

Arts degrees ‘more lucrative than working in trades’

Australian study finds that philosophers outearn motor mechanics – on average

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An Australian study has torpedoed the trope of the rich blue-collar worker, with arts degrees – on the whole – proving considerably more lucrative than trade certificates.

The Mackenzie Research Institute [analysis](#) found that “typical” arts degrees delivered higher lifetime earnings than certificates in aerospace engineering, one of the best-paid technical areas. Qualified workers in a “typical building trade” – carpentry and joinery – attracted similar incomes to graduates in philosophy and religious studies, the worst-paid arts category.

The research found that the average builder and plumber earned about 20 per cent more, at best, than someone with no tertiary qualifications. By comparison, bachelor’s graduates in humanities fields like political science and cultural studies earned almost 50 per cent more.

Arts degrees also offered longevity, with income typically peaking when graduates reached their early fifties. Tradesmen tended to achieve their maximum earnings about a decade earlier.

The findings undermine perceptions that tradespeople like electricians and plumbers tend to earn a fortune because they can be hard to find when needed – often at short notice to deal with household emergencies – and charge large fees just for showing up.

Study author Tom Karmel said the results suggested that only a minority of tradespeople achieved breakaway financial success. “An arts degree is a good proposition compared to a trade certificate,” he said. “There would have to be a dramatic oversupply of persons with an arts degree to remove the premium associated with the degree.

“There...is a tendency for parents to push their children toward the university path rather than [vocational education and training]. I argue that [this] is a product of the labour market rather than any innate snobbery. The university sector will be more highly regarded as long as it leads to the better paid jobs.”

The study found outliers in every field. About 2 per cent of people with certificates in painting, decorating and signwriting – the worst-paid trade category, delivering average earnings just 1 per cent higher than school qualifications – were in the top income bracket of over A\$3,500 (£1,714) a week.

“Average returns are exactly what they describe – averages over many individuals,” Karmel noted. “An individual’s income will depend on many factors. Talent, hard work and even luck will all play a part.”

A [long-term decline in humanities enrolments](#) has intensified amid questions over the value proposition, after [fee hikes](#) and [indexation](#) raised the cost of three-year arts degrees [above A\\$50,000](#). Meanwhile, government policies are [increasingly favouring vocational study](#), with policymakers highlighting severe shortages of technical skills.

Karmel said earning prospects were not the only factor behind course choice. Law study offered a “high return” on average, but probably not for people “with little interest in it”. Religious study was unlikely to be motivated by “a payoff in this life – maybe the next life”.

He said people should not be deterred by the fees if they had their hearts set on studying arts. Aptitude should be the overriding driver of choice, he told *Times Higher Education*. “You’re much better off being a really good tradie than a really bad art student.”

The analysis was based on full-time male earnings recorded in the 2021 census. Karmel excluded women’s earnings from the study because most female tradespeople specialised in hairdressing or the food trades, “both notorious for low pay”.

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