relation to internships which appeared, from some participants' perspectives, to provide the best returns in the labour market at the point of graduation. This point is borne out by employers who emphasise the value they place on work experience gained through internships when graduates first enter the labour market. Similarly, recent research has highlighted the ways in which individuals can 'stack' internships to give themselves a competitive edge in the labour market (Wright & Mulvey, 2021). This was borne out by our research which showed that graduates who took a strategic approach to undertake formal structured internships while at university felt they developed skills, experiences and social networks that helped them transition into the labour market. In fact, several described getting their first job with the company that initially provided them with an internship.

However, several individuals described feeling unable to engage in these kinds of opportunities, particularly if they involved living in a city with a high cost of living rather than with their parents. As Simon put it, *'in the holidays I had to live with my parents in Devon. I couldn't afford to go anywhere else, certainly not to an unpaid or poorly paid internship in London!'*

Several graduates described still feeling angry and frustrated about their inability to engage in formal internships more than ten years after graduation. Importantly, they described how their failure to engage with key internships while at university negatively shaped their aspirations. They described feeling that certain professions, particularly prestigious roles traditionally associated with Oxford Humanities graduates (in management, finance, and even the civil service), necessitated prior experience developed through internships while at University. Having failed to, or feeling unable to develop that intern-related experience while at Oxford, these participants frequently experienced messy and difficult transitions.

It is important to note that much work has been done to overcome some of the structural and financial inequalities related to accessing unpaid or low-paid internships at university, particularly for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The Oxford Crankstart Internship Programme (formerly known as Moritz-Heyman), for example, offers means-tested grants to undergraduates to subsidise the cost of taking internships while at university and programmes of support exist specifically for low SES students through the Careers Service, supporting students to find and access relevant internships and develop appropriate skills and experience. As such, the comments highlighted here may, in part, be the product of a historical participant group experiencing different, now outdated internship structures.

However, it is also important to note that students have complex lives. Many may have caring responsibilities during vacation or familial expectations that they will spend vacations with their families. Similarly, many have physical or mental health issues that may limit their abilities to participate in formal internships or necessitate a meaningful rest period during vacation. Others may feel taking up an internship comes at a cost to their academic studies. Therefore, there may still be a need to think creatively about ensuring means of gaining work experience are available to all students in order to support smooth transitions. The COVID-19 has necessitated some of this work, with creative approaches being taken that use the affordances of digital technologies to provide students with work experience. Creative and digital approaches may help provide access to internships for all students so it is recommended that these be continued and extended beyond the immediate pressures of the pandemic.

Beyond the point of transition into the labour market, many participants also highlighted the importance of work experience gained after graduation for their career trajectories. As discussed above, a relatively large number of graduates listed their job title as 'intern' within the DARS data. This likely reflects a wide range of meanings attributed to the concept of 'internship' and, as described by a number of interviewees, may often have been used colloquially to refer to individuals' initial jobs (often associated with low pay and menial work) that they viewed as stepping stones to better rewarded and prestigious positions. Other participants described these kinds of 'graduate internships' as ways of 'breaking into' particular careers, by gaining appropriate experience, developing networks, and accessing emergent opportunities. Within our data, this kind of work was particularly associated with participants who experienced messy transitions and had not developed relevant experience while at university.

A number of participants described struggling with these kinds of low paid roles as they attempted to establish themselves within the sector on which they were focused. These participants often described financial struggles related to low paid work early on in their careers. This is exemplified by Smiley's career trajectory (see vignettes in the Appendices), who described, on graduation, moving between a series of short term (low or unpaid) internships and labouring on construction sites to earn money in his effort to break into advertising. This shows that the quantitative data related to graduate outcomes conceals some of the nuances of the labour market and the complex career trajectories that some graduates experience.

7.2.4 Social Networks

Those participants that described smooth transitions into the labour market also described strong social networks, usually developed during their degrees. For many participants, Oxford introduced them to a diverse range of people they had not engaged with prior to university:

> *I just hadn't ever met people whose dad was someone really senior at JP Morgan or something, or like related to a famous playwright, that sort of thing. It just wasn't close to what my experience at school had been… I think that was a bit of an eye-opening thing for me, but it was good preparation for working in an investment bank…*

In some cases, participants discussed direct links between their social networks and their transition into the job market. For example, one History graduate described being made aware of a creative internship she applied to thanks to a former member of her drama society, who had himself held the same internship. Similarly, a Modern Languages student was made aware of a paid internship at an advertising agency through connections she had made through the university Advertising Society. These connections extended into sporting activity with one History graduate, who was captain of a sports team at Oxford, describing being offered a job in the sports charity sector by someone who attended one of the games he was captaining and who he ultimately got to know.

While a large number of graduates described ways in which the social networks they developed at university were important for finding their first job, as well as subsequently on their career journeys, many also described their networks as an important social resource which helped them transition to and

settle into the labour market in broader ways. Participants described relying on friends they had made at Oxford to deal with challenges and offer careers advice. This was particularly important where friendships developed with students in years above who entered the labour market first and could subsequently share advice.

Social networks were particularly highlighted by postgraduate students. Those taking postgraduate courses often came with very different levels of experience, were more likely to be international, and so represented a more diverse population. Postgraduate students and graduates particularly welcomed this diversity and the benefits of extended experiences and connections it brought.

7.2.5 Active/ Passive Approaches to Employment as a Student

A large number of participants described taking a very active and instrumental approach to employment from the beginning of their degrees and, as discussed above, actively leveraged the opportunities available at Oxford to develop different forms of 'capital', experiences, and skills, to distinguish themselves within the labour market. Other students and graduates took a more passive approach, deferring thinking about their careers until after graduation, and instead taking a deliberate focus on their studies. Those who took active strategic approaches to their own employability during their degrees often entered university with a clear career goal in mind, actively developed skills and experiences to facilitate that alongside their studies, and transitioned into graduate employment smoothly. Those who took a more passive approach often did not have specific career goals in mind during their degrees, took a more passive approach to developing relevant skills and experiences, and transitioned into the labour market in messier less focused ways. Many of these graduates described their initial years in the labour as part of, as one participant put it, *'the seeking process'*, where they decided on their career goals and trajectory, while in the labour market, rather than prior to entering it.

Thus active engagement in leveraging opportunities strategically are linked with smoother transitions, while more passive approaches to employment while are student are linked with messier transitions,

7.2.6 Problematising Assumptions About Transitions

Underpinning much of the literature and policy discussion on graduate transitions into the labour market is an assumption that straight forward transitions into graduate employment is an ideal goal and that messier transitions are problematic. Consequently, activities during students' degrees that facilitate smooth transitions, actively and strategically developing employability skills for example, should be encouraged. However, our analysis of the interview data suggests that these kinds of assumptions do not necessarily capture the nuances of the Oxford Humanities graduates' experiences.

While it is possible to highlight that some students experienced and struggled with messier transitions into the labour market than others, both the qualitative and the quantitative data

suggest that ultimately those students who initially struggled with their careers, found what they really wanted to do in the first few years of exploring different career options and developed successful careers. Although messier transitions into employment may delay higher financial returns, they need not always be problematic or limiting when longer-term career trajectories are taken into account. As is discussed in more detail below, many graduates highlighted that they felt they had a wide range of career opportunities because of their Oxford Humanities degrees and used the flexibility of those opportunities in the first few years of their time in employment to discover what they really wanted to do.

In fact, many graduates emphasised that they felt their time doing an Oxford Humanities degree was characterised by freedom to form themselves in the way that most aligned with their interests and ambitions. Some particularly focused on developing their careers and used the wide range of opportunities that are available at Oxford to facilitate this. Others focused mainly on their studies and developing themselves intellectually and academically. In other words, participants described their experiences in terms of self-formation (Marginson, 2014; Marginson, 2018) where their Humanities degrees provided them with the freedom to exert agency and develop themselves in ways that best fit their interests and passions.

7.3 WIDER CAREER TRAJECTORIES

7.3.1 Flexibility of Opportunity

Participants overwhelmingly referred to the flexibility of opportunity they felt they had been afforded by their Oxford Humanities degrees, emphasising the wide range of career pathways they felt were available to them. This was emphasised by current students, recent graduates, and even graduates who were ten or more years into a career. All felt that they had a range of career options available to them and that they could work in a diverse range of sectors and roles. This is reflected in our quantitative analyses which show increasing diversification of sectors in which Oxford Humanities graduates work.

Many participants highlighted the importance of this flexibility even when they had specific careers in mind (such a law or finance), valuing the opportunity to change their minds and consider a wide range options while at university and later in the labour market, knowing that their degree choice provided them with flexibility. John, for example, describes this clearly: *'History is a good, broad degree... you can go in all sorts of directions with it... it's a good all-round academic degree.'* The importance of this flexibility to graduates was emphasised repeated across all the interviews, as one participant put it: *'When I was applying for university... my family... didn't really see how it [Languages] would be useful at all. But... the skills are just so transferable to anything'* (Hala, BA French and Arabic).

Participants clearly described this flexibility extending beyond their initial transitions into the labour market and extending into their wider career trajectories. Many graduates described

regularly moving across both roles and sectors, often the ability to move across organisations to accelerate their career progression:

> I've switched quite a bit... at one point, I got a new job something like every year for a bit... but each move was an advance, you know, higher up, more money... By doing that I got much further much quicker than if I'd just stayed in one place (Sophie, Philosophy and Theology).

For other participants, flexibility of opportunity meant that they could move around the labour market, fundamentally shifting careers in some instances, based, less on a desire to progress, but on personal interests or personal circumstances. As one participant described, *I worked in HR for [a large business], but after a few years I felt I wanted to make more of a difference in the world so I moved to [the charitable sector]'.* As such, participants emphasised that the flexibility that Oxford Humanities degrees provided enabled them to work in roles and for companies that interested them. They felt freedom to choose their employment and move across the labour market with individual agency based on their interests and values. For some this meant focusing on career progression and financial returns; for others this meant focusing on work they found meaningful.

Several participants emphasised that the flexibility they experienced was particularly important at the end of the labour market often associated with high financial returns, prestige and autonomy, which is increasingly characterised by a growth in consultancy-based models of employment, job churn, and shorter job tenure. Several of the participants in this study were working in this way (usually in management consultancy, branding consultancy, or in the creative industries). These individuals described navigating short tenured roles effectively, crossing work contexts and sectors smoothly and efficiently.

Participants attributed this this flexibility of opportunity to their degrees, explicitly referring to a range of skills, knowledge and experiences they developed at Oxford (see below). However, they also emphasised the power of the Oxford brand as a signal of adaptability and an individual's capabilities to cross contexts, roles and sectors (see section on employer perspectives for more details) *'The Oxford name has a lot of power to open doors'.* This signalling affect was commonly referred to by participants. Current students described feeling the Oxford brand would be an important way of 'getting your foot in the door' of the labour market, while graduates commonly described experiencing the complex relationship between their skills and experience and the wider signalling power of the Oxford brand: *'it [the Oxford name] definitely helped! I knew I could do the job [first job in International Development], but having a degree from Oxford meant that I got the chance to prove myself'* (Megan, PPE).

As such, in a labour market where role and sector changes are increasingly common, when navigating the labour market as part of an ongoing career trajectories, graduates with Oxford Humanities degrees felt more advantaged than many of their peers due to the combination of knowledge, skills and experience associated with their degrees and signalling power of the university's brand.

7.3.2 Emphasising Diversity

Having emphasised the flexibility and diversity of opportunities they had experienced when navigating the labour market, many participants expressed a desire to challenge assumptions about 'typical career trajectories' for Oxford Humanities graduates. Many suggested that dominant discourses within the university were still rooted in an assumption that Humanities graduates would follow a specific career trajectory in a relatively narrow range of sectors which they felt did not reflect the diverse range of roles and areas in which they and their university peers worked. Such traditional trajectories often revolved around graduate recruitment schemes, focused on Education, Management Consultancy, Finance, Civil Service, the Law, and the Media. Graduate participants described, in retrospect, some frustration with these kinds of embedded assumptions, feeling they did not reflect individuals' lived experiences of the labour market or the range of available employment opportunities. Jacob, for example, summarises this clearly:

> During my undergrad, every department would get these nominally tailored emails... with ideas for summer internships and jobs that you could find after graduation. For my first year, the only job that was sent to the Classics Department was HR at a big company. I think about that a lot because I think it's a great illustration of how narrowly, uncreatively and reductively the dominant conversation thinks of the role of the Humanities. (Jacob, History)

Similarly, Lara (Modern Languages) felt it was assumed within the University by tutors, the Careers Service, and some of the student population that the majority of Humanities graduates would be going into the key sectors listed above: *'they [the sectors] were just really prominent'.*

There is an important reality to this. Our quantitative data analysis shows that these sectors still remain key destinations for the majority of graduates, with more than half, ten years from graduation, having taken on some kind of professional or managerial position in these core areas. In the graduate interviews, many participants, even when discussing flexibility of career opportunities, still conceptualised this flexibility within the context of these main sectors.

However, this situation is shifting with the growth in the number of graduates working in an increasingly wide range of sectors and roles, and with notable increase in emergent areas, such as the digital and tech sectors. Consequently, many participants expressed a wish that they had been exposed to more information that emphasised the breadth of opportunity available to them. Those graduates that did end up working in growth sectors often described circuitous routes into them that involved taking time to discover that such career options existed. These participants described, in retrospect, feeling that they had not been exposed to a wide enough range of

career options while at Oxford and would have welcomed greater institutionalised engagement with the diverse range of potential graduate destinations: *'I didn't even know what a start-up was…'* (Amanda, Philosophy).

Similarly, a significant number of participants wanted to challenge what they viewed as outdated assumptions that Oxford Humanities should be conceptualised as a pipeline for financial elitism. As Janet (Modern History) stated *'I think the assumption is that everybody… wants to earn shedloads of money otherwise why would you be there?'* However, for her, and many others, these embedded assumptions jarred with their wider aspirations:

> *that didn't really speak to people like me because there was no kind of, "Oh, have you thought about graduate public sector careers or a charities career?" I don't recall that ever being something that the university expressed as an option or something to think about.* (Janet, Modern History graduate)

For these participants assumptions that students and graduates were purely motivated by financial returns from their Oxford Humanities degrees was in tension with their experiences at Oxford. Many were aware of trends in HE discourses and regulations that emphasised financial returns and deliberately challenged or rejected policy approaches, emphasising the wider value of Humanities degrees (as will be discussed in more detail below). For example, Henry stated: *'Humanities subjects make you think about people and that definitely motivated me to work in charity… not money.'*

Thus, many participants described feeling frustrated by assumptions about typical career trajectories, both within the university structures they had experienced and in wider societal discourses, which they felt were in tension with the wide range of graduate destinations and career aspirations that went beyond simple financial returns. When discussing the relationship between their degrees and the labour market, these participants were consequently keen to challenge dominant discourses and move them forward in a way that reflected diversity of destinations, motivations, and aspirations.

7.3.3 Additional Post Graduate Study

A significant number of individuals included in the analysis are currently undertaking additional post-graduate study or had already gained additional qualifications. Some of the careers Oxford Humanities graduates have taken up require addition postgraduate qualifications: these include academia, accountancy, law, clinical psychology and forensic psychology. However, although many positions do not appear to require additional technical or general qualifications, a significant portion of the participants chose to do at least one further post-graduate qualification, either at Oxford and in other university and professional contexts. This appears to be part of an increasing trend towards growth in the number of individuals taking post-graduate qualifications across the HE sector as whole.

The range of different subjects participants focused on at post-graduate level varied significantly and included explicitly vocational or technical qualifications (e.g. accountancy or computer science) as well as broader subjects in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. The reasons participants gave for pursuing additional study were, understandably, varied. While some described needing a specific technical qualification for their careers, others described undertaking further study simply because they were interested in a particular topic and wanted to take the opportunity to explore it in greater depth than they had been able to at undergraduate level. Other participants described undertaking further study as a means of *'delaying real life'* or to give themselves time *'to work out what I want to do'.* However, the majority discussed the motivations, at least in part, in strategic terms, wanting to improve their qualifications to improve their employment prospects. One graduate put this succinctly: *'no longer is it okay to just have a degree, you need a masters to stand out.'* (Vladimir, PPE).

The idea of using a postgraduate qualification in order to set oneself apart was especially prevalent amongst those who had graduated around 2008, a particularly volatile time for the UK's labour market. These participants emphasised the effect that the financial crash and the subsequent recession had on their approach to the job market, and in particular in relation to post-graduate studies. As one participant put it:

> *I think that many people of my generation and slightly afterwards did post-graduate degrees, partly because the job market looked so dire when we graduated, because it was right as the Financial Crisis was happening and there was a lack of confidence in recruitment generally. So, a lot of people did Masters because they felt like it would make them better, stronger candidates when they were looking to do things* (Mike, Modern Languages and Linguistics graduate)

However, although a different cohort, those participants currently undertaking and who had recently undertaken post-graduate taught Humanities degrees at Oxford expressed similar sentiments. While some emphasised the importance of their own personal interest in the subject they were taking as the main motivating factor, the majority described their postgraduate studies as part of a wider trajectory. In some instances, this was in relation to ambitions to have a career in academia and participants were planning on undertaking a doctorate on completion of their taught post-graduate degrees. In most instances, though, participants were keen to emphasise both the signalling power the felt their post-graduate studies would have (or had already had) with employers, the value of the credentials within the labour market, and the relevant employability skills they developed.

8. SKILLS

Skills are often at the heart of academic and policy debate about work and employment, with governments across both advanced and developing economies prioritising skills formation as the answer to a wide range of policy challenges (Keep & Mayhew, 2012). Skills are commonly regarded as the driver of economic development, the panacea for social ills and an essential tool for economic recovery from recession (Buchanan et al. 2017; DfE 2021; H.M. Treasury, 2021). The data discussed throughout the previous section, as well as the vignettes of participants' different trajectories through the labour market (Appendix 2), illustrate that students, graduates and employers all frequently referred to the different skills developed by Oxford Humanities graduates. This underlines the importance of skills-related discourses to the way in which graduates experience and make sense of the labour market. This section, therefore, aims to provide insight into the relationship between the skills perceived to be supplied through Oxford Humanities degrees and current demands in employment labour market. As such, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What key skills do people associate with Oxford Humanities degree and graduates?
- How do people see these skills being developed at Oxford?

Humanities degrees are traditionally associated with broader, transferable skills rather than technical ones and so it is unsurprising that this research project found that many participants attributed these kinds of skills to their Humanities degrees. Much work has recently been undertaken analysing the skills Humanities graduates bring to the labour market and how these are valued by employers and within the wider economy. Lyonette et al. (2017) have developed a framework of skills associated with Humanities degrees (although they also include the Arts and Social Sciences in their analysis). These include: research, critical thinking, independence, time management, social skills, confidence, communication, problem solving, teamwork, emotional intelligence, leadership, global mindset and entrepreneurship. The British Academy has undertaken further analysis of how graduates deploy these skills successfully in the labour market (BA, 2020)

Similarly, Robson et al. (2021) through interviews with Chairs and CEOs from nearly a third of FTSE 100 companies have developed a framework, 'The Narrative Skills Framework', for understanding the kinds of skills Arts and Humanities graduates bring to business contexts that are particularly valued by business leaders. These skills include: narrative communication; empathy and perspective taking; critical analysis, synthesis and managing complex data; creativity and imagination; and digital skills.

However, rather than explicitly impose any particular employability skills framework or overt classification of skills on the data, we have taken a grounded approach and have therefore presented the skills described by participants in the way they were discussed in the interviews. This roots the discussion of skills seen to be developed through Oxford Humanities degrees in participants' actual lived experiences and allows the distinctive aspects of the Oxford degree programmes to come out clearly, undistorted by preconceptions and the imposition of external skills frameworks. However, it is of note that many of the key skills highlighted by Oxford Humanities graduates overlap significantly with those highlighted by both Lyonette et al. (2017) and Robson et al. (2021). This illustrates clear alignment between the skills that are valued in the labour market, particularly in strategic and prestigious roles, as illustrated by these studies, and the skills developed during Oxford Humanities degrees. This provides strong explanation for the number of Oxford Humanities graduates in these kinds of prestigious roles and the salary premium associated with Oxford Humanities degrees.

8.1 SKILLS DEVELOPED AT OXFORD:

Participants particularly highlighted the following key skills as being important in their working lives, both when they entered the labour market and throughout their wider career trajectories, and attributed the development of these skills specifically to their time at Oxford.

8.1.1 Communication
Written and Verbal Communication
Perhaps unsurprisingly, almost all participants across all subject areas and degree types emphasised the importance of communication skills. They argued that being able to communicate clearly and concisely was central to all Oxford degrees at all levels. However, the majority of participants saw this as being particularly important in Humanities degrees where both written and verbal communication skills were given such prominence and expectations placed on students meant strong communication skills were essential to success. As Max put it:

> my experience of a Humanities degree was that it was very focused on communication and language, trying to break that down in terms of structure, rhetoric and organising thoughts and I think clarity of communication is something that I took most strongly away from my degree

Participants provided numerous examples, across a wide range of sectors, linking the communication skills they felt they had developed during their degrees with experiences in the labour market. For example, Rachel described how she found the writing skills she had developed during her Modern History degree essential for written communication in her role at the Civil Service: *'Now, you know, you might have to write something which the minister reads or is published, so you really have to make it very taut and clear. I do think history helped me become a lot better at writing with more directness and clarity...'* Similarly, Paul described how communication skills underpin the process of product development in marketing and how his PPE degree helped him develop the skills required by his marketing role:

> Fundamentally it's [the degree] all about communicating well, writing well, and tailoring your writing to the audience... it's the same at work. You have to acknowledge the audience for the product, understand the audience and communicate appropriately

The ability to write well was a skill that many graduates particularly prized and this sentiment was echoed by the employers that participated in the study, with both employers and graduates particularly linking written communication skills with Humanities skills. Several even compared Oxford Humanities graduates with individuals who had taken STEM subjects at Oxford, suggesting that, '*compared with someone who has done something like physics, people who have done things like English, History, Philosophy, any Humanities can, most of the time, just write better'* (Employer Digital Sector). Importantly, writing skills were seen as valuable across a wide range of sectors and occupations. As one participant put it, '*even at the most basic level of email, being able to write clearly and well is the cornerstone of work'.* As such, many graduates viewed written communication skills not just as important to their current work, but as critical to their ability to progress in their careers and navigate the labour market – a skill that can be relied upon as individuals moved jobs, occupations and sectors: '*writing is really valued as a skill and so being able to write convincingly and explain and defend your arguments... is valued as a set of skills very strongly everywhere'* (Max).

At the same time, many participants emphasised the importance of the verbal communication skills they had developed during their degrees. Richard, for example, described how important these skills were in his role as a press officer:

> *During the degree you're put in quite pressurised situations, you have to verbally respond quickly... that's basically what I'm doing now as a press officer. You get asked quite tough questions by tough people and you have to respond coherently... in many ways, the degree is actually really applied...*

Graduates described leveraging the verbal communication skills they had developed during their degrees in a wide variety of ways, from when they first entered the labour market ('*being able to think on my feet and respond clearly has always been crucial in job interviews'*), to supporting specific tasks (e.g. '*chairing meeting', 'making pitches'*, answering questions at select committee hearings etc.), or simply facilitating effective relationships with colleagues and managers. Thus, many participants emphasised that written *and* verbal communication skills went hand in hand in an Oxford degree and that both of these aspects were essential to success in the workplace.

Argumentation and the Art of Persuasion
Many participants particularly emphasised communication in terms of their ability to construct and present (in writing or verbally) a strong argument – '*the art of persuasion'* as one graduate put it. This skill was seen as underpinning all Oxford Humanities degrees and being particularly rooted in the tutorial system and writing regular essays. Emily clearly described how important this was for her work in production in the creative sector:

> *Going to the BBC or into Film4 or the BFI and I've got to tell them in the opening 15 minutes why they should definitely finance my film. This it's really interesting, and I've got this great director and this brilliant writer and the project is going to be interesting for international audiences now and forever. I suppose the gift of the gab, the quick recall of information and presenting your argument is exactly what a tutorial is. Increasingly I feel very grateful for that experience!*

Participants provided numerous examples in the more creative sectors of having to pitch ideas to funders or key decision makers and relying on their ability to argue the case:

> *When I was working the publicist area of the music industry, we had to put pitches together to persuade people into the company or to work with us. That might have been a PowerPoint rather than an essay, but it would be essentially the same process [as writing an essay], it's about an argument: here's the issues, how we're solving it, why you want to work with us* (John)

Graduates working in areas like marketing and advertising also particularly emphasised the importance of being able to construct a persuasive argument: '*the art of persuasion is ultimately what advertising and marketing is all about'* (Lauren). However, as found by Robson et al. (2021), many participants saw persuasion as underpinning almost all kinds of communication. In all sectors, formal approaches to communication are often focused on attempting to persuade some kind of change in the audience, from buying a product, to accepting an idea or changing a behaviour. As such, the ability to present a coherent argument that will persuade the audience was seen as a crucial transferable skill by almost all participants and something that was highly valued across all labour market contexts.

Empathy and 'imagining the other'
many participants described feeling that their Humanities degrees had fostered a sense of empathy in them and being able to understand other people and their actions and motivations. As Esmeralda (History) pointed out, '*history is all about people and why they behave as they do'.* For participants like Felix (English Literature) this ability to understand and empathise with people was instrumental in motivating him to work in the charitable sector. However, others particularly emphasised the importance of empathy and imagining the other as underpinning communication skills: '*communication is all about the audience, you have to be able to imagine how the audience will react to your message'.* This sense of empathy was seen by many graduates as critical to understanding '*how your message will land'* and tailoring it appropriately either in terms of content or in terms of the medium.

Communication as Performance
A large number of graduates also particularly emphasised the performative aspects of communication they had developed at Oxford. Some discussed this jokingly in terms of the ability to mask shortcomings or a lack of knowledge: '*the ability to appear to know things'* (Kate). This aspect of communication is clearly summarised by Emily: '*I joke that the things that I use most from my degree is rhetoric and bullshit... going into a tutorial every week and trying to convince someone that*

you've done all of the reading… and putting your point across'.

Although expressed humorously, this point was echoed by a wide range of participants. Some expressed this negatively; for example, Samantha suggested that *'Maybe at Oxford it's all sort of bluster and prestige and learning how to present things so that they sound more impressive than they are meant.'* Usually, though, participants saw this aspect of their education as an extremely useful tool: the ability to work with limited information but use it effectively to make a case or come across as an expert was frequently referred to as a critical skill for navigating the challenges of the labour market at a practical level: *'sometimes it's fantastic to just blag it, bluff it out'.*

In fact, several participants took this further, arguing that being able to communicate in this way, 'bluffing it out', enabled them to spot when other people were behaving in a similar fashion: *'it means I can smell the bullshit'.* This was seen as particularly beneficial in terms of managing working relationships, forming alliances in the work place, or simply knowing what and who to trust: *'work is full of fakers, many are in managerial positions… being able to spot the fakers is important for upward management'.*

8.1.2 Research Skills and the ability to process, digest and manipulate complex material quickly

Although closely linked with communication skills, the majority of participants also separately highlighted the importance of research skills and the ability to process, digest and manipulate complex material or information quickly in the workplace. This was seen as the core part of an undergraduate degree in the Humanities from Oxford. The high-pressure environment and pedagogic model built around weekly tutorials was repeatedly highlighted as forcing students to read and absorb extensive amounts of material quickly and use it effectively to produce essays each week. Participants described how they relied on these research skills in a wide range of work situations. Jane summarized this clearly:

> *I found both in marketing and in my job today [policy analyst at the Civil Service], the degree [English Literature] served me really well… at Oxford you are just doing things at a crazy pace, like reading so much every week and writing essays, you just really hone your ability to find the right information quickly and turn it into something that makes sense very quickly.*

Graduates across all subject areas and working in all sectors (from finance and the civil service to education and the digital sector) highlighted these skills, emphasising the inherent transferability of being able to find, process and represent complex information in a variety of contexts. Some described ways in which their jobs exactly mirrored the research process associated with producing Humanities essays at Oxford, dealing with extensive information and evidence and synthesising it to make a particularly argument:

> *I work in forensics so I'm confronted with huge amounts of paper, reports and interviews and things going back years, and I have to try and sift through all of it in a reasonable time, work out what's true and*

what's cobblers, and then come to some conclusions about it and usually end up having to write a report of my own (Jason)

Other participants emphasised how these skills were essential in their places of work even when the information they were dealing with was very different to the kind of texts they worked with during their degrees. For example, Samantha (Digital sector) described using the research skills she had developed at Oxford to go through large amounts of financial data and budgets, understand the narrative that lay behind them, and produce relevant reports and financial recommendations. Similarly, Rory described how his Humanities-based research skills were transferable to his management role in the NHS where he had to process and work with a wide range of clinical data and information about patient pathways:

> *For somebody who doesn't have a clinical background at all, it can often be quite a steep learning curve! I think one of the things I took from my degree was not to be daunted by that and just approach it logically and quickly in order to get a working understanding of everything*

The ability to research, process, digest and manipulate a wide range of information quickly and efficiently was something brought up repeatedly by graduates, employers and students. Although this was explicitly linked by many participants with the tutorial system and so could be applicable to any subject area at Oxford, all groups of participants particularly associated these research skills with Humanities degrees. They suggested that the nature of their subject areas, the *'extensive reading lists'* they faced as students, and the focus on the production of text through essays all meant that Humanities graduates were particularly well prepared for undertaking similar information processing tasks in the labour market. As Vladimir put it (PPE):

> *I learned to read and write in a very short space of time… I think Humanities gives you that ability… compared to colleagues who went to other universities or did other subjects, the amount of reading and writing required meant you had to learn to gut a book in a very short space of time… and process it incredibly quickly.*

This emphasis on research skills is closely aligned with findings of Lyonette et al. (2017) and BA (2020) which highlight research and information processing skills as the most common set of skill developed during Arts, Humanities and Social Science Degrees. Similarly, Robson et al. (2021) found that these kinds of research skills were highly valued in a wide range of business contexts, particularly for those in strategic leadership positions where dealing effectively with extensive amounts of complex information is essential.

8.1.3 Critical thinking

Very closely linked with research skills was the idea of criticality. The majority of participants repeatedly emphasised the prominence given to critical thinking in their degrees and how Oxford fostered a culture of intellectual discernment,

challenge, and critical thinking. As James stated: *'at Oxford the importance of critical thinking is just rammed into you from the very beginning. You have to think about texts critically and challenge ideas… interrogate and question all the time'*. Graduates, post graduates, and current students all emphasised how this kind of approach was embedded in the curriculum and assessment of their degrees as well as in the wider discursive fabric of the university where critical thinking underpinned all academic work. As such, many participants described feeling like they'd been inducted into a particular 'mindset' or 'way of being' through total immersion in this critical culture.

Graduates described applying this kind of critical thinking effectively in a wide range of labour market contexts. At a basic level, many described leveraging their critical mindsets to engage with work-related information, from policy documents or marketing briefs to play scripts or advertising storyboards, analysing them effectively. For example, Keeley described this in the context of working at the Civil Service:

> *sorting information and just being able to weigh up whether a piece of evidence is compelling. At a response stage of a consultation or a policy idea you need to think 'where it's coming from, is there a vested interest here, is it a valuable piece of information?' That scepticism and critical thinking is massively important.*

More broadly, several participants described applying their critical thinking skills not simply to work related tasks but to navigating the social and political networks within their workplaces. Adeep describes this clearly in relation to his work in the financial sector:

> *I think PPE does teach you to think critically… Important in work. But it's one thing doing the job, but there's a whole other element, which is the office politics; how to interact with people… I was able to use the academic skills I'd gained and turn them into corporate ones and be intentional with the work I did, who I did it for, who to work with and how to work with them. You get that skill from the thought process of doing the degree.*

However, several participants described applying these kinds of critical thinking skills to wider discourses at a more macro level. Denise, for example, described how important she felt it was to analyse how her workplace, a technology startup, was part of a wider economic and political system and think critically about the levers of power and how all the different stakeholders, organisations, and agendas fit together. By questioning and challenging common assumptions, she could help position her company more competitively within the market.

This macro level critical approach was also discussed as *'spilling out'* across both work and non-work contexts. Jaspar, for example, discussed how his critical thinking skills, fostered during his English Literature degree, had changed the way he engaged with the news:

> *I don't think you can unlearn this… I think that I have kind of been shown that nothing is ever as simple as it seems and that you always have to search for the meaning behind what you see. For example, in the news, all sorts of messages will come through, but it's not like I know how to look for the truth, but I'm always sceptical now of what the news is telling me, because I know there are so many biases involved, it's never just what it seems.*

Concern around fake news and how political and economic discourses are presented in the media was a theme that many participants referred to and will be discussed in more detail below. Many explicitly argued, often very passionately, that the culture of critical thinking fostered through Oxford degrees, is now an essential tool for navigating the post-truth age and that their degrees had provided them with critical frameworks for making sense of the world and a way that blended their professional and personal lives together.

Such skills are often explicitly linked with Humanities subjects in literature on Humanities and skills (Keep & Mayhew, 2012; Lyonette et al., 2017; BA, 2020; Robson et al., 2021). One participant described this eloquently arguing that Humanities subjects are all about *'dealing with grey areas'* and navigating ambiguity in a context where *'there are rarely any right answers'*. This participant, and many others, felt that their Humanities degrees were particularly well suited to developing such critical thinking skills and, combined with the specific culture of criticality at Oxford, provide graduates with an important skillset for successfully navigating the labour market as well as engaging critically with wider global discourses.

8.1.4 Resilience

A common theme across all the interviews with graduates and students was the idea that time at Oxford was highly pressured. Many participants described 'lurching from essay crisis to essay crisis' all of which culminated in the intensity of finals. Although such a characterisation of an Oxford Humanities degree could be interpreted negatively, almost all participants who engaged in this study saw this in positive terms – particularly graduates (as opposed to students) who had successfully come out of this high-pressure system. They viewed the experience as fostering resilience which was seen as critical for successful engagement in the labour market:

> *I was able to withstand the pressure of the exam process or essay crises, so there's an element of how one would have been tempered in the fire of Oxford and that made you stronger for the world of work* (John PPE)

Many graduates reflected, often fondly in retrospect, on the intensity of the eight-week long terms, the heavy workloads, and the high stakes exams. These participants described feeling that, through this experience, they had been prepared to deal with anything that emerged in their professional or personal lives. As described by Catherine: *'it sounds funny, but one of the important things I've taken from my degree is being able to cope with anything'*.

Several participants, particularly those who graduated into the challenging labour market following the 2008 recession, particularly emphasised the importance of resilience in dealing job applications, interviews and rejection. They highlighted that they felt the resilience they had developed during their Oxford Humanities degrees enabled them to persist in navigating a clearly challenging employment context and ultimately gain the job they wanted. This has clear implications for current students who will likely graduate into a challenging COVID-19 economy; the resilience they have developed during their degrees may serve them well

8.1.5 The ability to cope with and give criticism

A key part of the resilience described by participants was the ability to cope with criticism and being challenged intellectually, using criticism positively to improve work. This was very much seen as being rooted in the experiences of tutorials where academic critique and discussion around presented work is the core activity. As Laura suggested, *'when you first come to Oxford, this can be a really challenging process, especially in a competitive environment'*, but ultimately it enabled students and graduates to *'deal with criticism in a healthy way'*. In the work place, this meant that graduates felt comfortable sharing ideas, *'even in an early stage'*, without *'feeling precious about what people might say'*. As Ben described:

> It's [Theology degree] enabled me to deal with criticism constructively, whether it's about my ideas or something I've done. Like if I'm writing web copy, I have no problem with someone critiquing it… I know if I engage in a discussion about my work it will get better.

At the same time as being able to cope with criticism, many participants explicitly linked this skill with also being able to provide criticism: *'the tutorial is all about discussion and challenging ideas and you're trained really well to ask questions and keep questioning things.'* Many participants placed a great deal of value on having developed the skill of 'academic engagement' and being able to ask probing questions and challenge colleagues' ideas in a constructive manner. For example, Jacob described *'in the bank [his place of work] I think people really respect the fact that I'm willing to question and challenge people… ultimately it's been really good for my career… and the bank!'*

However, several participants described running into difficulties when bringing the culture of questioning and challenging people and ideas into workplaces where such an approach was not always appreciated. As Vladimir described:

> After a while, I got some feedback that sometimes actually people were finding it [the challenging approach he had learned from the Oxford tutorial] really confrontational. I'm like, well no, I'm just trying to poke and prod. But I think moving away from a more sort of tutorial adversarial driven style and really trying to understand [that] other people think in different ways was something really important that I had to learn in work.

Other participants described running into similar issues particularly where they moved away from the UK and entered labour markets where a culture of challenge was less common: *'In China and actually most of Asia, my way of questioning people just didn't really fit and I had to pull myself up quite a lot'*. As such, these graduates described having to learn new ways of challenging colleagues in a way that was subtler and more socially acceptable within their working contexts.

8.1.6 Time management and working to a deadline

Many participants described forming the practical skill of time management, particularly in relation to meeting tight deadlines, during their Oxford Humanities degrees. Participants associated the pressured, sometimes competitive, environment where they had to produce weekly essays or, in the case of post graduate students, assignments, as contributing to the development of these skills. Current students and graduates emphasised that there was so much to do during term time that they had to learn quickly to prioritise different tasks and manage their time effectively in order to meet deadlines.

Unsurprisingly, participants valued this skill in the labour market as well as in general life. As Shona stated: *'you have to work to deadlines wherever you are, whatever you do. Knowing how to manage your time is absolutely essential.'* Many participants provided examples of having to work to tight deadlines in their professional lives, from writing grant applications in academia to meeting broadcasting deadlines, explicitly linking this kind of work with their time at Oxford: *'meeting deadlines is essential and there's not really any better training than getting through those essay crises and getting that essay done!'*

However, several participants, while acknowledging the important training in time management they received during their degrees at Oxford, suggested that the focused nature of work, primarily regularly producing essays, did not adequately prepare them for managing the diverse range of tasks they experienced in their places of work. This was clearly expressed by Levon:

> At Oxford your time was spent doing two essay a week so your to do list is basically two things long, four if you split it into reading and writing. But it's not really like that in the real world. Now I have my system that I've had to develop for managing my time: both long term and short term to do lists.

Several participants expressed similar sentiments, that the core curriculum focus of producing essays did not adequately prepare them for managing their time in relation to the diverse range of tasks they faced in the labour market. However, it was clear that the majority of graduates took advantage of a wide range of extra-curricular activities and professional opportunities alongside their academic work, from managing Junior Common Room Activities to leading widening participation work. This clearly afforded a wide range of tasks and activities, with both long and short term deadlines, providing individuals with the opportunity to develop time management skills relevant to the labour market. As described

by Cassie: *'there's so much to do. I was juggling essays with being on the ball committee and working for nightline and obviously going out with friends… great training.'*

8.1.7 Confidence

Graduate participants, and, to a certain extent, student participants, all repeatedly highlighted confidence as one of the most important things they felt they had developed during their time at Oxford. The majority of the graduates emphasised that this repeatedly proved very beneficial to the way in which they experienced and navigated the labour market as well as their personal lives.

The confidence many participants described was a basic assurance in themselves as individuals. Eli (History) expressed this clearly: *'it's [the degree] given me the ability to walk into any room and see myself as an equal to whoever's there, no matter where they came from or what they're doing now'*. To a certain extent, this attitude seemed to be rooted in a sense of elitism and the idea that Oxford graduates automatically are part of an intellectual elite. However, many participants also described this basic belief in themselves as being rooted in their own resilience (as described above) and overcoming the challenges, pressures and competitive aspects they had experienced during their degrees: *'it's a pressure cooker. If you can get through it, you know you can get through most things!'*.

Many participants saw this kind of assuredness as underpinning their smooth transitions into the labour market, helping them stay calm and focused in job interviews, while, for those with more work experience, also enabling them to move across jobs and sectors: *'it's that confidence to makes sense of whatever the problem or the task is and navigate through it'*. In many ways, the kind of confidence that participants described appeared to be a facilitating factor for the deployment and utilisation of the more specific skills they felt they had developed. By having confidence in their own abilities, participants felt comfortable in using their communication skills, critical thinking skills etc. in work based and wider contexts.

However, many participants also acknowledged that their confidence was in part socially constructed and rooted in the way colleagues and employers engaged with them as 'Oxford graduates': *'when you say 'I went to Oxford', people generally give you an impressed nod and that gives you confidence'*. Many described how important this aspect of their confidence was in transitioning into and navigating the labour market: *'I think, although I knew that I wasn't specifically qualified in the jobs that I was applying for, I think I felt confident that I would be able to learn how to apply my skills to the jobs'* (Erica History).

Several participants appeared to feel conflicted about this and described how the confidence they had developed through their degrees had also fostered a sense of arrogance and being better than others. This was often expressed in terms of *'walking a fine line'* between confidence and arrogance and having to *'pretend to be able to do something'* until you actually can – *'you have to fake it until you make it'*. For many,

this sense of discomfort eased as they began to find their place within the labour market and, as Phoenix suggested, learn some humility: *'I don't think Oxford fosters humility, I had to find it for myself'* (Phoenix, Philosophy and Theology).

8.1.8 Other Key Skills

Although mentioned less frequently across the data, several other keys skills were often raised by a number of participants (minimum of 20 to be included). These were:

Creativity: several participants described feeling that their Oxford Humanities degrees had been critical for fostering a sense of creativity. Usually this was defined in terms of creative thinking and taking varied approaches to problem solving. As such, this aspect of the degree was typically linked by participants with critical thinking and being open to raising questions and looking at problems in innovative ways. While fewer graduates may not have seen creativity as being particularly associated with their degrees, this was a skill that many employers highlighted and something that Robson et al. (2021) found business leaders particularly associate with Humanities degrees. This suggests that while participants may not have been aware of their own creative approaches to thinking, employers associate this with Oxford Humanities and particularly value this skill.

Strategic thinking: again, linked with critical thinking, several participants suggested that strategic thinking was an important feature of their degrees. Although this was particularly highlighted by those graduates who took PPE, and to a lesser extent History, several participants argued that the content of their degrees helped them think about the labour market holistically in terms of a complex system. This enabled them to think strategically about their place within the system, how they could navigate it, or how they could maximise individual returns.

Independence: the word independence was frequently used by a substantial proportion of participants. This referred to both independent working and independent thinking. Many graduates felt their experiences at Oxford were characterised by independent working: *'you are doing quite a lot of finding your own books and resources and things like that…then working alone'*. This was particularly emphasised by those participants that had taken post graduate degrees: *'you really have to go beyond the reading lists and do your own work and research'*. All of these participants felt this set them up very well for certain roles where the ability to work independently and self-motivate was critical – examples provided by participants included academia, law, policy analyst etc.

At the same time, participants described their experiences at Oxford as fostering independent thinking. Very much linked with critical thinking, these individuals emphasised how the Oxford system encourages students to take responsibility for their own ideas and arguments. For these participants, criticality often necessitated independence of thought and this was held up as a virtue and something that was seen as an important strength in both the labour market and in wider social engagement.

Agency and 'Life Skills': Although the participants interviewed for this study tended to describe the skills they felt they had developed through their degrees in terms of the workplace and employability, many elaborated on this by emphasising ways in which their employability skills helped them more broadly in their personal lives, as already highlighted above. Many participants referred to 'life skills'. They linked these with specific skills, such as communication and critical thinking, but more broadly related them to ideas of citizenship and identity: *'my degree helped me understand who I am and gave me important life skills'*. These participants particularly emphasised skills in holistic terms, without necessarily separating employability from a broader way of *'being in the world'*. As such, they emphasised the holistic nature of the Oxford Humanities degrees, not simply as a means of gaining employment but as a pathway to identity construction and self-formation that would enable graduates to successfully navigate a wide range of social, political and economic domains. Participants particularly emphasised that they felt their experiences during their Oxford Humanities degrees had helped them develop their own sense of agency to use their experiences to become the people they wanted to become. They described taking this sense of agency, linked with confidence and the range of other skills described above, into the workplace and more generally into their wider lives.

8.1.9 The importance of Humanities subject knowledge in the work place

In the interviews with participants, much of the discussion revolved around the transferable skills described above, which were frequently described in relatively generic terms. However, many participants were particularly keen to argue that the operationalisation and deployment of these skills really only made sense in the workplace when mediated by a framework of values and subject knowledge that they developed during their degrees. For example, Paul provided an example of using his communication and argumentation skills when discussing a creative brief with his Director when working at an advertising agency. The skills he discussed are often conceptualised as transferable skills that, in much of the skills literature, are largely devoid of content. However, when describing the argument, it was clear that these skills were shaped by the substantive subject knowledge he had developed through his history degree:

> *I was like we could do it that way, but this is how production worked in the 16th century. I know I've studied it! It's been done that way before... these are the lessons we can learn from that.*

Similarly, Emily (PPE) described how the critical thinking skills she used as a management consultant were fundamentally linked to Philosophy: *'I wanted to do ancient philosophy to understand the genesis of the ideas... it's the same as consultancy. I want to get under the skin of businesses'*. She continued to describe regularly drawing on key philosophical concepts, such as utilitarianism or Kant's categorical imperative to help clients understand decision making processes.

Thus, for many participants the separation of transferable

employability skills from the substantive knowledge-based elements of their Humanities degrees felt arbitrary. They described ways in which their degrees had shaped them in holistic terms with both knowledge and skills manifesting within each individual in a mutually complex relationship.

Much of the skills literature and policy discourse around the value of Humanities subjects emphasises the importance of transferable skills in the labour market. This is clearly borne out by our findings. However, the interviews conducted for this study clearly showed that, for the majority of participants, divorcing employability skills from epistemological frameworks and subject knowledge developed at university does not do justice to their lived experience of deploying their skills in the real world or the transformative relationships with the bodies of knowledge associated with their subjects that they developed while at Oxford. For most participants, skills were not devoid of content, but were intimately tied to their degree subjects and the associated knowledge they had engaged with while at University. As argued by Ashwin (2020) in his critique of the current emphasis on employability skills in HE policy, this suggests that more work is needed within both academic and policy contexts to ensure that skills-related discourses avoid reductive conceptualisations of transferable skills. Rather conceptualisations of such skills should be contextualised by specific epistemological frameworks, doing justice to the complex connections between skills and subject knowledge.

8.2 POSSIBLE SKILLS GAPS

Despite the range of opportunities embedded in both the academic structures and the extracurricular activities, many graduates, and to a lesser extent, employers, highlighted key skill gaps and specific skills they wished had been developed at Oxford. The most commonly mentioned skills that graduates felt they lacked were: collaboration skills and the ability to work in a team; presentation skills that go beyond the traditional academic format; digital skills; a workable knowledge of the labour market; and the ability to fail. Many described having to learn these skills in the workplace and expressed a wish that they had developed them more during their degrees.

8.2.1 Teamwork and Collaboration

Many participants described struggling to collaborate and work as part of a team when they first entered the labour market. While many individuals worked in contexts and roles where independent working was the norm, others found themselves struggling to work in team environments for the first time. As Dmitry (PPE) described, *'it was a real challenge to suddenly start having to coproduce... be part of something bigger... not be in control and rely on other people much more than I was used to'*. Participants who experienced this kind of challenge generally attributed it to the Oxford pedagogic approach and the inevitably competitive environment. As Anna (Music) described:

> *At Oxford the emphasis was on your own work... I think that it does, inadvertently, set a precedent of, you just do it yourself, get it done... but in the work place, the skill is 'what can you deliver through others'...how you*

develop other people by delegating... And that was definitely something I had to learn from scratch

Other participants were more explicit in their critique of the Oxford approach to this area:

The thing that Oxford doesn't teach you... no teamwork. Zero teamwork. Because it's like you write these essays and you debate, there's no group projects. I did one group project in three years... there's a lot you can learn from group projects and working with other people, which I think is really really useful and didn't get. (Jonty, PPE, Technology Start-up)

However, interviews with current students suggests that an absence of teamwork is no longer the lived experience for many doing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Group work, which a large number of graduates explicitly wanted, seems to be increasingly used across all subject areas. In fact, one undergraduate even described tutorials as a form of teamwork: *'you work in a pair, sometimes share out the reading and then come together to be guided by the tutor... it's really good teamwork'* (Zahara, Music). Other participants also provided a more nuanced picture of the situation, highlighting how a range of extracurricular activities provided opportunities for collaboration and teamwork, which helped develop skills they then used in employment.

8.2.2 A Wider Range of Presentational Skills

As described above many graduates highlighted their ability to present ideas as a vital skill they had formed during their degrees, particularly rooted in tutorials and the need to communicate carefully both verbally and in writing on a weekly basis. However, several graduates, while acknowledging the presentational skills they had developed, felt limited by the academic style they had learned, with many complaining that the tutorial-based approach of reading a detailed academic essay often jarred with the accepted norms of the commercial world where a more active presentational style dominated. As Jordon (PPE) stated, *'the notion that you can go into a commercial environment with just some good ideas and talk about them is ludicrous...'* Several participants consequently described feeling frustrated that they had not really had any experience of developing the kind of presentational skills common in the labour market, particularly the use of PowerPoint: *'doing a presentation, PowerPoint, that's the natural language of business but I'd never touched PowerPoint since A-levels'.*

Several participants described how the nuanced approach to presenting information that they had developed during their degrees had not translated effectively into commercial environments where a more direct approach was required. Participants working in areas related to marketing, advertising and management particularly emphasised this issue, feeling that a more black and white approach was required in their places of work. However, although participants described experiencing some challenges in moving beyond the traditional academic presentational style, this was usually as part of a wider narrative of continued development and learning on the job, as Carla, for example, puts it:

I have developed new ways of communicating ideas that are blunter, more direct, less nuanced basically. In the Humanities, nuance is the order of the day. That's all anybody ever does, they caveat everything. But we can't really get away with that in advertising or sales or even policy work. You have to say, "This is what it is, now let's do this". That's something I've learned

However, Robson et al. (2021) have recently highlighted a move away from PowerPoint-based presentations and simplistic approaches to communication and presentation in business contexts. In part driven by Amazon's explicit rejection of PowerPoint and emphasis on fully crafted, nuanced, written narratives as being critical to business decision making, many businesses appear to be reverting back to more structured and complex forms of communication and presentation, particularly in internal meetings and strategic contexts. This suggests that while forms of presentation may differ over time, the key communication skills developed during an Oxford Humanities degree are likely to serve as a strong foundation for graduates to adapt to specific communication and presentational styles and trends (Robson et al., 2021). In fact, although a number of participants were disappointed not to have developed more vocationally applicable presentational skills during their degrees, many described feeling that the skills they did develop proved to be a useful foundation for the development of a more applied approach in the work place.

Importantly, as described above, several participants presented a more nuanced picture of their time at Oxford, emphasising the importance of extra-curricular activities for developing skills (including more commercially oriented presentational skills) that might not necessarily be embedded in the taught aspects of their degrees. Several current students highlighted the growth in discourses around enterprise at Oxford and the wide range of opportunities that now exist to engage in entrepreneurial activities (The Oxford Hub, Incubator awards etc). This suggests that while commercial presentation skills may not sit at the heart of the curriculum in Humanities subjects, opportunities exist to develop such skills through the wide range of extra-curricular activities available at Oxford and that those students who were actively interested in leveraging their time at Oxford to develop relevant skills, were able to do so.

8.2.3 Digital skills

In a similar way to graduates' discussion of the limitations of the presentational skills they developed at Oxford, many participants also reflected that they had not developed many digital skills during their degrees. The digital skills that these participants felt they were lacking were often technical and linked with specific tasks they faced in the work place. For example, Tony (Modern History) wished he had a better grasp of graphic design and Photoshop when he first started his role as a brand manager. Similarly, a number of graduates described shock at having to work with complex databases in their places of work and a lack of skills related to programmes like Access or even Excel.

Although these participants reflected that these technical

digital skills would have been helpful when they first entered the labour market, they acknowledged that there is a limit to what can get covered in a degree programme. Few participants strongly argued that these kinds of digital skills should be part of an Oxford Humanities degree and, as described above, most acknowledged that such skills could have been developed through extra-curricular activities.

Importantly, many students described digital skills they had developed during their degrees in a more nuanced way that went beyond the technical use of specific computer programmes. Many discussed ways in which their degrees helped them engage critically with the digital world, particularly in relation to issue around fake news, social media, and digital ethics. As Erica (English Literature and Language) stated: *'the critical thinking that you get is so important to look at the world, you know, the stuff that went on with Cambridge Analytica and everything, and work out what's real and what isn't'.*

Historically, Oxford Humanities degrees may have provided few technical digital skills, but many participants felt equipped with wider more transferable digital skills that are critical for engaging in a context where social and digital worlds overlap in increasingly complex ways. However, with the Digital Humanities becoming increasingly prominent in the sector and Oxford University providing innovative teaching and learning opportunities through a wide range of Digital Humanities projects, Oxford Humanities degrees are becoming increasingly digital. This has been accelerated by hybrid teaching approaches necessitated by COVID-19. Therefore, it would appear that digital skills will increasingly become embedded in Oxford Humanities subjects curricula.

8.2.4 Knowledge of work

As described above, knowledge of the labour market and work experience were very important mediating factors for graduates transitioning smoothly into the world of work. The majority of the participants acknowledged that, although there were limitations, there was a wide range of sources to gain information and experience while at university. However, many individuals pointed to a disconnection between the kind of knowledge that was available to them and the operational knowledge about how businesses work that they subsequently developed through immersion in the labour market. Roshi (Music) described this issue:

> I think really basic things about the business side of stuff. Winning client accounts and growing business and commerciality certainly weren't something that I ever felt were in my undergrad environment.

Many participants echoed this sentiment that, apart from through participation in work experience, information about the day-to-day workings of different kinds of organisations was relatively hard to come by while at university. Roshi continued, *'sometimes I think it would have been helpful to have known a bit more about how things actually work in the real world'*, suggesting that this kind of operational knowledge would have helped him enter and navigate the labour market more effectively.

However, as already highlighted, other participants found this knowledge through internships and active engagement with the Careers Service and other sources of knowledge. This illustrates the freedom of the Oxford experience, which all participants valued, which allows students to focus on aspects of their own self-formation that most interest them, whether employability skills, knowledge of the labour market, sports, politics, academic learning or a balanced combination.

8.2.5 The ability to fail or ask for help

Many participants described feeling that their degrees and the Oxford environment had created a particular approach to work that made them struggle with failure. As Jan explained, *'sometimes it's really important to be able to fail, but at Oxford that just doesn't really ever feel like an option'.* Several participants described struggling with this issue after leaving university, feeling that the nature of the degree had the effect of encouraging students to take personal ownership or responsibility for problems. These participants argued that this approach did not always translate appropriately into work contexts where responsibility is shared across teams.

Linked with this concern, many participants also suggested that, when facing problems, their experiences at Oxford often led them to internalise their difficulties which manifested in an inability to ask for help. These participants described feeling that, embedded in the Oxford system, is an assumption that the solution to most work-related problems is simply to work harder. Eli described this issue clearly, explaining how he experienced difficulties as a teacher, a profession he left after two years:

> My biggest struggles were in teaching in my first year because Oxford teaches the view that if you were having problems, just work harder and longer. That doesn't work in teaching, you just burn yourself out. What you need to do is learn to work smarter and ask for help when things get too much… Oxford doesn't necessarily encourage people to go for help.

A number of participants highlighted this issue and particularly linked it with challenges they had experienced with their mental health both at Oxford and subsequently. Many overtly wished for a university environment that encouraged people to seek help when things got too much and a working culture that did not view seeking aid as a form of weakness.

8.3 MECHANISMS OF SKILLS FORMATION

As has been outlined above, it was clear that graduates and students saw their skills as being developed in a number of different ways during their time at Oxford, some more closely related to their subjects and the Humanities, others more linked with the general culture of Oxford and the pedagogic approaches taken. Tutorials were particularly highlighted as a key mechanism for skills formation, with the structured high-pressure format of a tutorial being seen as fostering key communication skills and the ability to present arguments, while providing individuals with a deep sense of confidence in their own abilities. At the same time the wider academic structures of the courses were seen as providing a critical

high pressure, high stakes environment for skills development, particularly the ability to process information quickly and efficiently. At the same time, many graduates highlighted the wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, including clubs and sports as a way of developing a range of skills, particularly those associated with leadership roles in the labour market, including specific technical skills such as financial management. Determining whether there is anything specific to the Humanities in the development of key skills when compared to Oxford students in other subject areas is problematic and would require a deeper comparison across subjects and universities. However, as discussed below, many graduates saw the distinctive combination of these skills with subject knowledge as critical to both their experiences of the labour market and the wider contribution they felt they could make to society.

8.3.1 Tutorials

Perhaps unsurprisingly almost all the participants, students and graduates, emphasised the importance of tutorials for skills formation, particularly in relation to communication skills, critical thinking, and developing confidence. This was clearly described by Francesca (Classical Archaeology and Ancient History):

> I think it's [skills formation] all about the teaching system in Oxford, the tutorial, you know, the way that you're very much put on the spot… you can't hide away, even if you don't know the answer… you have to come up with things quickly that have some substance, and it definitely increases your confidence and your ability to be put on the spot and to be challenged one on one.

Participants saw the repeated tutorial-related process of producing work and responding verbally to challenges as being fundamental to their conceptualisations of and experiences in the world of work and underpinning the skills that they deployed within the labour market. Samantha discussed this:

> One really good thing about working in small tutorial groups is that there's always a sense that what you say is worth hearing, and I think that's actually given me quite a lot of confidence in the workplace… I expect people to be interested in what I'm saying and sort of value it.

Tutorials were consistently referred to within participants' narratives and having an impact on individuals from their initial transitions into the labour market through their wider longer-term trajectories. For example, many participants emphasised the importance of tutorials for preparing them for interviews, as described by Monisha:

> That formal kind of interview [job interview] is similar to doing a tutorial… you're in a very intimate setting… and so just being comfortable articulating yourself in that kind of environment, rather than just being stuck in the back of a lecture, is important… and debate and being challenged is part of the Oxford tutorial experience so you don't feel wrong footed if you're challenged in an interview

A key part of communication highlighted by many participants was their ability to engage critically with more senior colleagues, challenge them and 'speak truth to power'. This ability was seen to be a core part of the tutorial process where students are expected to engage openly and critically with their tutors. Angelica describes this in the context of her work as a management consultant:

> I think I was supposed to just take notes, but when [my manager] told me what our scenarios for Brexit were, and I kind of in a polite way challenged him… Apparently he then went on and told everyone how great I was… if I had not had the experience of the tutorial it would never have occurred to me to pushback… when you go [to tutorials] you're always speaking to someone who knows far more than you but you're still encouraged to give an opinion and are praised for that.

Postgraduate Humanities students did not experience the Oxford tutorial in the same way their undergraduate colleagues did, with post-graduate courses not being structured or delivered in a tutorial-based way. However, many postgraduate participants emphasised that the principles that underpinned the tutorial-based pedagogic approach were similarly embedded in their courses, with small seminar-based classes and personal relationships with a supervisor who encouraged them to think critically and challenge accepted discourses. As Hugo stated: 'The classes [post graduate] give you space to have your opinion and articulate your opinion, but also providing challenge… [this] has meant that I've been able to engage in the work place in a way that I'm not afraid of the way that people will think…' As such, across both undergraduate and postgraduate Humanities degrees, the pedagogic approach, rooted in the principles of the tutorial system, small classes, and critical engagement, was seen as vital to the formation of key employability skills.

8.3.2 Essays

Very much associated with the tutorial-based approach, participants also emphasised the importance of the production of essays for skills formation. Unsurprisingly, these were seen as vital for developing writing skills, argumentation, and critical thinking: 'you have a point of view, you have to test it, unpack it, interrogate it, and write it'. However, the process of producing essays was also emphasised as developing the ability to think and work independently, effectively and to tight deadlines: 'you're producing two essays a week. You just don't get any better practice than that for work and meeting deadlines!'

Participants provided numerous examples of how essay writing as part of their Humanities degrees was critical for the deployment of skills in the work place. For example, Jennifer (PPE), working as a management consultant in Finance, described how the approach needed for writing an Oxford essay was essentially the same approach she adopted as a consultant:

You have a point of view, you have to test it. And, with consulting, it's the hypothesis driven method which is how we typically went about engagement, so you have a point, you have where you think you're going and then you challenge it as you go along. It's the same as writing an essay.

Similarly, Jay (MSt), working in academic administration, described how he used the critical thinking and writing skills he developed through the essay writing process to support researchers to write grant applications:

One of the funniest things about working on bids and proposals… is that it's basically the same as an essay, at heart you have to get some pros that make sense and it is ready by a certain deadline, that is the whole job really. I always find it quite funny that that aspect of the role is so similar to the essay system.

8.3.3 Extracurricular Activities

As has already been discussed above, many graduates found they benefited from engagement in extracurricular activities as they transitioned into the labour market. Participants described a wide range of extracurricular activities including: rowing, football, debating, advertising society, student magazines, drama society, African and Caribbean Society, bands, nightline, JCR, MCR and college ball committees, choirs and orchestras, etc. etc. In addition to developing interests and experience, participants highlighted participating in this diverse range of extracurricular activities as being a vital part of their portfolio of skills and experiences. The skills discussed ranged from generic skills relating to leadership, and communication, to harder technical skills. For example, several participants described using a range of extracurricular activities to develop digital skills – use of accounting software, for example, desktop publishing, and photoshop. However, many participants described skills formation through extracurricular activities more in terms of cementing skills that were being developed during the formal parts of their degrees, particularly communication. Extracurricular activities afforded the opportunity to deploy these skills in a wide range of contexts that went beyond purely academic activity and, importantly, signalled to potential employers that individuals had developed these skills in a way that could be applied to the labour market.

8.3.4 Work Experience and Internships

Work experience and internships undertaken while at university were highlighted by a wide range of graduates as being critical not only to their transitions into employment, but also in terms of helping them develop relevant skills or understanding how skills they had formed during their studies could be applied in the labour market. For some students, formal internships arranged through the university were

essential in expanding their range of skills, digital skills for example, and applying communication, research and critical thinking skills in work place settings, further developing the relevance of these skills to different work-related contexts. As has already been highlighted, language graduates particularly emphasised the importance of a year abroad and particularly, where they took the opportunity to work, enhancing a range of employability skills and labour market experiences.

8.3.5 Peers

A very interesting finding of this study was the value that graduates and current students, across all disciplines, placed on their peers. A large number of participants highlighted the importance of interdisciplinary interaction as a key part of their skills formation. This was facilitated by the college system which brought students together in ways that enabled them to collaboratively make meaning about their subjects as well as wider issues in the world and more profound concerns about what it means to be human. Eli described this clearly:

I remember debates; philosophers and PPE students would compare notes on how we were interpreting things and we would get into arguments with the biologists about what real history was. They were like 'we are real historians, we go back to the ice age'… if you were friends with these people you would start talking about all sorts of things and you would start bringing what you were taught into it

These opportunities were referred to by a large number of participants and, while seeming integral to self-formation and the construction of subject specific identities, they were also emphasised as critical for developing debating and argumentation skills, dealing with challenges, and responding quickly and critically within discourse at an academic level.

8.3.6 Transformative Engagement with Knowledge

As highlighted above, graduates explicitly emphasised that many of the skills they developed during their degrees, while transferable, were not generic and could not be divorced from subject knowledge. These skills were embedded in knowledge related to graduates' degree subjects and were deployed through subject specific language, epistemological frameworks, and knowledge. The transformative engagement with and induction into subject specific bodies of knowledge was highlighted by nearly all participants as the most important aspect of their Oxford Humanities degrees, with many highlighting this core, educational aspect as the biggest contributory factor to the development of the skills they used in their work and wider lives. As John put it: *'it's (History degree) just all about learning; that's what it all boils down to; that's what it's all about'.*

9. EMPLOYERS' PERSPECTIVES

Some attempt has been made to weave employer perspectives into the discussion above. However, this section aims to bring together employer perspectives on Oxford Humanities graduates and the skills they bring to the work place in a more systematic manner. As described in the Methodology, employer data took three main forms: questionnaire data gathered through Oxford University Careers Service networks; interviews undertaken with employers from SKOPE and CGHE networks; and data from the graduate interviews, where participants were involved in employment and recruitment strategies at their organisations. Data covered a range of different sized organisations and employer representatives from all the sectors highlighted in the quantitative analysis were included. Initial fieldwork was conducted in 2019, prior to the pandemic. However, this was supplemented with additional interviews with employers in the spring of 2021 to gain a sense of how COVID-19 might shape employers' future skills needs.

As discussed in the methodology, it is important to note that recruitment and employment practices vary across and within organisations, shaped by local labour markets, internal cultures, HR structures and strategies, and positive and negative biases of existing members of staff. Information provided by individuals may not fully represent organisational strategies, actual practices, or the lived experiences of all of those directly involved in recruitment.

9.1 SKILLS EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATE WITH HUMANITIES GRADUATES

As in the case of the analysis of the graduate interviews, we deliberately avoided imposing a specific skills framework on the data from the employers. Instead we present here the skills employers particularly associated with Humanities graduates and valued in their places of work using the actual skills referred to by employer participants, making an effort to draw comparisons with the skills highlighted by graduates and those referred to in the wider literature where appropriate. Several employer participants emphasised what they saw as a unique palette of skills that Humanities graduates brought to the work place, particularly compared to graduates from other disciplinary backgrounds, that combined verbal and writing communication skills, argumentation and persuasion skills, critical thinking, research and synthesis skills, creativity, and empathy. Employers in this study emphasised that they felt this combination of skills was particularly unique to Humanities graduates and a combination that was vital in a wide variety of roles across all sectors.

9.1.1 Communication Skills

Employers across all sectors unanimously associated a Humanities education with strong communication skills. A chair of a media company, for example, commented:

> The Humanities provide an essential grounding in communication. These kinds of communications skills are vital in the creative industries, but underpin all forms of business... I can't think of many better ways to gain these skills than through studying something like History, English, Philosophy...

Being able to communicate clearly and concisely was something that all employers highlighted as essential in almost all roles and something they associated with all kinds of Humanities degrees. This was pointed out clearly by a Partner in a law firm:

> you get people [from Humanities degrees] who are usually pretty good with presentational material, whether it's verbally in meetings or on paper.... Increasingly, the demand is for massively involved or complex concepts or issues to be presented in a really clear and concise way, and humanities graduates have a valuable role in that process.

Even employers that primarily worked with numerical data or in finance emphasised the importance of communication skills and the value individuals with Humanities degrees can bring to an organisation. For example, the Head of Finance of a large university commented that Humanities graduates often bring the ability to communicate complex financial information clearly and construct an argument around it that facilitates meaningful decision-making. They commented that, in their experience of working finance, this kind of clear presentation of complex financial information was something that often set Humanities graduates apart from their peer who might have taken more technically oriented degrees (e.g. business or accounting).

This was similarly expressed by an employer at a large tech corporation:

> The way I view it is, if you're going into more STEM-based or more business-focused degrees, longer term, you still need a foundation in the Humanities; you need to have an understanding of language and communication and philosophy in order to do those other things.

These findings reflect wider analysis of the business sector undertaken by Robson et al. (2021), where a range of high profile business leaders from FTSE100 companies emphasised the importance of key communication and persuasion skills (referred to as 'narrative skills' in the report) in all aspects of business work. The communication of complex financial reports and numerical data in a clear and understandable manner was particularly highlighted by this group of participants as being essential in the business world and something they felt Humanities graduates were particularly skilled at doing.

9.1.2 Critical thinking and Synthesis of Complex Information

The majority of employer participants expressed the view that underpinning the communication skills they particularly associated with Humanities graduates were critical thinking skills and the ability to synthesise complex information effectively. An employer participant, a senior member of the Civil Service, who also had a History degree from Oxford, expressed this clearly:

Graduates like me (ha ha) bring a critical edge... there's a lot of material you have to wade through and you need to know what's worth using and what you just need to get rid of... some of it's really complicated or just really dense... but that's what I'm usually looking for, people who can deal with it all efficiently and then present it back to you.

Similarly, an executive from a large digital company in online retail emphasised the importance of these kinds of critical thinking and synthesis skills in their industry:

In [the company] we really care about rapid decision making... but it needs to be effective. You need people who can present options clearly... That involves dealing with lots of information, you know, bringing it together, critically assessing it... we have it written down, but speaking to it is also important

9.1.3 Creativity and Creative Problem Solving

Employers across all sectors often emphasised the importance of having people from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds in their teams, highlighting that graduates from different subjects often tackle problems in different ways. Participants particularly associated Humanities graduates with creativity and more creative approaches. A partner in a law firm, for example, referred to this as 'blue sky thinking', which they viewed as rooted in Humanities education:

If you do a law degree, and you've got a problem, you will look to, you know, what the law books say, rather than principles and how you get yourself within the confines of these principles. I sometimes worry that it becomes more difficult for a lawyer to engage in what you might call 'blue sky thinking'. I think that humanities graduates can bring...the facility to... think out of the box.

Similarly, a Diplomat in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, similarly underscored the importance of creativity, reflecting on how the skills they developed during their Humanities degree underpinned their work and were sought after in political and legal contexts:

I think my Humanities training gave me critical reasoning and thinking creativity, skills which probably I definitely didn't learn in my one year conversion to law, which was very, you know, technical.

As highlighted above, only a few of the graduates who participated in this study referenced their own creativity. However, the 'out of the box' thinking Humanities graduates were viewed as bringing to the workplace was explicitly referred to and valued by employer participants. This corresponds closely with findings from Lyonette et al.'s (2017) and the British Academy's (2020) recent studies, which highlight the creativity of Arts and Humanities graduates and how 'being innovative and creative' is valued in the labour market. Similarly, Robson et al. (2021) include creativity as one of the core skills FTSE100 business leaders value in Arts and Humanities graduates and view as an essential part of creating diverse teams that can tackle problems in creative ways.

Several employer participants particularly associated creativity with confidence. While a large number of graduate participants highlighted confidence as a key part of successfully navigating the labour market, particularly in terms of dealing with job applications, interviews, and rejection, it is worth noting that a number of employers viewed confidence as an important quality for dealing with problems creatively by being open to take risks and knowing that there is a solution available:

Being positive about being able to work something out is a skill that you learn to manage as a graduate. So thinking, 'Okay, I don't know the answer to this, or I'm not sure what my views on this [are], but how can I formulate what my view is?', or' How can I work out what the answer is? And that kind of positive thinking about knowing how to approach something, even if you don't know the answer to it.' I think it's something that you get [with] Humanities degrees.

9.1.4 Empathy

Many employers explicitly emphasised the importance of empathy in a wide range of work settings, linking this quality explicitly with Humanities graduates. For example, a leader in a digital business stated:

One of the things you have to be able to do is empathise with the customers and understand what their challenges are. You can't do that if you can't do that with people. And I feel like you know, the more time you've spent in things like philosophy and language and communication, the better equipped you are to do that.

Robson et al. (2021) highlighted empathy as underpinning communication skills and the need to engage effectively and meaningfully with audiences. However, the employer participants in this study expanded on this, providing a range of different work-related examples in which empathy is essential in the labour market. One participant, for example, highlighted how empathy must underpin effective leadership, particularly when driving organisational change:

[Empathy is needed] where you have to drive a change in the organization... and you need to bring, especially a large company like [mine], you need to bring people with you, you need to get people excited about changing how we do business or changing how we operate internally.

Other participants emphasised the importance of empathy in counteracting the potential dangers of shareholder capitalism and the greed that accompanies it, ensuring companies, organisations and institutions engage meaningfully with a full range of stakeholders. One head of HR in the education sector argued that Humanities subjects cultivate 'compassion and understanding for why people behave the way they do':

...Grounding in degrees, like Humanities and Social Sciences, I think prepare you well to understand why people behave in ways which you don't expect them to, or other people don't expect them to. So I think it is a good grounding in HR.

9.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF OXFORD

While employers were most comfortable about talking about Humanities graduates in general terms, the interviews also focused on their perceptions of Humanities graduates from Oxford University, the primary focus of this report. Employer participants emphasised the high employability of Oxford Humanities graduates and highlighted a range of factors and qualities that they felt helped them to standout in the labour market.

9.2.1 The Oxford Brand

Participants overwhelmingly emphasised that the University of Oxford brand provided an imprimatur of quality which gives its graduates a boost when entering the graduate labour market: *'Oxford generally brings a brand, doesn't it, that's well recognized across the world'.* Participants noted that the brand was usually seen across all sectors as both a mark of a high quality degree and strong candidates.

> *If you've got an application from an Oxford graduate, you're probably more assured about the quality of that degree and you know you'll get a good quality graduate if you see an Oxford graduate.*

This appears to give Oxford graduates an automatic positional advantage in the labour market, with one international employer noting that they were very likely to offer an interview to an Oxford graduate on the basis of their Oxford humanities degree alone and the perceived qualities it entails. As one employer put it: *'like it or not, Oxford definitely means something'.*

This was particularly noticeable for those employers involved in traditional forms of graduate recruitment, providing training pathways for graduates straight out of university. For these employer participants, Oxford provided a sorting mechanism, where academic success at the university (albeit combined with a desirable range of extra-curricular activities and work experiences) worked as an appropriate proxy for high quality candidates. As one graduate recruiter put it: *'we like to work with Oxford graduates as we know they're good!'*

However, other employers were keen to point out that while the Oxford name might be used as an indicator of candidates' abilities, this was just one indicator among many. All employers stressed that an Oxford degree would never guarantee a job and emphasised the importance of skills, experience, an interview, and testing as key factors in employment decision-making. In fact, several employers described deliberately rejecting the signalling power of institutional brands and recruiting blind:

> *We try and recruit blind. We try not to be swayed by universities or even people's names. We just try and make judgments on what people have done and what they can do.*

Blind recruitment is part of a growing trend and seen as an important step in bringing a more equitable approach to the graduate labour market. However, several participants noted that, even with these approaches to recruitment, they had noticed Oxford candidates performing better in interviews and tests compared to peers from other institutions: *'they [Oxford candidate] are often better at answering questions [in interviews]… being calmer and confident… it's definitely noticeable.'*

9.2.2 Intelligence and Knowledge

Beyond the Oxford brand, participants noted a range of qualities they particularly associated with Oxford Humanities graduates. The most common was the intelligence of the candidates employers engaged. One participant particularly highlighted this quality as something that enabled Oxford Humanities graduates to undertake a wide range of roles, reflected in our analysis of graduate destinations and graduate experiences in the labour market:

One thing that strikes me…is they're just really bright and really interested in things and able to turn their hand to things that you wouldn't necessarily assume they would need to be able to turn their hand to.

While this kind of intelligence is likely something that graduates bring to their degrees, rather than something developed at Oxford, several participants particularly associated intelligence breadth of knowledge, and linked this with both the degree curriculum and the wider Oxford experience:

> *…[you get] quite a broad knowledge base from an Oxford graduate.*

> *[Oxford Humanities degrees] broadens your mind around societal issues and it teaches you to look at different perspectives on society and of different societies.*

This appears to reflect aspects of Oxford Humanities degrees that were particularly highlighted and valued by the graduate participants, who emphasised the importance of their subject knowledge and, more broadly, the interdisciplinary knowledge they gained from being part of a collegiate community.

9.2.3 Work Ethic and Resilience

Several employers suggested that, in their experience of both employing and working with Oxford graduates, Oxford graduates seemed better able to cope with long hours and hard work and generally had a stronger work ethic than peers from other institutions: *'I think one thing would be an acceptance of quite hard work, like a good work ethic.'*

Several employer participants, reflecting the graduate data, particularly associated this work ethic with tutorials. In fact, a large number of employers (both those who had been at Oxford and those who had not) explicitly discussed seeing tutorials as shaping Oxford graduates in a highly distinctive manner:

What Oxford does more than perhaps other places, is set you off to go and find out yourself through reading etc, so that kind of research element, even in an undergraduate degree is already a good head start

What [Oxford humanities graduates] bring to the table might be the product of the tutorial system, where you had small

groups of one or two, two or three tutorials a fortnight…and it was a pretty intense experience of discussions and debate…

These findings closely correspond with our interviews with graduates, who highlighted feeling that their experiences of tutorials was instrumental in helping them develop practical skills, a work ethic, and resilience in the face of challenges in the work place.

Confidence

Finally, many of the employers associated Oxford humanities graduates with confidence. As highlighted above, many employers linked confidence with creativity and a willingness to take creative risks when solving problems. More broadly, they highlighted feeling that Oxford Humanities graduates generally came across more confidently when presenting themselves and in the work place, enabling them to engage in discussions, strategic planning, debate etc. in a more active way than some of their peers.

Like the graduate participants, employer participants linked this confidence with the nature of an Oxford degree and the importance of tutorials in helping students to engage with people in more senior positions and learn how to defend their ideas.

9.3 SKILLS MATCHES AND FUTURE SKILLS NEEDS

As illustrated by the wide range of sectors and roles Oxford Humanities graduates work in, there appears to be very close alignment between labour market needs and the skills that Oxford Humanities graduates bring to the workplace. This was echoed by graduates who overwhelmingly described, when discussing their career trajectories, feeling that the skills they developed during their degrees were valued and sought out by employers and that they continued to deploy them throughout their careers. Similarly, all the employers who participated in this study emphasised that Oxford Humanities graduates were highly valued in their organisations and the skills they brought, as described above, were critical in a wide range of roles.

This is closely aligned with wider analyses of the labour market. The recent British Academy report (BA, 2020), which builds on skills analyses undertaken by Lyonette et al. (2017; see also BA, 2017) and attempts to quantify the demands for skills associated with Arts, Humanities and Social Science degrees, very clearly shows that that skills associated have the Humanities are valued in a wide range of sectors across the workforce, ranging from financial services to education, social work, the media and the creative industries. The skills associated with Oxford Humanities graduates overlap closely with the British Academy's framework and, just like in the sector-wide data used by British Academy researchers, Oxford Humanities graduates work across a wide range of sectors clearly showing extensive current labour market demand for the knowledge, skills, and experience they bring.

However, Oxford Humanities graduates feature disproportionately in roles associated with high levels of autonomy, prestige, and pay when compared with the wider population of individuals in these kinds of positions. This

suggests that the skills Oxford Humanities develop during their degrees are particularly suited to leadership and strategic roles. This was reflected in our interviews with employers who emphasised that leadership roles usually need a specific group of skills that are closely aligned with the skills they associate with Oxford Humanities graduates. One business leader in the construction industry summarised this clearly:

To be a leader in business, actually anywhere, you absolutely need to be able to communicate, to persuade people, to bring people with you… but to do that you need to think about things critically… but also understand what your team needs, what your employees need and want… what your stakeholders want, what the regulators think…

As such, communication, critical thinking, and empathy, were all skills that employer participants explicitly highlighted as being essential for leadership roles. This finding reflects Robson et al.'s (2021) recent work with FTSE 100 business leaders who emphasised that narrative skills (narrative communication; empathy and perspective taking; critical analysis, synthesis, and managing complex data; creativity and imagination; and digital skills) are important in all aspects of business, but are essential for those in leadership positions. These skills closely correspond with the skills participants associated with Oxford Humanities graduates providing some insight into why Oxford Humanities graduates appear to be so well represented in leadership positions across all sectors and illustrating consistent demand for these skills.

9.3.1 Future Skills Demands and the Changing Nature of Work

Throughout our interviews with both graduates and employers, we frequently discussed future employment demands and how these might change over time. As discussed in the Methodology, we supplemented data on this that was gathered prior to the pandemic by undertaking additional interviews during spring of 2021. These aimed at capturing how employers thought skills demands might change in the wake of COVID-19 and the associated economic disruption.

Future skills demands are difficult to predict. However, research suggests these are currently being shaped by a range of key, interconnected factors: technological change (particularly digitization, automation, and the growth of AI); environmental and climate change; urbanisation; globalisation; growing inequalities; political uncertainty; and demographic change (particularly intergenerational conflict) (see BA 2020; Nesta & Pearson, 2017; Servoz, 2019). These factors are already changing the nature and structure of work, occupational identities, and skills demands (Berger and Frey, 2016; White 2018). Emerging evidence suggests that COVID-19 has accelerated some of these changes with lockdowns reshaping the role technology plays in mediating work and increasingly driving the digitisation and automation of a wide range of work-related processes.

At the same time, the desire to rebuild the economy in the UK in a way that deals with a range of issues (climate change

being one of the most prominent), is likely to reshape skills demands in particular industries as the government's approach to 'building back better' aims at generating more green jobs. This is set against a backdrop of the economic pressure that has led to an employment crisis at a global scale, with the youth labour market (which includes graduates) hit hardest. Previous recessions have shown that the youth employment is much slower to recover than the rest of the economy, suggesting that labour market instability will particularly affect those attempting to gain employment straight from education. It is likely that this will extend the pre-existing trend towards job churn and increasingly precarious modes of employment and employment structures.

As such, all graduates, for the next few years at least, are likely to have to navigate a labour market characterised by competition for graduate level employment, uncertainty and instability, shifting occupational identities, short term employment structures, and rapidly changing skills demands. However, despite this likely challenging and changing context, the evidence collected for this study suggests that Oxford Humanities graduates and the skills they bring to the workforce will remain in high demand. In fact, the skills, experiences and knowledge developed during an Oxford Humanities degree may be critical in helping graduates navigate uncertainty, technological change, and a whole range of global challenges.

The experiences of the graduates included in this study, particularly those who graduated in the years following the 2008 recession, show Oxford Humanities graduates display resilience in the face of labour market uncertainty. At the same time, this study has shown that the flexible nature of an Oxford Humanities degree and the transferable skills graduates develop have enabled many individuals to work across a wide range of sectors, moving roles effectively, and

rapidly progressing. Many graduate and employer participants highlighted this flexibility as likely to enable Oxford Humanities graduates to work through instability and navigate shifts in industrial strategies and the growth and contraction of different sectors in the face of a range of intersecting economic, political, and environmental challenges.

In recent years, rapid technological change has been highlighted as one of the biggest factors in reshaping occupational structures and identities. The growing dominance of automation and AI are frequently highlighted as key drivers of the removal or recalibration of certain jobs and particularly the restructuring of a wide range of routine tasks across sectors. However, the majority of the employers we interviewed in this study were keen to emphasise that while technology may restructure the nature of work, there would like still remain a need for strategic thinkers and leaders and the skills associated with certain kinds of roles are likely to remain in demand for the foreseeable future:

> *One of the things we're nowhere near automating is human relationships. Managing… nurturing relationships between humans is always going to be essential…*

Other participants expanded on this, highlighting that the wider range of skills associated with Oxford Humanities graduates, including communication, critical thinking, research, and confidence are all likely to remain in demand, even in the face of the changing nature of work. As such, the flexibility of opportunity that an Oxford Humanities degree affords graduates, that enables them to move across roles and sectors freely, along with the transferable and relationship-oriented skills developed during an Oxford Humanities degree were seen as providing graduates with a significant positional advantage in an unstable, post-pandemic employment context.

SECTION III
BEING HUMAN IN A CHANGING WORLD

10. UNDERSTANDING THE WIDER CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE HUMANITIES

As policy discourses increasingly discuss the value of Higher Education in terms of labour market returns, dividing degree areas into 'high return subjects' and 'low return subjects', Humanities students and graduates necessarily engage in a discursive space that is becoming increasingly critical of the Humanities. The graduates who participated in this study often commented on this shifting discourse. However, the current students particularly emphasised feeling that the Humanities were increasingly *'under attack'*. As one student succinctly put it:

> I think the default assumption is... that the humanities are a leisure activity with limited bearing on politics, economics, society, culture and people's everyday lives and I think that is dramatically wrong (Joe).

Ella made a similar point, arguing that she feels that there is an assumption 'that Humanities degrees just have no job prospects'. Consequently, many participants felt implicitly judged for not undertaking overtly vocational subjects with clear financial returns. As such, many spoke of their degree subject choices in defensive terms, framing this as a choice of fulfilment over subsistence. As Seb, who described seriously considering a degree in Biochemistry, said of his choice to study Languages: *'I think I've just always prioritised meaning and enjoyment over money.'* For many, these sentiments were expressed in defiant terms, with several participants emphasising that they felt they were challenging, often deliberately, expected norms by taking subjects that, in policy discourse at least, were criticised for not necessarily have clear vocational pathways associated with them: *'God, if I did a science, I would definitely have a job by the end of it'* (Ella).

At the same time, many participants were also keen to justify their choice of taking Humanities degrees at Oxford by emphasising the clear personal financial returns that many graduates received. As such, they expressed confusion at the fact that there appeared to be overt criticism of the Humanities in policy and public discourse for not providing adequate labour market returns, despite the fact that evidence showed their degrees often led to significant employment benefits. However, more broadly, many participants expressed discomfort at these reductive discourses that simply define degree value in financial terms. Many expressed a pugnacious belief in the wider value of the Humanities, in terms of both private and public good. This was expressed concisely by one graduate: *'there's a lot of talk about value for money in higher education, but that does not mean that value should only be about money!'*

Given that the majority of participants in this study were keen to discuss the value of their degrees in broader terms than their labour market destinations and employability skills, and conceptualised the importance of their Humanities degrees in a far wider range of ways, this section discusses participants' perceptions and conceptualisations of the wider value of Humanities degrees at Oxford and the wider contributions of the Humanities in more general terms. An extensive and eloquent literature exists on the value of the Humanities and Liberal Arts degrees in America (e.g. Small, 2016; Collini, 2012; AHRC, 2009; Bate, 2011; Nussbaum, 2010) as well as extensive critiques on reductive discourses that emphasise only the economic purpose of HE (e.g. Ashwin, 2020). This section does not aim to repeat the arguments made by these authors. Rather its focus is to report the ways in which the student, graduate and employer participants from this study, many of whom have taken their degrees in a policy context that emphasises degree value in terms of private financial returns, have responded to and engaged with this context.

10.1 PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT

10.1.1 Holistic Development

As discussed above, almost all participants emphasised that, despite their success in the labour market, the most important aspect of their degree and their time at Oxford was the transformative process they underwent and their own personal development. In almost all cases, participants described their time at Oxford in transformative terms, emphasising that it helped them to develop their sense of identity, their values, and in the words of one PPE graduate *'how to live in the world'*. As such, graduates emphasised the value of their degrees in terms of this transformative process that helped them develop an understanding of themselves that would help them make choices and engage with people across all aspects of their lives. As Susan put it:

> ... thinking about how I should live my life, that's all through my degree, and it's really changed me as a person. It's built me up and I wouldn't trade that for any job... It's helped my life and I think that's most important.

Critically, these participants were keen to emphasise the idea personal development and formation in opposition to reductive discourses which conceptualised degree value purely in financial terms: *'it's about more than money'*. Several of the more philosophically minded participants explicitly described the importance of this formative process in terms of

'eudaimonia', drawing on the Aristotelian concept, viewing their degrees as a mechanism for supporting human flourishing:

> It's [degree] about flourishing and happiness... it's really impacted my life in terms of how I think about my decisions and how I balance the priorities in my life because I could just work all the time, but if I put my family first or other personal relationships first, that's down to the education I had.

The concepts of identity construction and personal development are frequently emphasised as the key function of Higher Education (e.g. see Marginson 2014 and 2018; Ashwin, 2020): being at university, both in terms of the academic and social aspects of university life, helps students construct their identities and mature as individuals. The majority of graduate participants as well as a large proportion of the students we interviewed similarly thought about their degrees in this kind of holistic way, viewing their entire Oxford experience as fundamentally shaping their personal development: 'it's college life... tutorials... essays... rowing... being able to debate with loads of people... it all made me who I am...'.

10.1.2 Transformative Induction in Bodies of Subject Knowledge

However, many participants emphasised the specific degree subjects as vitally underpinning the holistic formative experience afforded by their degrees. This was reflected in the fact that almost all participants, when asked why they chose to do their degrees, emphasised their main motivating factor was a deep interest in their subjects. At university, participants described that their main activity was focused on learning and the process of deepening their understanding of their degree subjects and being inducted into more and more specialised bodies of knowledge was the most critical part of their personal development. Many participants described how the transformative induction into subject specific bodies of knowledge that they experienced during their Oxford Humanities degrees helped them develop a subject identity that stayed with them throughout their lives.

Joffrey, for example, described this clearly: 'I did history and that's given me historical lenses... I end up thinking about the future by looking backwards...'. Similarly, Agnes described how studying languages enabled her to see the world 'through other people's eyes by speaking their words'. As such, while personal transformation may be conceptualised as taking place within Higher Education whichever degree students take, it was clear in this study that many participants viewed their specific Humanities degrees as fundamentally mediating the kind of people they became, providing a subject-specific framework for engaging in the world and with the world. Many participants saw the Humanities in almost spiritual terms as being a vital way of understanding the history and culture of humanity, providing an important link between society and individuality:

> We need the Humanities and we need the Arts because those are the disciplines, and I'm getting a bit philosophical about it now, but that's how we learn

about ourselves as humans and our culture and our history (Elinor).

For many, a significant part of this formative process revolved around the establishment of personal values rooted in their Humanities subjects. As Annabeth, stated: 'in many ways, the value [of my degree] is the values that it helped me develop... being compassionate... resilient... charitable...'. These participants equated this subject specific understanding of 'what it means to be human' with a wider desire, that many saw as implicit in the Humanities, to 'be good citizens' or 'giving something back':

> I do a lot of mentoring to help people, to pay my degree forward. I also do a lot of community events and those are things I picked up from Oxford and my degree [English Literature and Language]. It really does influence how I think about my life and my actions and I'm quite proud of that. I'm proud of the person it made me. I think it's hugely positive.

Many of these participants explicitly described the values they associated with their Humanities degrees as shaping their career aspirations. They felt that their degrees had helped them construct identities rooted in values of compassion, charity and citizenship. As such they described being more motivated to 'make a difference' and 'have an impact in the world' rather than gaining private returns from their degrees. This was one of the reasons that many felt it was increasingly critical to challenge assumptions that students taking Humanities degrees at Oxford only wanted to make money. They saw this as entirely at odds with the broader, selfless, human values inherent in Humanities subjects.

10.1.3 Agency and Self-Formation

As throughout this report, almost all the graduate participants reflected on the freedom they felt they had during their Oxford Humanities degrees to craft a university experience that best fit their interests and ambitions. For some this meant taking advantage of the wide range of employability related opportunities available to them, from the careers service and internships to strategically leveraging extra-curricular activities focused on developing skills that would help them in their future careers. For others, this meant focusing on their studies, socialising with peers, or participating in sports. As such, it is important to emphasise that the transformative development graduates described going through should not be thought of in passive terms. Rather participants emphasised that an Oxford Humanities degree provided space for them to navigate their degrees as part of a process of self-formation, driven by their own individual agency (see Marginson 2014 and 2018).

10.2 HUMANITIES AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Many participants were particularly keen to emphasise the importance of conceptualising the value of Humanities degrees in a way that went beyond simple private returns, whether in relation to employability or broader self-formation. As such, they emphasised what they viewed as key public goods from Humanities subjects, often viewing both undergraduate

and postgraduate Humanities degrees as critical vehicles for keeping the Humanities alive in universities and enabling broad contributions to social discourse, often at a global level, through both themselves as individual manifestations of the Humanities and the wider Humanities research that goes on in universities.

10.2.1 Engaging with the big issues

Many participants frequently expressed the view that Humanities subjects enable deep thinking around the big issues affecting humanity at the moment, at a global scale. These participants were keen to challenge what they saw as preconceptions that exist about the Humanities being backward or inward looking and unable to impact the social world in the same way that STEM and Social Science subjects do. Participants explicitly argued that Humanities subjects provide both the analytical tools and the language to *'take a broad approach and look at issues holistically'*. As one graduate emphasised: *'science looks at whether you can do it, AI, cloning, whatever; the Humanities allows you to step back and ask whether you should!'*

Participants referred to a wide range of global issues to which they felt the Humanities made an important contribution. These frequently related to global politics, conflict, and geopolitical economies as well as broader concerns related to global health, population dynamics, and climate change. The most commonly raised issue related to emerging technologies and digital innovations and how these intersected with the social world. A commonly referred to issue, as already mentioned above, related to how people should navigate a post-truth world dominated by fake news, social media and manipulation. Many participants saw this as a critical topic that intersected with a wide range of political, economic and social concerns. They argued that the Humanities provided the analytical tools and holistic lenses to look at this issue in a broad enough manner to see the global discourses and impact. However, they also emphasised the substantive contribution Humanities subjects make in the global conversation around the issue of fake news. It was argued that philosophical and ethical discussions are needed to understand the moral and practical implications of fake news; historical discourses are important to understand similarities between propaganda generation, the rise of demagogues, and the growth in populist politics; and a deep understanding of a range of cultures, languages and religious perspectives are essential to conceptualising the global landscape that has led to the 'post truth age' and continue to enable it.

However, the technological issue participants raised most commonly related to the growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with many participants emphasising the important contribution Humanities can make to global discourses around AI innovation. Fran described this contribution clearly:

> *Humanities are essential to the discussion about when to use it [AI], fairness, who should be responsible for it, who should own it and regulate it, who has access, what are the cultural norms… you just can't answer these questions without drawing on philosophy, history,*

> *even literature and languages…*

Underpinning these arguments was a view that effective engagement with these important global issues required complex questioning, multi-faceted reasoning, and complex answers - *'there's no right answer to some of these issues'*. Participants viewed Humanities subjects as providing the right set of intellectual tools to engage at this level of complexity. Eli explained this:

Humanities makes you ask questions about why something matters or whether you should do something… And…history or English or philosophy or PPE, it really gives you the tools to think about those kinds of questions in a holistic, sophisticated, integrated way… Those kinds of questions demand nuance… And I don't think you can get that any other way.

Although graduate interviews were undertaken before COVID-19, several employers interviewed during the pandemic emphasised the role the Humanities have to play in dealing with a whole range of social, economic, and political issues with the wake of the coronavirus.

10.2.2 Enabling the public to engage with big issues

A key part of the contribution many participants felt the Humanities made to discussions around critical global issues was the ability of Humanities subjects to democratise the debate. Several participants described feeling that the kinds of questions and approaches the Humanities introduced into public debate moved discourses from the technical to the general, making them accessible to the public. These participants suggested that *'the place of Humanities in public debate involves humanising the issue… exploring what it means to be human in the face of AI… or climate change'*. This was seen as making engagement with the 'big issues' accessible to the general public, motivating people to engage, and highlighting the wider impact of issues in the world.

Participants emphasised the importance of opening up debate in this way, supporting public scrutiny, and enabling and motivating the public to engage. They described feeling that the Humanities provided a vehicle for critical debate. By taking Humanities degrees, whether they, as individuals, explicitly engaged in public debate or not, graduates felt part of the process of keeping values of critical thinking and democracy alive and ensuring that *'Humanities style questioning remains active in the public sphere'*.

Many participants particularly emphasised the importance of Oxford within this space. As the world leading institution, they felt the institution sat in a unique position to drive forward public engagement with the Humanities and, importantly, promote holistic questioning and critical thinking within public debate. Many participants explicitly referred to initiatives like TORCH, Oxford Digital Humanities projects, and the new Stephen Schwarzman Centre as key parts of this approach. While acknowledging that such public engagement work fell to researchers and academics within the Humanities at Oxford, several participants described feeling that their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees facilitated broader academic research through both funding and dialogue with academic

staff. Several graduates described Humanities knowledge as *'a living thing'* that expanded, reformed, and developed through the interface of teaching and research as manifested at Oxford University and emphasised that they felt privileged to have been part of the long chain of knowledge development.

10.2.3 Preserving and sharing knowledge and culture

More broadly, many participants highlighted the Humanities as playing an important public role in preserving and communicating knowledge and culture both within and beyond the walls of academia. While several participants described the idea of cultural preservation in reified terms, in relation to 'artefacts' (literature, art, and music), several individuals also discussed the importance of ideas and beliefs and the importance of interpretation. As Luke suggested: *'you have these things [art, ideas, culture…] but none of it makes sense without the cultural and historical lenses to understand them… what they mean… why they're important'*. For these participants, the Humanities preserved not only knowledge and culture, but maintained the discourses around them, providing analytical and discursive tools and lenses for understanding the world.

10.2.4 Helping people to be human in a changing world

A key part of the interviews with current students and graduates involved inviting participants to reflect on what the Humanities meant to them. Many struggled with this question. However, a large number provided the same answer: that *'the Humanities helps people understand what it means to be human'*. While many discussed this in terms of the construction of their own identities and in relation to self-formation while at university, many conceptualised this in a much broader way. For them, 'being human' cut across language, culture,

knowledge, and public debate. They conceptualised the Humanities holistically as making a vital contribution to the world in ways which operated at individual, societal and discursive levels.

Many participants were particularly keen to emphasise what they saw as a swiftly changing world. They highlighted: rapid technological change (digitalisation, AI, dominance of social media etc); rapid political change (political shifts and the rise in popularist politics); restructuring of geo-political and economic power bases (for example, the increasing dominance of China); a changing labour market (shorter job tenure, casualisation, gig and platform work); and climate change. COVID-19 can clearly be added to this list. While acknowledging that human society has always faced change, several participants expressed the concern that *'humanity is going through a kind of existential crisis right now'*. These participants felt bound up in this crisis and subjected to a state of rapid social change. For them, the importance of the Humanities lay not in the supply of work ready graduates with transferable skills, but in providing society with the analytical tools and nuanced questions to makes sense of the world. However, for these participants, Humanities knowledge underpinned this process of understanding humanity in the face of change. Humanities knowledge was seen in vibrant, 'living' terms, developing through engagement with emergent issues and existing at the interface between Humanities teaching and Humanities research. As such, many participants emphasised the value of Humanities degrees in terms of their transformative potential: the development of individual students; the formation of new bodies of Humanities knowledge; and the transformation of what it means to be human in a rapidly changing world.

11. CONCLUSION

Since the Dearing Review (1997), through Browne (2010), the Augar Review of Post-18 Education (2019), and the current policy focus on the Tertiary sector (DfE, 2021; HM Treasury, 2021) the issue of graduate employability has underpinned much of HE policy in the UK for the last two decades. As such, in part driven by growth in student fees, and more recently growth in unpaid student loan debt held by the government, graduate labour market outcomes are a prominent feature of current HE policy and embedded in regulation. At the same time, in an era of massification and consumerisation through increased tuition fees, growing individual student debt, students and graduates are increasingly demanding personal labour market returns from their investments in their education (Tomlinson, 2012; Marginson, 2007). As inter-university competition dominates the sector, there are now graduate employability rankings and a variety of data sets and reports on financial returns of degree subjects to support student choice and aimed at ensuring students get value for money from their higher education (Keep, 2018; Belfield et al, 2018 etc.).

Thus, Human Capital Theory (Becker 1963) has come to permeate both policy and public discourse, where HE is viewed as a vehicle for delivering increased productivity, economic growth, and individualised success in the labour market through personal investment in one's own education. In this context, the way in which the core value of Higher Education is conceptualised has shifted radically from a public good to a vehicle for private returns, understood and measured with salary data. Subjects which are seen to provide poor financial returns to the individuals taking them face increasing criticism and precarity within a complex educational marketplace. This is a particularly hostile environment for Humanities subjects, which are often associated with weaker labour market outcomes for graduates than STEM subjects or more vocationally oriented degrees. For example, Belfield et al.'s (2018) recent analysis of LEO data emphasise the low financial returns of Arts and Humanities, highlighting that some graduates from these subject areas earn less than peers who had not been to university, five years after graduation. Similarly, Britton et al.'s (2020) projection of lifetime earnings of different degrees have criticised a range of subjects, many in the Arts and Humanities, for providing low returns on initial investments.

As policy increasingly focuses on dealing with the increasing costs of the RAB charge (the cost of government borrowing to support the student finance system) and the challenges of the COVID-19 labour market, many commentators are already predicting significant restructuring of HE fees and funding arrangements and student number allocations that will significantly and negatively impact on the Arts and Humanities (Adams, 2021). This discursive context is the backdrop for this report and, importantly, is the social environment in which current Humanities students and graduates must engage. Consequently, the core focus of this study has been the interface between Oxford Humanities and the labour market, examining graduate destinations, transitions into the world of work, wider career trajectories, and employability skills.

However, despite ongoing criticism of the Humanities in policy and public discourse, as seen above, our analysis has shown that graduates from Oxford Humanities degrees are, at an aggregate level, fundamentally successful at navigating the labour market. Based on analysis of both LEO and DARS data, the vast majority of graduates appear to be in positions in the labour market associated with prestige, autonomy, and high financial returns, with earnings significantly above the median for all subjects and high levels of wage growth. Our analysis clearly shows a significant wage premium associated with Oxford Humanities degrees, when compare with other Humanities graduates across the sector. To a certain extent this is unsurprising as Oxford has long been seen as a crucial pipeline for higher status professions in the UK, with graduates from Oxford Humanities degrees often taking high profile graduate recruitment pathways into key areas of management consultancy, finance, law, the civil service, and education. Data show that these pathways were still very common and these sectors still remain an important destination for significant numbers of Oxford Humanities graduates.

However, importantly, our analysis has shown that the range of roles and sectors that Oxford Humanities graduates work in is rapidly diversifying. Data show increasing numbers of graduates working in the growing areas of digital technology and start-ups, as well as in the charitable sectors and international development. Many of the graduates and employers that participated in this study emphasised this trend as showing the flexibility that Oxford Humanities degrees affords graduates.

Graduate trajectories showed that the flexibility associated with Oxford Humanities degrees also manifested across participants' wider career trajectories. Many described moving freely through a range of roles in the years following graduation, often making significant career changes and working across different sectors, and enabling rapid career progression. In a changing labour market, increasingly characterised by shorter job tenure and increased job churn, as well as technological shifts, developments in occupational identities, and economic challenges brought about by COVID-19, the flexibility afforded by Oxford Humanities degrees is likely to serve graduates well in the face of uncertainty and instability.

A key part of this study focused on employability skills and how skills formed at Oxford relate to the labour market. Consistent with the wider literature on skills associated with Humanities degrees, participants typically described developing transferable skills while at Oxford, primarily: communication and argumentation, research skills, the ability to synthesise and process information quickly and effectively, and critical thinking. Graduates viewed these as essential to the way in which they first transitioned into employment, to their wider ongoing experiences at work, and in successfully navigating the labour market as part of an ongoing trajectory. These skills were seen as affording graduates the opportunity to work in a diverse range of sector and roles. Employers echoed these sentiments, highlighting the importance of these skills for their current and future workforce planning,

suggesting a close alignment between the skills developed during Oxford Humanities degrees and labour market demands. Employers particularly linked the skills associated with Oxford Humanities degrees with leadership and strategic roles (as reflected in the destinations data) and emphasised that key transferable skills such as communication and critical thinking will always be important in the labour market, even in the face of transformation and occupational restructuring.

Participants described developing these skills at Oxford through both standard pedagogic practice (primarily associated with tutorials, reading extensively, essay writing, and presenting and defending their work) and a range of extracurricular activities that individuals often leveraged strategically. From a systems perspective, this can be conceptualised as embedded skills formation where opportunities exist in standard practices and it is up to the students, themselves, to draw them out. This model of skills formation places the onus primarily on the students to extract their own conceptualisation and narratives of employability from their university experiences, although structures exist to support students with this process, the Careers Service in particular.

Our findings, as well as wider literature on access, suggest that certain structural barriers may particularly disadvantage certain students (e.g. lower socio-economic status students and those with special needs or mental health issues) from developing their skills and experiences as effectively as their more advantaged peers (e.g. O'Sullivan et al. 2018; Robson et al., 2018; Rivera, 2016). More work may be needed to enhance structures that support all students to have equal access to a wide range of skills formation and work experience opportunities. Work undertaken during COVID-19 that uses the affordances of digital technologies to provide students with a range of opportunities may help ensure equity.

However, almost all the participants in this study described their Oxford Humanities degrees in ways that emphasised their own freedom and agency to craft a formative experience that best suited their needs and ambitions. For some, this meant leveraging employment related opportunities strategically; for others this meant focusing on other things. Although those in the latter group often described experiencing messier transitions into the labour market, the evidence from this study suggests that they ultimately developed successful and fulfilling careers and appreciated the formative experiences they had developed for themselves during their degrees. This, therefore, raises the important question of how Oxford University should balance ensuring equity of opportunity to mechanisms of skills formation, internships, and work experience for all students with the freedom students clearly value to exert their own agency in crafting their own educational and developmental experiences that reflect their own values, interests and ambitions.

11.1 WHERE DO THE HUMANITIES FIT?

Throughout this report, it has been a constant challenge to identify which aspects of participants' experiences and their employability are related to their degree subjects and which

aspects are related to the wide range of other factors: the signalling power of the Oxford brand, previous education and ability, social and cultural capital, social networks etc. The relation between all of these aspects is extremely complex.

The reality is that, for both students and graduates, the subjects they take, their experiences at Oxford, and the skills they develop are all part of a broader experience related to self-formation, as they spend their time at university constructing their identity and discovering who they are and want to be. This is necessarily a holistic experience that is equally tied to Oxford's institutional identity and individuals' relationships with it. At a micro level, our findings showed that it is challenging to link the formation of specific skills or career trajectories with specific subjects, although it is possible to talk about Humanities subjects at an aggregated level and discuss subject-specific trends within the destinations data.

However, participants often described their own formation in terms of transformative engagement with subject specific knowledge as they deepened their understanding of their degree subjects through in depth learning experiences. Participoipants felt that this transformative engagement with knowledge provided them with subject specific identities and, more broadly, subject specific cognitive frameworks and critical lenses for interpreting the world. These mediated graduates' experiences of the labour market and provided context for operationalising their skills in ways they felt were unique to them. These subject-specific interpretive frameworks were not limited to the labour market. They shaped the way individuals engaged in the world in holistic terms, defining their values and their social and political views and activities. In many ways, participants viewed this developmental and formative aspect as the most important part of their Oxford Humanities degrees.

Many took this as further, arguing that the value of Humanities degrees lay not in private returns, but in public goods. The knowledge and conceptual tools provided by Humanities subjects were seen as essential parts of providing both individuals and the general public with a means of engaging with big issues (e.g. fake news, AI, and climate change), democratising debate, and making sense of the world. For many participants, the true value of their degrees, therefore, lay in the provision of Humanities knowledge and conceptual frameworks that afforded them and wider society with the ability to make sense of being human in a rapidly changing world.

Thus, although participants completed their degrees in a discursive context that emphasised the importance of HE in terms of labour market returns and the need for students to get value for money on their investments, many challenged this approach. The majority struggled to think about their degrees in such reductive terms, only in relation to their place in the labour market. Participants described how their Oxford Humanities degrees and the knowledge and skills associated with them had a transformative impact themselves as individuals, the nature of knowledge and understanding of society, and the world as a whole.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSTITUTION-LEVEL DISCOURSE

- The value of degrees and contributions of Higher Education should be thought of in broad terms. These should take into account private contributions of HE in terms of graduate outcomes *and* their transformative relationships with knowledge, and wider public contributions. This should be reflected in institution-level discussion of degree value.

- Graduate labour market outcomes and career trajectories are complex, evolve over time, and are rooted in varied ambitions that go beyond financial returns. Discussion of graduate outcomes should adopt a nuanced approach that draw on multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources to focus on graduates' abilities to meet their ambitions and the way in which they navigate the labour market over time, rather than attempting simply to determine the number of individuals in graduate jobs or only measuring salary data.

- Oxford Humanities graduates particularly valued the freedom to exercise their own agency in engaging in opportunities and activities that best suit their own interests, values, and ambitions. The university should attempt to maintain a balance between ensuring equity of access to opportunities that support students to develop relevant employability skills and experiences and ensuring student autonomy and agency to determine that their degree experiences align with their own interests, values, and ambitions.

CURRICULUM DESIGN, PEDAGOGY AND SUBJECT LEVEL ISSUES

- Students, graduates and employers all highlighted the importance of current teaching approaches for skills formation. It is, therefore, essential to ensure **that very small group settings, including tutorials, remain at the heart of the Oxford Humanities pedagogic approach** and that they remain a key part of Oxford University's skills formation and graduate employability strategy.

- Skills development and employability enhancement opportunities exist for students across a range of curricular and extracurricular contexts, often linked with subject-specific pathway. Therefore, a **co-curricular mapping exercise should be undertaken** for each Humanities subject to benefit teaching and learning and support students to understand how their experiences relate to their own employability and the labour market.

- Evidence suggests that graduates with language degrees have greater financial returns than their peers and transition into the labour market in a smoother way. This is likely to relate to the value of having technical language skills within the labour market and individuals spending a year abroad gaining valuable experience. Therefore,

  o all students taking Humanities degrees should be **encouraged to use the opportunities available to them at Oxford to develop and evidence foreign language skills.**

  o At a subject level, educators should **explore ways in which opportunities for experiences relevant to the labour market could be embedded in the curriculum.**

- Tutors and peers (as well as the Careers Service) shape the way in which students view their career options. Many participants described feeling pushed towards 'traditional career pathways' by these key stakeholders. The Careers Service is working with students to emphasise the wide range of career options available to them. It is recommended **the Careers Service also explicitly targets all members of staff to broaden their thinking about careers and ensure they appreciate the diverse range of options available to Humanities Graduates.**

WIDER ISSUES

- Our research suggests that while an Oxford Humanities degree may have an initial levelling influence on graduates' labour market destinations across different socio-economic statuses, the intersection of SES, class, wealth, and social and cultural capital is complex and may adversely affect the way low SES graduates experience the labour market over the course of their careers. **More work is needed to understand the influence of SES, class and social and cultural capital across career trajectories and the role universities can play in ensuring all graduates successfully navigate the labour market.**

- This study was unable to engage with the experiences of students learning and developing relevant knowledge and skills during the pandemic or the cohort of students that graduated at into the COVID-19 labour market. The experiences of these students and graduates will be unique; understanding how they experienced their studies and transitions into the labour market, particularly across different minoritized groups, may have important implications for structuring learning, skills formation, and supporting transitions in the future. Therefore, it is recommended that research is undertaken to map the experiences of the COVID-19 generation of students and graduates.

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APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1: PROFILING CAREERS AMONG THE WORKING POPULATION OF HUMANITIES GRADUATES

This Appendix presents a statistical profile of the working population of graduates who have taken a Humanities subject at an undergraduate or postgraduate (taught) level at University of Oxford over the last two decades.

At Oxford, there is no such thing as a 'Humanities degree'. Rather, a wide range of individual subject areas are included in the Humanities Division. Individuals take one subject, a combined degree comprising subjects within the Humanities, or a joint honours degree, which includes at least one subject outside the Humanities. As described above, one of the most high-profile joint honours degrees is PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics). Here the Economics component of the degree sits in the Social Sciences in terms of discipline and institutional management structures. Therefore, a primary goal of this analysis is to examine the relationship between subject areas and graduates' subsequent employment in a way that takes into account the compounding factor of joint honours degrees where one subject sits outside the Humanities. However, for the purposes of mapping a cohesive picture, the number of degree options on offer to students at Oxford have, to a certain extent, been aggregated.

We have therefore collapsed degrees according to the first major subject area. This means that for example, if someone had studied Classics and Modern Languages, their degree would be reclassified and denoted simply by 'Classics'. However, four cross-Divisional combination degrees have been kept separate, enabling us to control for possible disciplinary variations and, as highlighted in the introduction, the potential for Economics to influence the analysis. The four combination degrees identified here with sufficiently large numbers to enable meaningful comparisons are those that combine a humanities component and either a science or social science component, namely Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE); Philosophy and Science; Modern Languages and Social Science; History and Social Science.

The categorisation of Humanities degrees can be seen in Table 1, and the number listed sums to 13 types of content related 'subjects'. The table displays a breakdown of each subject by gender and by total number of observations within the dataset.

Table 1 Degree subjects across working population, graduates 21-54 year olds

Humanities	Women	Men	*N*	Total
Oriental Studies	48.9	51.1	*485*	100
Art Ruskin School	74.6	25.4	*197*	100
Classics	45.9	54.1	*623*	100
English	63.4	36.6	*1,628*	100
Theology	37.9	62.1	*330*	100
Music	42.0	58.0	*376*	100
Philosophy, Politics & Economics (PPE)	38.8	61.3	*1,716*	100
Philosophy	46.5	53.5	*288*	100
Philosophy (Science)	42.4	57.6	*323*	100
History	45.6	54.4	*1,988*	100
History (Social science)	37.6	62.4	*194*	100
Modern Languages	61.5	38.5	*1,102*	100
Modern Languages (Social science)	55.7	44.3	*61*	100
*Graduates with combined degrees**	*39.6*	*60.4*	*2,294*	*100*
All graduates	*49.5*	*50.5*	*9,311*	*100*

Notes: DARS 1996-2019 authors' calculations; *Graduates with combination degrees refers to the combined degrees listed here: N=100 records for taught postgraduates, rest of combined degree sample refers to undergraduate degree population; humanities and economics combined degrees majority pertains to PPE, however this category also contains a few cases (N<50) which refer to Economics and History degrees.

The greatest number of graduates are found holding History undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, followed by Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE), and closely trailed by English, and Modern Languages. Looking at the distribution of male and female Humanities graduates by degree subject, the most marked gender split is to be found in studying Art, where, at 75%, women make up the most sizeable majority. English similarly stands out, with 63% of the sample being female. As is commonly found across higher education institutions in the UK, combination degrees with an Economics component tend to be heavily skewed towards male graduates, with 61% of the PPE sample made up of men. Studies have repeatedly shown that male economics graduates earn considerably more than their peers from other Arts, Humanities and Social Science disciplines and so it is important to consider conflating issues of both gender and subject area in this analysis (Lyonette et al., 2017).

Appendix Table A1. Humanities graduates, analytical sample statistics

| Variable	N	Mean. (%)	SD	Range
Age	9,311	34.55	5.31	21/54
Gender				1/2
Male	4,613	49.54		
Female	4,698	50.46		
Birth cohorts				1/4
1964-1979	2,242	24.08		
1980-1984	3,162	33.96		
1985-1989	2,406	25.84		
1990-1996	1,501	16.12		
Degree type				1/2
Undergraduate	8,022	86.16		
Taught Postgraduate	1,289	13.84		
Degree matriculation cohorts				1/4
1996-2000	3,389	36.40		
2001-2005	2,926	31.43		
2006-2010	2,177	23.38		
2011-2019	819	8.80		
Occupation				1/21
Legislators and senior officials	127	1.36		
Corporate managers, directors	461	4.95		
Production and operations managers	261	2.80		
Specialist managers (finance, research, sales)	783	8.41		
Computing, maths, architects (prof.)	129	1.39		
Health professionals	67	0.72		
HE teaching professionals	513	5.51		
Secondary, primary education prof.	547	5.87		
Other education prof. (school inspectors)	82	0.88		
Business professionals	1,945	20.89		
Legal professionals	1,235	13.26		
Archivists, librarians rel information	61	0.66		
Social science and related prof.	917	9.85		
Writers, creative or performing artists	1,213	13.03		
Religious (assoc-) prof.	166	1.78		
Public service admin. prof.	254	2.73		
Other teaching assoc- prof.	49	0.53		
Finance, sales (assoc-) prof.	68	0.73		
Administrative, civil service assoc. prof.	248	2.66		
Artistic, entertainment, sports assoc. prof.	123	1.32		
Other primary, trade, service workers	62	0.67		
Sector				1/10
Agriculture, Water, Electricity,Waste	103	1.11		
Manufacturing, Construction	125	1.34		
Transport, Trade, Food and Retail Activities	217	2.33		
Arts & Entertainment	1,038	11.15		
Education	2,031	21.81		
Financial, Insurance, Real Estate Activities	1,046	11.23		
Information, Communication, Technologies	748	8.03		
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	2,486	26.70		
(Public) Administrative & Support Services	827	8.88		
Health, Social Work Activities, Other Services	690	7.41		
Occupation	9,311	23.02	8.45	1/61
Humanities subject	9,311	5.87	3.61	1/13
Analytical sample				
Year of data source	9,071	2011	2.48	1996/2019
Years since graduation	2,183	2.78	4.16	0/22
n individuals		*8,997*		
N observations		*9,311*		

Source: DARS 1996-2019, authors' calculations.

Appendix Figure A1. Humanities graduates, analytical sample distributions
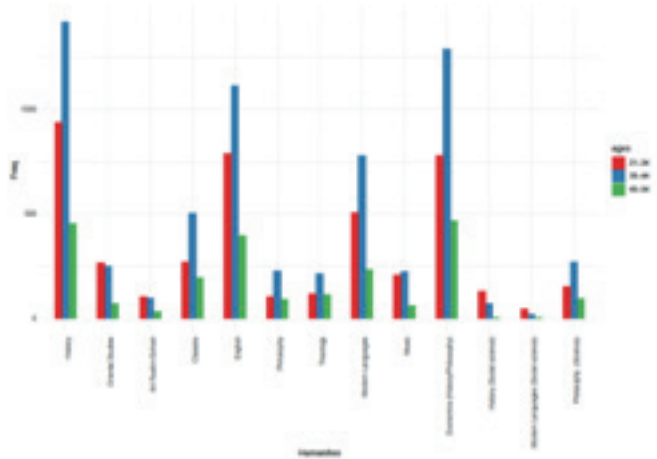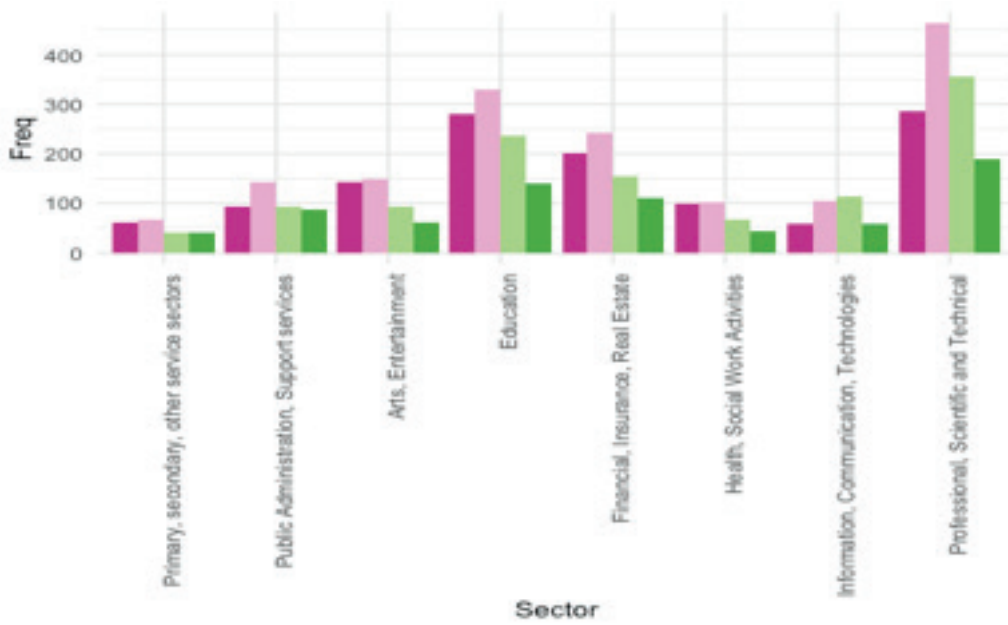
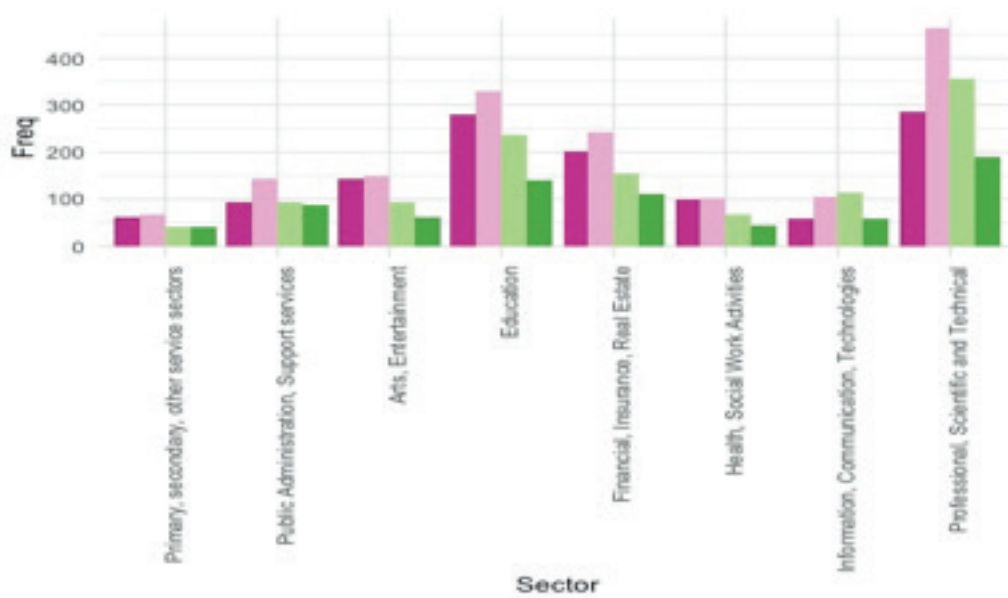(1) Degree Types
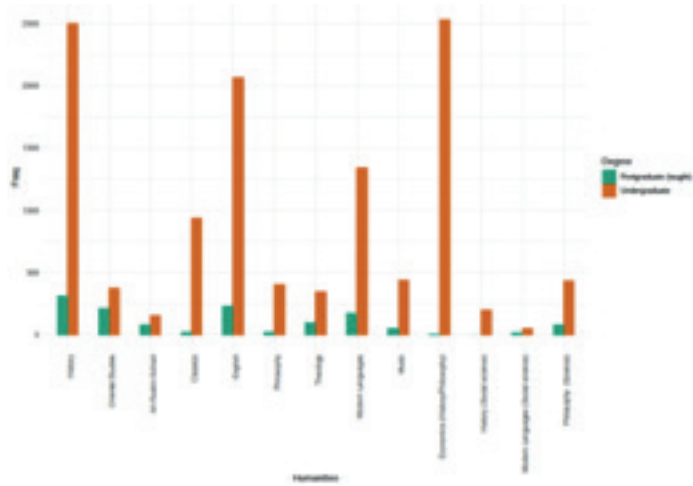
(2) Gender
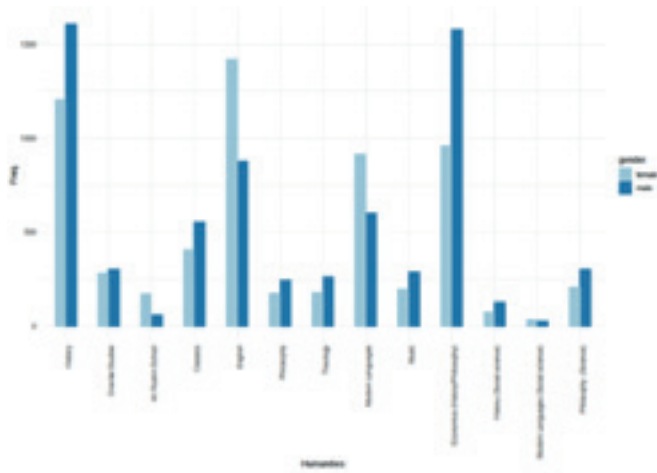
(3) Age groups

Appendix Figure A2. Employment Sector of Oxford Humanities Graduates

Men, working population aged 21–54

Women, working population aged 21–54

Birth cohorts

cohort
1964–1979
1980–1984
1985–1989
1990–1996
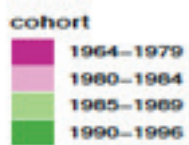
APPENDIX 2: GRADUATE TRAJECTORY VIGNETTES

The following vignettes have been developed from a selection of graduate trajectory narratives. They have been chosen to illustrate a range of different trajectories experienced by Oxford Humanities graduates, to highlight the inherent complexity and messiness of graduate trajectories and human lives, and to root the above discussion more closely in the lives experiences of real people.

ALABAMA: GRADUATE RECRUITMENT ROUTE INTO THE FINANCIAL SECTOR

Alabama followed what many participants viewed as a 'traditional career pathway': gaining information from the Careers Service, developing relevant experience while at Oxford, undertaking an internship, then successfully applying to a graduate recruitment scheme in the financial sector, where she continues to work, although she is considering a radical move into the area of technology and startups.

Alabama was the first in her family to go to university, choosing to read English Language and Literature at Oxford (2009-12) because she was *'naturally quite good at languages'* and they were the things she enjoyed most. She had doing a law degree, having taken part in mock trial and debating initiatives, but ultimately felt that she could do a law conversion course if she ended up wanting to go down that career route.

While at Oxford, her ambitions to work in law shifted to a focus on finance, in part driven by current events: *'at the time I was going to university the financial crisis was happening so there was a lot of financial news in the press.'* She initially felt that she *'didn't come from the right sort of background for… big corporate jobs… I didn't know anyone who had done that… I didn't know what to expect. I didn't really know what was expected of me'*. As she put it, *'I almost felt like I didn't know how to play the game because I didn't know what the rules are'*. However, in her third year, Alabama came across a skills–building/female empowerment course at the Careers Service, which introduced her to an RBS internship in their Investment Bank Division:

> *'It turned out that RBS had sent a few reps there to give their view of like, 'Here is an invite from someone who works in a bank,' you know sort of mid-level investment bankers in their late 20s, and in talking to some of them I actually thought that their job sounded quite interesting. And, one of them mentioned that they do a summer internship and there was one starting soon and was that something I might be interested in… So, I was like, 'Yes, that sounds great, because I haven't got any plans for the summer, or any way of making money, so that sounds fun'.*

The internship was instrumental for Alabama's career, and for making her re-think what she could do with her degree:

> *I never would have thought that I would work in a bank, or would do finance, because I was like, 'I am an English person, and they only hire like economics graduates,' but I actually really enjoyed it and took to it*

sort of really well and got a lot out of my internship.

Following the summer internship, Alabama was hired onto the graduate program at RBS and has stayed at RBS ever since.

While at Oxford, Alabama took part in a variety of extra-curricular activities, including rowing, working for one of the newspapers and becoming vice president and treasurer of her Junior Common Room, all of which she felt were important for developing skills, experience and her CV. She viewed the expansion of her social network at Oxford (e.g. meeting students whose parents were senior bankers) as *'eye-opening thing'* and *'good preparation for working in an investment bank'*. Although the internship was challenging, she viewed the hard work she had experienced in finals as good preparation enabling her to do better than fellow non-Oxford interns. She particularly emphasised the tutorial system as being instrumental in developing her confidence in critically discussing her ideas and being able to defend them with senior colleagues:

> *'I think the sort of tutorial system, the way that you sit in a room with another student and a professor and talk about your essay for the week, and challenge the other person and receive challenges yourself, is quite different say from how a lot of other universities teach. So, not taking it personally when someone says, 'Oh, you're wrong about that,' or, 'I don't agree with you about this point,' and being able equally to ask questions and challenge someone who already works at the bank. I think that helped me out quite a lot.'*

She also found that her experiences as treasurer for the JCR translated directly to her that work:

…the main job of the treasurer is to keep the accounts and design the budgets for the coming year… I had to chair a budget meeting and that was always the College Society and sports teams come and do like a pitch for how much money they need for the year, and then we sort of try to divide the budget up according to what those pitches are, and then also present the accounts to the Governing Body… that is a fairly typical experience that I ended up having at work.

More broadly, she credits her humanities degree with giving her the ability to read critically and communicate well, something she feels is often lacking in other degrees. As she puts it:

> *I definitely see that at work, especially now that I have been there for six years, and regularly deal with people who are fresh out of university and have just graduated. They have done a physics degree or something. So, it's like, 'Great, you are super clever, super smart, but you can't form a sentence, so how are you going to tell our client that this is the best option for them or that you understand that their needs… if you can't even write it down, you don't have a way of communicating with them.*

She is part way through studying for Chartered Financial Analyst Certification which she says as broadening her future

career option options. Although she anticipates staying broadly in the finance sector, she would like to move more into technology and is actively looking for opportunities in this area. She particularly emphasised that she views the skills she developed during her Humanities degree as giving her the confidence to move across sectors successfully.

BEIRUT: MESSY TRAJECTORY INTO THE CHARITABLE SECTOR AND BEYOND

Beirut took a BA in History (2012-15) and an MSt I Economic and Social History (2015-16). He comes from a family of Oxbridge-educated Cambridge academics, and went to a very high-performing sixth form college in Cambridge, where he took both humanities and science subjects at A-Level. He applied to read History at Oxford in part because of an intrinsic enjoyment of the subject and in part because '*it's respected as a degree showing a wide range of skills.* While at Oxford he was very involved with the football team, eventually becoming Captain of the Oxford team.

Thinking he might go on to do a DPhil, but without much of a plan in mind, Beirut went straight from his undergraduate History degree to a Master's degree in Economic and Social History, also at Oxford. Having not enjoyed the Master's during the first term, though, Beirut decided not to apply straight away to a DPhil. Although he still didn't know exactly what he wanted to do, he didn't want to take a traditional career paths and go into banking or law. He came across a short-term role through Oxford Careers Service to go and work in Myanmar with the British Chamber of Commerce, undertaking research and providing support for British companies interested in trading in Myanmar. He thought this would be the perfect opportunity to '*get out of the UK for a bit and experience something different'.*

He finished his Masters in September and went out to Myanmar, where he stayed until December. He then returned to the UK and immediately took up a job as CEO of a football charity —a role he was encouraged to apply for by the former CEO, whom he had met while playing an Oxford University football tournament in China. He initially felt unqualified, as he put it: '*because the role title is Chief Executive, right. So, as a 22-year-old, when I was first basically invited to apply and consider it, I was flattered but, obviously, didn't have actual experience of running a professional organisation'.*

However, he was encouraged by the confidence the former CEO had in him and felt he could draw on his experience running societies at Oxford. More broadly, he felt his work at the Trust has drawn on the skills that he learned in both his degrees at Oxford, in particular his communication skills, as he put it: '*writing skilfully and effectively is always an advantage, particularly in my role, when I'm potentially writing reports to relatively senior business people, and being confident in my writing ability.'* He particularly highlighted the importance of the tutorial system in helping him learn to be prepared for the meetings he has now:

I think I certainly learnt at Oxford the need to be sufficiently prepared when going to things, because, in a tutorial, if you went in not knowing what you were going to say, you could be embarrassed. And I think that's a helpful thing to learn, whilst at university, before you get to serious meetings, potentially, in a professional sphere."

More recently, alongside working for the charity, he has also been working part-time with an MP in Westminster. He is thinking of eventually, '*in ten or twenty years' time'*, moving into civil service or some similar sort of policy-influencing position:

I think careers develop in fits and starts, and you have to take opportunities that come. And I think having an idea of what your perfect career is, is difficult. Maybe there's a few, like being a doctor or a lawyer or, potentially, an academic, where it's more clear cut, the steps you'll take. But, even within them, often you might have to be geographically flexible or willing to take a sideways move to move up in an area of speciality you really like. So, whilst I have a broad idea of where I want to head, I'm also aware that I need to be flexible and adapt to opportunities that come… I feel well prepared for that.

LAYLA: RELATIVELY STRAIGHTFORWARD TRAJECTORY; SHIFTING SECTORS

Layla grew up in the outskirts of London in an 'arts-oriented home', with a father who was a musician and a mother who was a costume designer. She attended an independent girls' boarding school as a day pupil, where took French, German, History, and Art as A Levels, with an advanced extension paper in French. She applied to read French and German because of an interest in '*subjects that tended towards longer form writing or that were more based on communication'.*

While at Oxford, Layla actively sought to develop her employability skills and make connections, joining the Advertising Society, working on the ISIS magazine, and getting work experience while on her year abroad. She thought: '*If I'm going to go out and try and get a job, what else might I need to have on my CV that shows that I have interest in things that are outside of my academic pursuits'.*

She did not have a set idea of what she wanted to do. Feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of finals she decided not to think about work while at university so she could '*concentrate on doing the best that I could whilst I was doing the degree'.* She therefore used family funding to do an MA in linguistics, which gave her the '*breathing space'* to engage with the labour market after completing her undergraduate degree. At the beginning of her Masters, she applied to a digitally-focused firm that had given a talk at the Advertising Society for their graduate scheme. She got an offer, as did many of the Oxford Humanities graduates who also. She noted that the '*the reason why they would have chosen us was because there was something about the way in which we could articulate*

ourselves or respond to a problem rather than us having specific knowledge on advertising or marketing or the world of digital'.

She spent four years at the firm in their planning and strategy unit. There, she drew on a lot of the skills she had developed at Oxford:

it reminded me of the experience that I had at Oxford on a weekly basis, where I would be given an essay on a topic that I knew probably nothing about, whether it was about a specific author or a literary period, whatever it might be, and within a week, I had to come back with 2,000 or so words and a response and to have tried to challenge the question [...] I think that sets you up very well for that kind of a planning role in an agency which is often quite fast-paced and deadlines are often quite tight and there's often pressure to get the creatives to start coming up with ideas.

A former client of hers then invited her to join a car-sharing tech start-up in Sweden, where she has since worked as a product owner. As she pointed out, *'the world of tech is not just for developers'*. She particularly highlighted how useful an English degree is for the world of start-up:

Even if I didn't know it at the time, I was learning about the innovation process through literature—the desire to build and enhance on what's come before. And looking at the world from the perspectives of all those different characters and voices, I like to think that made me a more empathetic person. Capacity for innovation combined with empathy strikes me as a good combination for creating meaningful products and services for people, and that's the direction I've tried to steer my career towards with my latest job move. So in that respect, my degree set me up well!

EMILY: SMOOTH TRAJECTORY INTO THE CREATIVE SECTOR

Emily attended a private all-girls school in Cambridge where she took History, Economics, Maths and Spanish for A-Level. She chose to read Modern History at Oxford (2008-11) because she loved the subject so much she could '*do history all day, every day'*. Originally, she had vague plans of going into law *'or something corporate-seeming because that's what my dad does'*. However, when she got to Oxford, she joined the Oxford University Dramatic Society and began producing plays. This got her started in the arts, and made her realise that she enjoyed production: *'I think as soon as I realised that I could be offstage and still involved in the production, I realised that that was exactly what I wanted to do, and so I just kept doing it.'*

Prior to that, she hadn't considered theatre production as a viable profession—she hadn't previously known anyone who had ever worked in film, TV or theatre—and she hadn't had the confidence in herself to pursue a passion professionally:

I think that I learnt what I was capable of, I suppose,

like the ability to be able to work hard and do things that I was passionate about was, I guess, kind of a revelation to me both for my degree and in all of the theatre that I did there. I think that was one of the reasons that I ended up not going into anything achingly corporate. It's like, oh, you can actually spend all of your time doing things that you enjoy doing.

Emily didn't engage with the Careers Service at all. Instead, she applied for a variety of internships and jobs that she found through *'Googling TV shows I liked'*, feeling confident that she would excel if given the opportunity:

I was like, I'm sure that whatever you need me to do, I can apply my brain and do it. I had spent three years being incredibly organised, researching stuff, putting together arguments, trying to convince somebody that I was right once a week. So yeah, I think, although I knew that I wasn't specifically qualified in the jobs that I was applying for, I think I felt confident that I would be able to learn how to apply my skills to the jobs.

Eventually, it was through the drama society that she found an internship with a talent agency after finishing her degree:

they had written to a few top university dramatic societies and said, 'Please apply for our internship.' And then, a guy that I knew [..] had got it the year before me, and then he had suggested that I should apply for it and that I would be good at it. And so, I applied when the year came up.

She spent two years at this internship, looking after actors and presenters, and then started making short films with her friends from Oxford. Realising she enjoyed film production as much as she had enjoyed theatre production, Emily applied for and secured a job as the producer's assistant at Ealing Studios and was there for a few years, after which she worked as a freelance producer. She then got a job as associate producer and production executive, and then finally left to set up a production company with a friend. Throughout her career so far, she found that the connections she made at Oxford stayed with her in her professional life, with many of her friends from Oxford working in various roles across the industry. As put it: *'we get everywhere. It is scary, actually.'*

She found that the skills she developed through her degree have come in very useful in her work as a producer, particularly the communication skills she honed in the tutorial process. She also felt that the analytical skills that were developed as part of the History degree have been especially applicable in her work in the film industry. As she explains:

If you're looking at why Henry VIII did something, it's the same as trying to understand a character and make sure that their motivations onscreen are explicable, as well. I think that's one of the reasons we love historical drama, as well. You want to understand the people behind the story, behind the human motivations for things that have happened. I feel like my humanities degree better enabled me to do all of the different parts of my job now than specifically – you can't teach

somebody to read a script and have thoughts on it. You've just got to teach somebody to be able to read a variety of things, think about them and then process them. I think that's the joy of the humanities.

Not only the skills, but also the content of her history degree have come in useful in her work in TV and film production, in part because she made a conscious choice to focus on historical dramas:

There's bits of history which I try to get into my projects all of the time, even if it's just interest in it. Like, I had a particularly satisfying experience recently where I was on a conference call talking about an adaptation of a book and we were talking about just something which needed to happen to the characters, but I've just got to go to my bookshelves and pull off a book and be like, "Oh well, I can tell you that in Greece in 1917, this is when the Treaty of this thing happened, and therefore, the fictional characters in my book would have been affected in this way by it."

Overall she described feeling strongly that both the skills and knowledge she gained from her History BA were more useful than the knowledge that might have come from a more vocational subject, such as film. In fact, when looking at graduates to hire, she would *'rather that they had the transferable skills from a humanities degree than that they could sound record which you can pick up quite quickly without needing the degree'.*

JUSTIN: THE MEDIC – A SMOOTH BUT DIVERGENT TRAJECTORY

Justin came from a disadvantaged background. He was torn between psychology and history but decided to read History at Oxford because he felt it provided more career options as a *'a good, broad degree in terms of the skills'*, where you could *'go in all sorts of directions with it.'* While at Oxford he got involved in Nightline, a student mental health support charity. He was influenced by the medics working there and linked this to his emerging professional aspirations to work as a clinician:

There was a TV series about the graduate entry programme at St George's Medical School in London and that's how I remember becoming aware of it. So I started looking into that, did some healthcare assistant work in hospital and some voluntary work in a hospice and looked at the different courses available and what the access requirements were and did enough research that I thought, okay, it's worth doing this to keep my options open, so I could end up being a GP or something rather than a psychologist.

Although he looked into law conversion courses, and for a while seriously considered going into teaching, he ultimately chose to apply to medical school in Nottingham upon graduating to undertake a medicine conversion course. In part, he attributed the confidence he needed to consider a career in medicine as a Humanities graduate to his experiences at Oxford:

I had a fairly poor upbringing. We weren't homeless or anything like that, but it was a struggle. And that, I think, doesn't give you much of a sense that you have a right to think about doing big things in your life, so medicine would have been a complete pipe dream when I was at secondary school, say. But I think three years in Oxford, you come out of it thinking, actually, I'm reasonably bright and reasonably able. I can actually do what – if I want to do something, if I work hard enough, I'll probably be able to do it.

The course at Nottingham involved four years of medical school and two years of a foundation programme where he worked in different areas of medicine and surgery. Since completion he has been exclusively working in psychiatry in the NHS.

He described the importance of applying the skills he learned at Oxford to the clinical context, particularly in terms of evidence synthesis and argumentation as well as highlighting extracurricular work with Nightline as helping develop general managerial skills and the more specific patient interaction ones:

There's a lot about the Nightline thing of taking a call, as it were, that's very similar to how you start an interaction with a patient, especially a new patient when you're trying to get a history and ascertain what their concerns are. So there was a lot of that that was useful. Also, having delivered a lot of training and had to manage trainees individually and in groups, and the other roles I had there that were all leadership roles in the society, group, whatever you want to call it. They were quite useful preparations for working with juniors and medical students, which I've done further on in my career so far, yeah.

Justin further argued that he felt Humanities degrees offer important critical thinking skills and a *'broader swathe approach'* which are critical in medicide medicine, where *'if you just take things at face value and you focus on one detail, you miss the bigger picture.'* He described feeling that this holistic way of thinking was not just important in the work place, but essential for society:

My hope would be that people who've studied history or English language or literature, sociology, whatever, have... thought about how things work for society as a whole, and that they might have a bit more of... a less utilitarian kind of approach to the world and an ability to think critically about what's presented to them every day in the media and from people with interest in presenting things a particular way. So it comes back to that critical thinking again, but not critically thinking about whether you got your test tube dirty or the temperature was wrong, but thinking critically about the messages that are being put out from government and the direction of social policy and everything in a much more broad sense... about what it means for people.

LEESA: A SMOOTH AND MEANDERING JOURNEY

Leesa was the first in her family to go to university, and to begin with she wasn't entirely sure if she would go. She got into Oxford but deferred her place for a year, working in a call centre during that time, which made her realise *'that putting the real world off for another three years was probably quite a good thing'*. She also felt that it would be *'pretty hard to say no to Oxford, like you'd be an idiot to do that'*. She chose to read History (2008-11) out of interest and because she felt she was good at it, but also because she felt it would provide her with a range of employment opportunities

> So, I didn't really know much at all to be honest, about what you could do with a history degree. I just knew it didn't really close off loads of doors at the time, and that history was quite general, so when you came out hopefully there was a lot of choice… I didn't really know all about professional jobs and things that could happen. I just knew that there were lots of jobs that hopefully would be opened by a history degree from Oxford.

While at Oxford, she organised a ball at her college, an extra-curricular activity she chose very consciously as a way to build her skills and differentiate herself from her peers. As she explained:

> I probably wasn't ever going to get a first in my degree, maybe I sold myself short intellectually, but when I came I thought, "I am probably not going to get that, I am probably going to get a 2:1". So, if I am going to get a 2:1 and you don't necessarily have to work 100% of the time to aim for a 2:1, what else can you do to, I suppose learn? And, I think a lot of the things that you learn during your degree is kind of those more analytical skills. But what you don't necessarily learn as much is, how do you work in a group? How do you work through those issues etc? So, I think the ball was definitely an intentional thing to say, "Right, how do I get experience in that?" And I think that was maybe because I wasn't really going to get all these hotshot internships, or go into all of these companies because I have got connections or whatever, so I thought I probably needed to have something else there to differentiate myself.

She described feeling very 'othered' while at Oxford due to her background. A key part of this was feeling that she was *'used as an example of a poor person a lot'*, although she noted *'it was all meant out of a position of love'*.

After graduating, Leesa didn't know what she wanted to do so she took up a job working in the alumni office an Oxford college. After a year she *'got bored'* and began looking at where she could go next. Eventually, she applied to TeachFirst:

> I had varying interests and I didn't really know what I wanted to do and Teach First was great… something that I thought had a really good message, was really good for building skills, but also was well regarded amongst other companies, so if you wanted to move

on after the two years you weren't restricted.

She worked as a Maths and History teacher for two years but eventually realised that teaching wasn't something she could do for the rest of her life: *'I really, really liked it, but I didn't love it, so I couldn't do it for 40 years.'*

She applied for three jobs, all in consulting. Although she didn't expect to be successful as she *'had no experience in business'*, she was offered a strategy consulting position at PwC. She felt the work provided her with flexibility of opportunity, providing a broad experience of a range of different kinds of businesses and a doorway into other areas of work – *'and, you know, it pays alright'*. After three and a half years at PwC, she moved in-house to work on strategy in an Australian bank, where she currently is based.

She described finding similarities between her consulting work and her experience of studying at Oxford:

> in my first year or so I was asked to basically help write a report on consumer credit, and I suppose that brought in a bunch of the skills that you learn, so I felt that I probably could research, know where to go to to get information, process that information really quickly, and then turn it into something that made sense for a non-expert audience […] that is essentially what I did week in week out at uni.

Leesa *'never thought I'd be working in a bank'*. Her ambition is to move back into education, although not as a teacher.

JAFFA: CIVIL SERVICE INTO INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Jaffa went to a state grammar school near Liverpool and did English, Maths, French, General Studies and History for A-Level. One of her parents had been to Oxford, the other to another Russell Group university. She chose to read English (2005-2008) because it was the subject she had enjoyed most at school, but also because she thought *'I've got a good shot at English (laughs) because I'm pretty well-read'*. Partially based on her upbringing, she viewed her degree from early on as a form of social capital, regardless of subject area, but recalls feeling initial anxiety about her career prospects:

> I remember just before I started my undergraduate degree, having a bit of a freak out and thinking, "Oh I shouldn't do English because I'm never going to get a job!" (laughs) and as I arrived at the beginning and I had this crisis of confidence when I arrived, I remember in fresher's week and phoning my parents and being, "I've made a mistake, I think I'd like to work in public policy, what's an English degree going to do for me?" I phoned the admissions tutor and they were all ready to let me have a chat with the PPE tutor and then I went to the first couple of lectures and just really enjoyed it and then stopped being so silly about doing English!

She remained interested in public policy and consciously developed experience in that area by engaging in relevant extracurricular activities, such as Oxford Aid to the Balkans,

where she was a fundraiser and then president in her third year, and the UN Society. She found these extracurricular experiences particularly useful when, in her third year, she applied to TeachFirst and for the civil service fast stream:

> I thought they were useful for giving me credibility in job applications, so they allowed me to demonstrate I had an interest in the field I was applying for and they – when you have to answer these competency-based assessment questions about managing people or dealing with change and crises and that sort of thing, they – it gave me material to draw on. So, I think it helped me apply.

At the same time, she also applied to read for an MPhil at Cambridge in English literature, as *'a bit of an indulgence'* because she *'didn't feel quite ready to leave academia'*. The Civil Service offered her a fast stream place which enabled her to take a year off to do the MPhil.

After a year in Cambridge she started at the Civil Service. The fast stream gave her experience of a wide range of civil service jobs, developing interests and experiences. She spent two years working on domestic policy, education and climate change issues. She then took a further year out to do a MA in European foreign and development policy at the College of Europe in order to be *'a bit more conversant in the field I was working'*. She then returned to the civil service and took up a role at DFID, and has worked there until very recently, when she shifted to working at the World Bank as an advisor the UK Executive Director.

Having ended up working in development, Jaffa was critical of the information available on this area when at Oxford. She stated that she would have applied directly to internships in development or junior positions immediately after university, not going through the civil service. As such she wished she had access to better information on charitable and international development opportunities at university.

Though Jaffa explicitly upskilled by attending an evening Economics course at Birkbeck, she highlighted how applicable the essay-writing skills she had developed at Oxford were to her roles in the civil service:

> if you're thinking about writing submissions to ministers, it's all about being able to set an argument and some options out and that's exactly what you do in an essay every day, being able to digest large amounts of information very quickly when you may not have fully done your reading or fully been on top of topics, because in the fast stream, you're thrown in to jobs, you only do them for a year, you're not really an expert in it, you're working with people who have been doing things for years and years and years, so just being able to get – have the confidence to get on the – and the ability to get on top of information quickly.

However, for her, he most important aspect of her English degree was that it developed her empathy and ability to see multiple perspectives, something she viewed as crucial in her role in development:

> I feel glad that when I'm sitting at the IMF Board and stuf …if you're an economist or a scientist, you're seeing the world through big rules and models but I think for me, the way of thinking you develop studying English, it just gives you a degree of sensitivity to different people's perspectives and the irrationality of that and the complexity of the world.

Although mildly critical, she emphasised that Oxford fostered a sense of entitlement in students that was extremely beneficial within the labour market, particularly when compared with peers from different institutions:

> There was a sense in which my peers who went to Oxford had a degree of almost confidence in how they entered the career market and knowledge of different graduate schemes and that sort of thing because you just know of them and a sense that they could – were a credible candidate to apply for lots of things, whereas some of my friends who went to other universities were a bit slower, did more little internships to start with or were a bit slower finding a job and I didn't actually – I don't think it was necessarily a skill or a competence issue, it was actually more that there's a sense of entitlement you get from being at these very privileged universities which means you're just, "Oh of course I can apply for that!"

ELENA: THE 'STRUGGLE' – CHALLENGING TRANSITION

Elena went to a state school in South Wales before studying at Oxford (English Language and Literature). She had taken English, Biology and Chemistry for her A-Levels, originally thinking she might go into Medicine, but then chose English because that's what she enjoyed most. She didn't have any specific professional aspirations at the time beyond vague notions of staying in academia:

> I thought I'd just go into academia, that's what I presumed I would do. I didn't really have a job in mind, as such. My grandmother did an English degree and she just presumed I was going to become a teacher and was always really disappointed that I wasn't a teacher! But, I had absolutely no interest in doing that… I just presumed I'd go off and do a Master's and then I'd probably do a PhD and that's how it was left; I didn't really have a plan, so…

While at Oxford, Elena became loosely involved in the JCR at her college. She ran to be welfare officer but lost. She was also a member of the Oxford University Labour Club, working as a women's officer for a while there, and she did some volunteering for a charity for children with disabilities. Though her experiences were mostly positive, she highlighted feeling that there was a lack of support at Oxford for people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and feeling ostracised by the fact she went to a state school:

> Having come from a state school, I was at an immediate disadvantage really and, because I just – when I first went up I felt really out of my depth and

I know I wasn't the only one who felt like that, but I think it doesn't matter what background you come from, a lot of people will feel out of their depth. One thing I've always looked back on and slightly resented is I don't think that they really gave enough support to the children – I say the "children', the students that had come up from the state school system. Because you just don't really know how to play the game, so you're trying to deal with all that.

She viewed this lack of support as having had a detrimental effect on her degree and therefore on her trajectory afterwards:

I learnt loads of stuff doing my degree and it was really nice doing English every day, that was my hobby that I got to do. But, I think over the years, like I said, that slight resentment of not – maybe not getting the help that I needed, I feel like I could have done a lot better if I'd got a bit more help and if that had been recognised that I needed the help.

Elena had a difficult transition to the labour market, in particular because she still wasn't sure what she wanted to do after her degree. She felt limited by the options that seemed available to her and the assumptions that English students, if not going down major graduate recruitment routes would go into teaching, publishing or journalism. None of these appealed.

Immediately after graduating, Elena worked in a bar and then did a Linguistics MA at the School of Oriental and African Studies. After her masters she *'worked in retail for a while and then I drifted about a little bit aimlessly'*, unsuccessfully applying for *'proper jobs'* in the civil service and the management route of the NHS. She attributes her failure to get these positions to the *'generalness'* of her degree:

It was really difficult and I think it was partly because my degree… it's not the kind of degree that people who do those jobs have, so I wasn't trained in to it, if you see what I mean? And, my peers weren't going for those kind of jobs, whereas some of my peers who were doing PPE and things, that is exactly the sort of jobs they went in to because I think that was the expectation. I didn't really feel there was any expectation for English graduates, you were just – that you'd probably go on and just do more English somehow

However, at the same time, she recognised that she had transferable skills but felt she wasn't being given the opportunity to use them because employers were hostile to English degrees:

I just thought the people who are shortlisting candidates for these jobs, they're going to want people that have got degrees in politics or that kind of stuff, they're not going to want English graduates, even though I knew that I'd be able to do the job… everyone was talking to me about, "Oh you've got all these transferable skills and stuff" which I knew I did have but I just, I don't know, I always felt like maybe the reason I didn't progress with anything was just that it

just doesn't look as shiny I guess on paper as maybe some of the other degrees that people had, the PPE-ists and so on.

She also highlighted feeling that she faced significant socio-economic barriers to entering particular fields and parts of the labour market:

I'd been at school in south Wales, we didn't really have many extracurricular work experience opportunities– I remember going for an open day at SOAS and one of the things I was interested in was maybe going in to do international development and they said to get on to the MSc or MA course or whatever it was, you had to have done some unpaid work experience with a NGO and there was just absolutely no way that I would have been able to do that, because I wouldn't have been able to afford to. I was living with my parents in south Wales and there aren't any unpaid NGO opportunities in south Wales.

Though she had considered going on and doing a PhD after finishing her MA, she was interested in conducting her research in Russia, and when this became impossible—due to political instability in the region—she felt she had had enough of academia:

I started having doubts about going in to the academic profession really and I just thought I wanted to do something different, something that used – and I really enjoyed helping people and I wanted to do something – I remember saying to somebody I wanted to do something vocational, which sounded ridiculous, but what I meant was I wanted to have a job, a "This is what I do" and a 9am to 5pm almost which sounds a bit strange, but that's what I wanted, I wanted a set job, "This is the job that I do" and I thought if I just carried on doing a bit of whatever or just doing all these different qualifications and stuff, I wasn't really going to get that.

She then worked as a teaching assistant in a school in London for a few months, after which she moved on to a role as a speech and language therapy assistant at a special school, where she worked for just over a year. She then decided to apply to UCL to do an MSc in Speech and Language Sciences, would qualify her to be a Speech and Language therapist—a career she had become aware of during her MA at SOAS. She qualified and has been working as a speech and language therapist ever since.

She felt that the tutorial system was helpful during her time job-hunting: *'I didn't find job interviews too difficult, having done the tutorial system because I'm used to having to think on my feet, so that wasn't so bad.'* She also noted that the subject knowledge she developed during her degree has been useful in her work with children particularly in facilitating careful communication:

I'm not afraid to use my vocabulary, so having read a lot of books, I know a lot of words (laughs) which helps! And, I'm not afraid to write them down if I need to

and I think it's really also helped me in terms of, in my job now, I have to often give information to different people in different ways and I think having done an English degree, I've got a much better overview of that, than I perhaps would have done, because I've just seen a lot of different writing and I'm familiar with different ways of communicating, which has been beneficial

However, Elena felt conflicted about the value of her degree and the Humanities more generally.

People who do English degrees or Humanities degrees, probably feel like sometimes they're not really helping anybody apart from themselves; it's a hobby, it's something they're interested in, but that's as far as it goes. So, I don't know, it is – I think it's valuable for mankind but we're in a world of limited resources and I think – I feel terrible saying this because I'm somebody that has an English degree and I'm really interested in the Arts and things but it's – we have to prioritise and some things need it more, need the money more, unfortunately.

She felt that her *'struggle'* to succeed in the labour market is typical of other Humanities graduates.

LEAMAS: THE 'JOB HOPPER' AND GRADUATE RECRUITMENT REGRETTER

Leamas went to school in the south of England, not far from Oxford, and undertook a BA in Modern History. His father had an MA in a Humanities subject. His mother hadn't been to university. He took A Levels in Music, History, English and Chemistry. A key part of his motivation to apply to Oxford was rooted in an enjoyable visit at an open day. He chose history because he both liked it and, although he didn't have a strong idea of a career trajectory at that stage in his life, viewed the subject as broad enough to offer flexibility in the labour market.

He really enjoyed his Oxford experience: *'it got better and better… all these intelligent people around… the way one was forced to think and thrown in at the deep end. And the small teaching groups were amazing'*. He particularly felt that the college environment provided a diverse academic community that broke down disciplinary boundaries and embedded students in a small enough group of peers that enabled meaningful communication:

I remember debates, philosophers and PPE students would compare notes on how we were interpreting things and we would get into arguments with the biologists about what real history was. They were like 'we are real historians, we go back to the ice age'… if you were friends with these people you would start talking about all sorts of things and you would start bringing what you were taught into it

Leamas took advantage of a range of extracurricular opportunities at Oxford: *'I was in bands, I was in a lot of college balls and I played in a lot of musicals. I played on a number of*

sports teams.' He was aware of the value these opportunities had for his CV.

He started thinking about his career at the end of his second year, like many of his peers, and did an internship in the summer vacation:

I did an internship at the British Council in Canada, which was arranged through connections that my dad had… they thought 'he's at Oxford, he must be bright enough, I'm sure we can put him to use… it was mainly to do with climate change and collaboration between the UK and Canada on climate change. I was doing some research into energy security and wrote some reports for them.

After Oxford he spent a *'gap year'* in Beijing working at a school, then returned to a job at the Civil Service as part of the graduate recruitment route (which he had secured in his third year at university). He worked at the civil service for four and a half years then joined the music industry, working *'for a music venue and freelance as a music journalist'*. He then moved into the tech sector, working in a startup doing online music materials for two years, focused on marketing then moving into videography and editing. He then returned to government to work on Brexit a year ago.

Leamas highlighted a range of skills he felt he developed during his degree which had proved important across the wide range of professional contexts he had worked in. However, he particularly emphasised the value of communication: *'fundamentally the history degree is all about communicating well, writing well, bringing information together… it should be tailored to the audience… you acknowledge the audience for the product and how you communicate it'*. He provided several rich examples from his work in the music industry: *'When I was working the publicist area of the music industry, we had to put pitches together to persuade people into the company or to work with us. That might have been a PowerPoint rather than an essay, but it would be essentially about an argument: here's the issues, how we're solving it, why you want to work with us'*

He particularly highlighted the relevance of being able to deal with and analyse complicated information quickly for the fast paced world of the civil service and the policy arena: *'complicated information is a key point and obviously you are working with ambiguity and grey areas in history, and that's very much true in the policy world.'* However, overall, he emphasised the transferable nature of the skills and experience he developed, underpinned by a sense of confidence, which enabled him to move roles and sectors to freely.

For Leamas, the tutorial system was key to the development of these skills. He also felt it was an essential preparation for job interviews:

That formal kind of interview is similar in some sense to doing a tutorial in that you're kind of doing it in a very intimate setting… and so just being comfortable articulating yourself in that kind of environment, rather than just being stuck in the back of a lecture, is important… and debate and being challenged is part of

the Oxford experience so you're not necessarily wrong footed if you're challenged in an interview.

However, he also emphasised the signalling power of the Oxford brand within the labour market, the doors it opens and the confidence it provides graduates: *'When you say I went to Oxford, people generally give you an impressed nod and that gives you some measure of confidence'.*

Although he successfully applied to the Civil Service graduate recruitment programme, he was highly critical of expectations about Humanities careers trajectories being dominated by particularly sectors and pathways, feeling that these limited student aspirations. He was particularly critical of careers fairs, dismissing them as being 'silly, just giving out free mugs and stuff', but importantly 'they massively narrow everyone's horizons in that you think 'OK well the options are law, banking management consultancy and the Civil service. That's it!'

He spoke of his training programme in the Civil service with regret:

> *I felt I had rather arbitrarily fallen into this career by virtue of accepting a free mug at a careers fair and I hadn't really explored my passions in a professional context until I went away and did that for two years… Oxford gives us this great education and creativity, but then the potential is slightly diminished by all these firms and careers fairs that swoop in.*

SMILEY: CHALLENGING TRANSITION AND A 'ZIG-ZAG' CAREER

Smiley came from a single parent home. His mother didn't go to university. He grew up in South London and identifies as disadvantaged although he went to a private school funded through a hardship scholarship. He took history, politics and English literature for A level. After a circuitous route, he is currently working as a brand strategist in Hong Kong.

He didn't know what he wanted to do after university:

> *I kind of had missed the whole milk round thing while friends were ducking out of parties to go and get wooed by McKinsey, I was sort of either staying at the parties or going and doing some sport…I enjoyed my time but didn't really focus on what I was going to do afterwards.*

On leaving he entered the labour market without any particularly strategy, taking whatever employment he could: *'I ended up doing a sort of general dogsbody job for an e-commerce company out in Acton for about six months, but that wasn't really going anywhere'.* Having worked in construction from the age of 16, he fell back to building work and labouring, combined with unpaid internships: *'I was ducking in and out of alternating between essentially about a month of unpaid internships and a month of working on building sites'.* Eventually he got a *'poorly paid'* 6 month contract at an ad agency while renting a place in London. That

turned into a challenging three and a half years contract, but he eventually got a full time job at the agency. However, he was made redundant when the agency lost an account and so worked freelance for 6 months before getting a job working in market research and brand consultancy.

The company was small and with a relatively flat hierarchy, so he moved into a senior position relatively quickly: *'I mean I'm not that old at all and I was a Director at the age of 30'.* He worked there for 4 years then was seconded to Singapore. He left the company while in Singapore and moved into market research and consumer insight for Uber Eats in Asia and worked there for a year and a half before getting 'desperately bored' and moving with his partner to China, where he works as a freelance brand strategist.

Although Smiley had a relatively challenging transition into the labour market and a relatively difficult transition into university, he enjoyed his time at Oxford:

> *I loved it… my first term I felt completely like a fish out of water but it got to the point that I could rebel against the weird anachronistic hobbit-arseness of the thing or own it… it's a meritocracy… if you remove all the societal caveats… you are all, in this weird way, equal if you can bring something*

He elaborated, explaining that while the traditions and grandeur of Oxford were initially alien to him, he felt that he could either reject it and feel 'othered' by the university or embrace it all:

> *you can either fight that you've got wear weird gowns and there are these odd rituals and someone saying grace in Latin and you live in a medieval blooming cloister. Or you can say "Do you know what, I've chosen to come to this place… And I can only, you know it's only if I meet it, you know, eye to eye, am I going to have any chance of changing it, if I just reject it wholesale, it's never going to evolve.*

He therefore took full advantage of the opportunities available to him at Oxford, *'jumping into everything feet first'* from croquet to running entertainments. He felt that this provided him with *'a greater sense of confidence'*, but noticed that while others were being strategic about these opportunities, he was simply revelling in them without a wider plan.

He described developing a number of skills at Oxford that were ideally suited to marketing, particularly *'synthesising a bunch of different ideas… and selling the idea onto people who want to buy it'.* However, he felt uncomfortable about developing a feeling of entitlement *'that I've probably been recovering from since my early 20s… The worst thing I left with was the feeling that the world owed my a favour'.* This had negative implications for how he conceptualised the labour market, bringing a deterministic sense of entitlement to it, meaning that he was surprised at some of the challenges: *'I've cobbled together an interesting career, but I didn't think it would be quite so zig-zag or quick so difficult as it ended up being'*

ELI: CHALLENGING TRANSITION, CHALLENGING NAVIGATION

Eli comes from a single-parent household but attended a top-tier all-boys private school—*'ranked the number one school in the UK'* the year he graduated—thanks to his mother, who *'re-mortgaged the house and went into a shitload of debt to send me there'*. The experience at this elite institution was formative, for example, helping him develop the ability to project confidence when nervous by adopting an expression of 'arrogance'. As he puts it, *'I practised and practised and practised and learned how to actually reset my mind so that's now my resting expression when I'm scared'*. But he also found his time there *'jarring'* because he was *'was not from that background at all'*.

He took history, philosophy, and geography for his A-Levels, as well as AS biology, and he *'applied to Oxford like two weeks before the deadline, just kind of on a whim* because that was what he saw his peers doing. He also found strong support from the school, with *'special classes for everyone, to help everyone get into Oxford'*, pointing out that *'all that stuff that people are saying about the private school boys having an unfair advantage is 100% true'*. He thus defines his journey to Oxford in passive terms, rooted in chance and a feeling of luck and imposter syndrome: *'I guess I felt like I didn't really deserve to be there and like it was just an accident and that I wasn't able to really take advantage of anything.'*

While at Oxford, he felt overwhelmed by the lack of structure, at one point voluntarily rusticating for a year at the request of the College. He was at a particular loss when it came to forward-planning, feeling that Oxford does not *'really provide you with any kind of a structure or any goals or like this is what you might want to do with your life, or this is what a job is. The idea of a job generally seems to be a bit gauche, like what, you want to work for some money?'*. He highlighted that he felt there was a big disconnect between the reality of preparing students for the labour market and what he saw as the Oxford's intrinsic learning-for-learning's sake model. As he puts it:

> They didn't see themselves as providers of education for a group of people who were then going to go into a workforce and become useful productive members of society. They were just like here is a group of people who really like reading books and we really like books as well, so let's read books together. And then at the end of the three years, it's like great, I'm glad you enjoyed these books, good luck.

He felt this was particularly problematic for Humanities degrees and what he described as the *'problem of elite overproduction'* where *'you have too many elites and not enough jobs for those elite people'*. He had a constant sense that Oxford was *'like a weird fairyland place'*, where *'you're giving people a massive student loan, almost no supervision, and then an extreme amount of pressure, academic pressure to succeed, in a very, very short-term times'* but at the same time *'the idea that you would really do anything afterwards seems to be like lost on people'*.

His sense of disempowerment and the lack of forward-planning carried through to the labour market. Both his transition into the job market, and his time there, were challenging. He knew he *'didn't want to go into management or consultancy or law, I mean that's what everybody else did'* but could not establish how to secure a graduate role before finishing his degree, pointing out that *'how could I focus on trying to line up a job when I'm trying to focus on passing these exams?'*.

On leaving, he got a job as a salesman, but found that he was *'really bad at sales and also hated it'*, so he then found work at a thinktank. He loved the job and got promoted twice, but felt that the role was not lucrative enough. Having run out of money he moved with his partner to America, where he now works as a customer service representative, where he feels underemployed, underpaid, and undervalued.

Though he admits that Oxford gave him some key skills, such as *'an ability to detect that, okay, like you're bullshitting me'* and *'a good command of language'*, as well as enabling him to *'think more deeply about the world'*, he also describes a sense of helplessness with regards to engaging with the labour market in the right way: *'I don't understand what you want from me, I don't understand how to give you what you want, I don't understand what I'm supposed to do to get this job.'* He also made it clear that he felt let down by the institution:

> People look at it and are like… 'It's [Oxford] prestigious, which nice, but you can't eat prestige, man. […]Prestige doesn't translate to money, necessarily. That's the main thing. Would I have earned more money if I'd spent the time and been more stable emotionally if I'd done something else instead of going to Oxford? And the answer is very probably yes, maybe, right.

Put succinctly: *'people have this idea that like Oxford is a ticket to the Dolce Vita and like maybe, but like also not, you know.'* Moreover, Eli points out that *'everybody I know who's been able to buy a house has either had family money or they lucked out in some way'*. Despite admitting to a sense of entitlement he gained from Oxford, he also blamed Oxford for not enabling a more successful journey into the labour market:

> I also feel annoyed because I'm like here's one year – I took four years to do it – it was three years and you invest and invest and invest and the work is difficult, and you do it all and you get out and people are like, so what have you done, what experience have you got. And like I went for three years and I got myself into debt, and I worked hard and like you're telling me that this is not enough and all I can get with that is an entry-level thing. Like fuck you, to hell. […] Like how much more people are saying, oh, I should have done a Master's Degree. No, I'm not obliged to. I was in school for a long time and I just want to work, and I feel like I did enough school and I don't know where the end of the rainbow is, but if there is one, I'd like to get there already. I feel like I've put in my dues.

APPENDIX 3: GRADUATE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Theme	Key areas to prompt for

1. Background:
• Degree
   • Which degree, year college?
   • Just to start, can you tell me about the degree you did at Oxford
 	
• Personal
   • Where are you from?
   • What was your parents/guardians highest level of education
   • What was their professional background?
 	
• Secondary School
   • What type of school did you go to?
   • What A levels did you take?
 	
• Current Job
   • Can you give me a brief summary of your professional experience since university? Including any post-graduate degrees and professional training
 	
• If postgrad:
   • What led you to pursue a postgraduate degree?
	• Potential WP background
	• Additional professional training after graduation

2. Degree choice: • What were the main reasons you chose your degree? • What were the main reasons you chose Oxford? • What were your professional aspirations at the time? • How did you expect the degree to bring you towards to those? • Did you consider any other degrees? • Graduation year	• Passion for subject v. professional aspiration • Awareness of skills degree could provide • Aspiration vs expectation • General degree of professional ambition at entry into Uni
3. University Experience: • Generally, how did you find your time at Oxford? • Apart from studying, how did you spend your time? • How do you feel you changed at Oxford? • What aspect of your Oxford experience was most influential in shaping your future?	• Influence of peers/tutors/lecturers • Networks formed in college or through activities • Influence of course/department compared to other areas
4. Professional decision: • How did you choose your first job after university? • How qualified did you feel for the jobs you applied for out of University? • What experiences from your undergraduate degree contribute to your choice of jobs to pursue? • How well informed did you feel about career options for graduates in your field? • What interaction did you have with career services during this time? • Explore subsequent roles... • Plans for the future	• Influence of internships or other experiences in developing professional interest • Value of networks gained, whether these had any relation to degree area • Degree to which career services or other opportunities were useful for showing career options for humanities grads

5. Knowledge and Skills

- What aspect of your Oxford experience was most useful in preparing you for your career?
- To what extent did you feel it was important to develop professional skills while you were at Oxford?
  - Which skills did you think about developing?
- What skills or attributes acquired at Oxford did you feel helped you get your first job?
- What skills acquired at Oxford did you feel helped you once you started your job?
- Could you tell me about a specific work experienced where you felt a skill or attribute you acquired at Oxford proved helpful?
- What are the most important skills you feel you've developed since graduating from Oxford?
  - How were these developed?
- How satisfied are you with the way Oxford prepared you for your career?
- What could Oxford have done differently to better prepare you for your career?
- Thinking about content knowledge vs skills, which has been more useful for the labour market

- Whether skills were developed in academic setting or in other setting such as clubs or internships
- Whether they actively sought to develop skills or whether they were developed passively
- Whether they expected their degree to help them develop professional skills
- Non-academic, Oxford-specific factors that were important in skill development

6. Perceptions of Oxford and Humanities today

- How would you define the Humanities?
- What value do Humanities degrees have?
- Do you identify as a Humanities student?
- To whom would you recommend a humanities degree today?
- What changes, if any, should Oxford consider making to their humanities degrees?
- Are you aware of any differences between Oxford humanities graduates and humanities graduates from other universities?

- Whether they believe the world has changed, if so how?
- Whether they work with any recent grads and what their perceptions are of them
- Value of HE
- What would you look for in a graduate if you were hiring someone today?

7. Close

- What advice would you give to your teenage self thinking about doing a Humanities degree at Oxford