Future skills?

On the planned closure of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Kingston

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On 26 February 2025, students of Philosophy, English and Creative Writing at Kingston University London received an email titled 'Proposed changes within Department of Humanities', sent on behalf of the Dean of the Kingston School of Art, Mandy Ure. In that email, the University revealed 'proposals to close the Department of Humanities', with English and Philosophy ceasing to take on new applicants, and Creative Writing moving to another department. Students were assured that our 'views will be a really important part of [the consultation] process.'

For staff at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) this was not a new experience. Four of them were part of the CRMEP when Middlesex closed it down in 2010, and accepted an invitation to move to Kingston later that year. It wasn't a novelty to students either: in early February 2024, we received a very similar email which initiated a 'Review of Philosophy programmes'. The Professors received another, different set of communications, at the same time as we did. As in the message sent in February of this year, it cited a decline in student recruitment, driven by a combination of government policy and market trends, as part of the justification for suspending applications to courses in Philosophy. In that case, the review was improvised at faculty level to judge the apparent 'viability' of Kingston's philosophy programmes. It is worth noting at the outset that recruitment to CRMEP's courses is in fact quite buoyant. A drop was certainly suffered after Brexit, when the number of students from the EU fell dramatically, but as of late February 2025, the MA courses had received 59 applications for 2025-26, and made offers to a large majority of them, mostly from overseas. Based on past experience, application numbers could easily have exceeded 100 by June. Meanwhile the CRMEP remains a central locus for research-based philosophical activities in the UK. Its public research seminars regularly attract scores of participants and remain the occasion for hours of animated discussion and debate; the most recent seminars, by two PhD students nearing the end of their dissertations, were on the philosophy of ecology and the concept of civil war. At the time of the proposed closure there were still 26 PhD students in Philosophy, despite the freeze on new applications that began a year ago. This is not, by any measure except that apparently adopted by Kingston's managers, a department struggling for recruitment or significance.

The purpose of this piece is to make clear how students at CRMEP understand this closure of our Centre. Last year's review, and its implied conclusions, were contested and resisted by both staff (who raised grievances regarding the secrecy of the process) and students at CRMEP; eventually, the review failed to publish any conclusions and passed over into a 'period of reflection'. We counted this, broadly, as a victory. Our campaign was one of strategic de-escalation, focusing on points of weakness within the university's review procedure, to locate points where the process, represented as natural and necessary, was in fact far more contingent, dependent as it was on the choices of a few individuals. Our campaign did not go public at the time. This is because we judged that our resistance would be more effective if we resisted incorporating ourselves within wider discourses around the funding of the humanities in Higher Education, which are increasingly beholden to a myth of inevitability, be-

lieved by those who support, and those who oppose, the marketisation of universities.

This year, however, the proposed cuts came against a background of increased preparedness on the part of the Kingston University administration. In particular, the administration emphasised an alleged need to make £20 million worth of cuts over the course of two years, the majority of which are this year to be made in the Humanities and Social Sciences (though £10m was saved last year, by other means). As a result of the scale of the proposed cuts, and the nationwide cuts to so many similar programmes and departments across UK universities in the last year, we felt that a more public campaign was more likely to be successful this time around, with the rationale that Kingston's reputation would suffer if their plans were made public. This is especially the case in light of the University's unwillingness to confirm that they would allow our Professors to teach out the students already signed up for Masters and Doctoral courses, bearing similarities to a case at the University of Essex, recently ruled upon in favour of the students by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.[1] The precedent set by this judgment might lend some cause for optimism, however limited, for students threatened by cuts to their departments.

Despite the similarities between the 2024 and 2025 situations, there has been a notable change in discursive emphasis from the Kingston administration. There is a growing emphasis on teaching something called 'Future Skills', oriented around the belief that universities ought to change their teaching in order to adapt students to 'the world of work'.[2] Each year since 2021, when the Future Skills agenda began, a report has been commissioned by Kingston University to justify the shift toward such skills and, by implication, away from the education on which universities have historically focused. The skills were determined by a survey of 'business leaders' in the UK. Nine such skills were identified, and are now the focus of Kingston's compulsory Future Skills modules for all undergraduate students: (1) creative problem solving, (2) digital competency, (3) being enterprising, (4) having a questioning mindset, (5) adaptability, (6) empathy, (7) collaboration, (8) resilience and (9) self-awareness.[3] On the face of it, of course, none of this seems particularly at odds with an education in the humanities or social sciences, certainly not in a research environment in which most students will be locating and compiling resources predominantly digitally. As such, it might appear surprising that it is the plan to cultivate these skills that prefaces the announcement of the proposal to close the Department of Humanities.

The surprise is, however, explained in part by the more recent turn towards a specific vision of the future for which students at Kingston are now being prepared, in part by a brute matter of the reduction of costs. Regarding the latter, Kingston University's plan is to shift the teaching of Future Skills away from humanities academics. These are not just skills communicated through other modules, but are specific modules, now necessarily at least 25% of all taught courses. This comes along with Kingston's removal of all optionality in the provision of modules, so that students will no longer have any possibility for specialisation based on their interests. Future Skills modules are to be outsourced to an education consultancy firm called GradCore. Those teaching the modules no longer need to be qualified as academics in the way in which those currently working at universities are. In short, Future Skills has become the label under which the cost of teaching is reduced – de- and re-professionalised – with a branding of innovation and future-preparedness, while its real content is the provision of university-level certification (complete with university-level tuition fees) without university-level teaching.

Perhaps the more significant element is this former aspect, the vision of the future assumed by Future Skills. In the most recent Future Skills report, supported by JP Morgan, the focus shifts markedly towards Artificial Intelligence (AI), and its 'rapid development' and 'exponential growth', according to Kingston's Vice-Chancellor.[4] This goes as far as to say that the 'modern ... world of work' can *already* be described as 'AI-first'. This claim is not substantiated. In general, the evidence of the need for universities to pivot towards the teaching of AI is based on the expressed opinions of business leaders about what they expect could happen to techniques of labour, though there is, of course, no reason to suspect that business leaders are likely to be accurate in their predictions, or to understand their consequences. In fact, what is perhaps most surprising about the research structure of the report is that there is no account of exactly what must change in response to this alleged growth in AI, nor what

this growth actually is. The only example cited is Open AI's Chat-GPT, whose place seems rather under threat as the ecological impact of LLM-based Artificial Intelligence is at last attracting scrutiny,[5] and the emergence of international competition threatens the viability of stock market investments in large American AI firms.[6]

Back in 1735, James Wyatt invented the spinning machine and proclaimed its autonomy from labour in its ability to 'spin without fingers'. As Marx notes, however, it was not without labour: donkeys supplied the power to these machines, and there remained a labour, albeit now further alienated from the labour process, of feeding and keeping these donkeys.[7] Throughout its history, of course, capitalism has invented machines which revolutionise the labour process so as to increase its productivity. Marx called this 'the intensification of labour', which appropriates more labour-time per hour by virtue of the labour-time crystallised within the machine.[8] But perhaps more importantly, it allows for the reduction in the cost of the labour-power employed in the use of the machine, since the apparent simplification of the labour process allows for a reduction in the cost paid for that labour, by virtue of the reduction in the socially necessary labour time required in its reproduction – although the 'moral and historical factors' in the determination of the value of a certain period of expenditure of labour-power are, at least in part, determined by what are determined as a worker's 'so-called necessary wants and needs', the minimum living standard acceptable to individuals according to their position in society.[9] Moreover, the centralisation of the cooperation of workers in machines allows for the simplification of labour such that the labour of one individual takes the place of that of many others. What does not change, however, is the structure of production itself, which remains, as we might expect, dependent on wage-labour and private property. Just as the cost of reproducing the labour of a single stable hand and a donkey is far less than that of sewers, the cost of reproducing workers who can operate an AI chatbot is less than that of workers who were previously doing this

A man with a wooden leg carrying arms and legs in a basket; representing the relation between the whole and its parts in Aristotelian logic. Engraving by L. Gaultier, ca. 1613. Wellcome Collection.

work 'themselves':

> The whole system of capitalist production rests on the circumstance that the worker sells his labor-power as a commodity; the division of labor narrows his labor-power to the point where it becomes a very particular competence in handling a specialized tool; then, when his tool falls prey to a machine, the exchange-value of his labor-power immediately vanishes along with its use-value. The worker becomes unsellable …. Some members of the working class are rendered superfluous by machinery: they are turned into a population that capital no longer needs to valorize itself.[10]

Here, the vanishing of the value of labour-power is an outcome of a process that was meant merely to be an increase in the productivity of that very labour-power.

Those 'moral and historical factors' in the determination of the value of labour-power, which appeared at first to be independent of the process of production itself, now appear influenced by this process as workers are reduced to the mere operators of tools, and then, eventually, as the work is made autonomous of the workers themselves, the value of their labour-power is abolished, and more and more of the population are rendered 'useless' – made not just unemployed, but *unemployable* in the fullest sense. Those remaining in employment are then forced to accept lower wages, a logic that was explicitly stated by Kingston University, of its own students, in a now-deleted update to the new university website:

Hiring one of our graduates offers you: Affordability:

Maximum enthusiasm and a fresh approach *at a lower salary*.[11]

On the same page, Kingston praises the diversity of its student body, which, combined with this message, seems to imply that one of the uses of Kingston University to alleged employers is the provision of a diverse (read: non-white) student body willing to accept low wages. This is the nature of contemporary capitalism's increasing dependence on the creation and management of surplus populations, a result of the increasing accumulation of capital rendering labour unemployable. As such, there is an ever-growing portion of the population for which capital has no use other than as an effectively infinite supply of labour upon which it can draw in order to suppress wages.[12] Viewed in this context, the discourse of Future Skills begins to appear as the rendering unemployable of workers in the present on the basis of an expectation about the developments of technology in the future, an unemployability that ought to be fought, by universities, with an abolition of teaching in the humanities. In this sense, Future Skills is no doubt an attempt to secure the continued existence of universities like Kingston, but it makes this claim in a discourse in which all of capital's goals have already been taken for granted.

In 2022, the Future Skills report asks for integration of its language by politicians, including the creation of a Future Skills council modelled on the Creative Industries Council which 'will focus on how to solve the workforce skills challenge and the roles of [sic] government, industry and education can each play.[13] This is part of a general attempt to remove the educational significance of universities, which is the heart of the Future Skills initiative, expressed in the attempt to change their position within the state. In response to the lack of funding to Higher Education, the proposed move is to

align universities' teaching and learning missions with economic growth and innovation by moving them out of the Department for Education to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Department for Business and Trade.[14]

The guiding motive, therefore, seems clear: to abolish any distinctly educational function of universities in favour of increased integration with capitalist 'innovation'. The structure of this subjectifying function, determining that universities need to be reformed for future employability, is thus an operation of this 'future' upon the present, in order to lower the cost of labour-power. As noted in the open letter written and signed by CRMEP students, opposition to the humanities is frequently justified both in terms of the lack of its use-value in the production process and its left-political content, especially as it relates to queer, feminist and anti-racist politics.[15] In the United States, years of campaigning, under the guise of promoting 'free speech' in universities, led by figures such as Christopher Rufo and James Lindsay, has now legitimated a general attack on universities as promoting an ideology threatening to the American state; all elements of the academy are now deemed compromised by the pervasive influence of, among other things, critical theory and feminism. As is well-known, the Trump White House issued an executive order 'ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs',[16] now extended to include a list of words which, if included in research, will result in a review of their funding grant, including 'race', 'LGBTQ' and even 'female'.[17] While the assault on the universities is not limited to research which might be deemed to have left-political content, nonetheless this research is deemed *especially* useless in the face of the metric of employability.

It is therefore with the utmost concern that we should read the promise of Kingston's Future Skills reports to invent a new 'employability metric that will support start-ups, entrepreneurs and industries'.[18] Insofar as the concept of the future is indexed with regard to possibility, by virtue of the fact that, at least socially speaking, no one knows what will occur, we have what Reinhard Koselleck calls the 'horizon of expectation': the set of experiences deemed possible.[19] So not only is the meaning of the future everything that is possible, it also, by determinative negation, includes that set of experiences deemed *not* possible. The horizon of expectation, however, is not exactly the future, it is not just those events that have not yet occurred, but it is the future-in-the-present, the temporal meaning of the future felt as that towards which we are moving in time. Kant's critique of prophesy is useful here, since the horizon of expectations always makes some claim about what is possible, and we see how subjection functions through the narrowing of this horizon:

We can obtain a prophetic historical narrative of things to come by depicting those events whose *a priori* possib-

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ility suggests that they will in fact happen. But how is it possible to have history *a priori*? The answer is that it is possible if the prophet himself occasions and produces the events he predicts.[20]

Such prophesies are made, Kant argues, by politicians who claim to take humans ' "as they are", but this "ought to read" as we have made them by unjust coercion, by treacherous designs which the government is in a good position to carry out.'[21] We might say that the descriptions of AI and future technology in Kingston's Future Skills reports are not strictly speaking predictions, but rather *prophesies* that, in their acceptance as prophesies, make themselves true. The moment of resistance to this domination of the future lies, then, in the rejection of these prophesies as the outcomes of merely positive claims about how employment will change. An order is always given in these prophesies. Every prophesy contains an imperative.

This prophetic logic has already operated quite concretely in our own situation: the figure of £20m was generated out of a shortfall on projected earnings after student recruitment for 2024-2025 was not as high as projected. This was not a deficit, not money lost in the present, but money lost on a projection. The perverse logic of financial prophesy operates this way: a prophesy is made, often unattainable, and the failure to realise this prophesy justifies the (re)institution of a particular state of affairs, particular relations of power. We can now read the moral content in such financial projections: the prophesy *ought* to have been made true, and the fact that it was not justifies social change to bring us closer to this perfected state. Kant's analysis holds true today, insofar as the prophetic mode is a strategy of instituting states of affairs desirable to those who hold power. However, prophesies no longer make themselves true, on the basis of taking humans 'as they are' and not as they ought to be; our capitalism's prophesies make themselves false, taking humans as (capital thinks) they 'ought to be', not as they are.

So it matters rather little whether the devaluation of the humanities comes from apparently benign prophets of technological progress, or from more explicit denouncement of their research as a kind of subversive agenda. The claim, uniformly, is that we, as a society, cannot waste time and money on education. At least, this is the case for the greatest portion of society, those

in the precarious position of being rendered 'unemployable', and thus surplus. The same fate, we should note, is unlikely to befall universities like Oxford or Cambridge, whose endowments for the humanities are apparently beyond threat. This casting of the humanities as always proximate to unemployability is, at least in part, because its education does more than simply prepare people, primarily young people, for employment. It involves the attempt at a communication of something which is not yet understood by those being educated, something that Friedrich Schlegel called the 'incomprehensible' moment in the transmission of an idea.[22] There is something in education that Peter Osborne, the Director of CRMEP and a former editor of this journal, has noted is absolutely in opposition to *training*.[23] Whereas the latter involves the cultivation of a skill for the purpose of the improved fulfilment of some task, the former always involves changing the understanding of those being educated. Educational difficulty, then, is a symptom precisely of the fact that a certain idea is not easily comprehensible against a particular background. This was intended, in that lecture, to clarify the importance of difficulty in the teaching of any idea. But it might here be generalised to the fact that the humanities, especially philosophy, often deal with initially incomprehensible ideas and texts at almost every moment of their teaching, and so strictly speaking this incomprehensibility means their value always exceeds their use, their employability. It is this resistant quality of education itself, that it lingers within the face of incomprehensibility, which is threatening to a worldview based solely on training, since there remains a moment in this education which *is constitutively unemployable*, and affirms this precisely as its value. Education in this sense remains genuinely transformative and threatens the authority over the future to which any discourse of Future Skills makes claim, not only in its ability to call into question the concepts invoked in making this claim, but also in this structural fact of education itself.

I have elected not to speak too much of the value of CRMEP specifically here, since those reading this journal will require no convincing of the significance of the content of the research that is undertaken here, with or without direct familiarity with its research and teaching. However, if I might speak personally for a moment, it is this commitment to what is difficult, unincorporateable, unemployable, that makes CRMEP often feel to me like a

singular reprieve from a Higher Education system that seems less and less about education. Texts which have, in the UK, often been discounted precisely on account of their incomprehensibility to the dominant modes of philosophising, retain a place at CRMEP not simply because they can be justified by their conversion into a digestibly Anglophone 'Continental Philosophy', but because the hermeneutic density of these texts, their persistent incomprehensibility, reflects thought's non-enclosure of the real. Our collective bafflement in the face of these texts, over and over again in libraries and seminar rooms, is perhaps what remains their most important quality, that they might teach us the value of unemployability, and the terror of a world that would be easily understood.

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Notes

1. The OIA ruled that these students had a 'legitimate expectation to be taught by an expert they signed up to the course to be taught by'. Leigh Day Solicitors, 'Adjudicator rules in favour of students left in academic limbo after African history course was axed', 20 February 2025, https://www.leighday.co.uk/news/news/2025-news/adjudicator-rules-in-favour-of-students-left-in-academic-limbo-after-african-history-course-was-axed/.
2. Kingston University, 'Future Skills at Kingston University', https://www.kingston.ac.uk/about/future-skills.
3. 'Future Skills'.
4. Kingston University, 'Future Skills – The Kingston Approach', 2023, 1, https://assets.kingston.ac.uk/m/2f62cc1612165a88/original/20231129Future Skills-Report-2023.pdf.
5. Sophie McLean, 'The Environmental Impact of ChatGPT: A Call for Sustainable Practices In AI Development', *Earth.org*, 28 April 2023, https://earth.org/environmental-impact-chatgpt/.
6. Kelly Ng et al, 'DeepSeek: The Chinese AI app that has the world talking', *BBC*, 27 January 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5yv5976z9po.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital*, *Volume 1* [1872], trans. Paul Reitter, 2nd edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), 342.
8. Marx, *Capital*, 377.
9. Marx, *Capital*, 144.
10. Marx, *Capital*, 397.
11. https://www.instagram.com/p/DHq505kN$_L L$/, 24 March 2025, emphasis added.
12. William Robinson, 'Global Capitalism's Extermination Impulse', *The Philosophical Salon*, 19 August 2024, https://www.thephilosophicalsalon.com/global-capitalisms-extermination-impulse/.
13. Kingston University, 'Future Skills - League Table', 2022, https://assets.kingston.ac.uk/m/43626c23951b08fb/original/2022Future-Skills-League-Table-2022V1.pdf, 22.
14. 'Future Skills - The Kingston Approach', 26.
15. E-flux Notes, 'Open Letter from CRMEP Students & Researchers on Kingston University's Proposed Closure of the Department of Humanities', 5 March 2025, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/658933/open-letter-from-crmep-students-researchers-on-kingston-university-s-proposed-closure-of-the-department-of-Humanities.
16. The White House, 'Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing', 20 January 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/.
17. Karin Yourish et al. 'These Words Are Disappearing in the New Trump Administration', *New York Times*, 7 March 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/07/us/trump-federal-agencies-websites-words-dei.html.
18. 'Future Skills - League Table', 22.
19. Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
20. Immanuel Kant, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', trans. H.B. Nisbet, in *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 177.
21. Kant, 'Conflict', 178.
22. Friedrich Schlegel, 'On Incomprehensibility', trans. Peter Virchow, in *Lucinde and the Fragments* [1800] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 259.
23. This was a class, given as part of Kingston's 'Teaching and Learning in Higher Education' module.