

The Two Cultures Revisited: The Humanities in British Universities since 1945*

Those of us who teach in the humanities – or to use the traditional term, ‘the arts’ – in British universities are used to thinking of ourselves as the Cinderellas of the higher education system. For half a century or more we have been consistently told by pundits and funders and government that our historic dominance in the university system was an anachronism, and that modern requirements – for useful knowledge, for technical skills, and above all for economic growth – demanded that henceforward we take a back seat. This argument intensified in the late 1950s, taking the now familiar form of the ‘two cultures’ discourse, which as other historians have shown remains the distorting lens through which we view many other aspects of postwar British life. In this article I re-examine the actual record of the arts and the sciences in postwar British universities, and reinstate another perspective – lost amidst the nannying and muttering from within the Whitehall and Westminster bubble – the perspective of students and their parents, who seemed to have a rather different understanding of what a university education was for. The record will show that the humanities have had a rather better time of things than the moral panics of the chattering classes would suggest. In making this argument, it is not my intention to confirm – or even to address – the gloomy diagnoses of the alleged effects of the dominance of the humanities on economic performance. I share with David Edgerton and Jim Tomlinson the view that the ‘two cultures’ critique – along with declinism in general – was a very partial and a very polemical intervention in a contemporary debate.¹ Like them, I agree that the sciences were

* For continuing discussions on the issues addressed here, I am very grateful to my colleagues in the Royal Historical Society, especially Colin Jones, Margot Finn and Jo Innes, and at Cambridge University, especially Joel Isaac, Stefan Collini and Andrew Bell, and to Deborah Cohen, Guy Ortolano and David Edgerton for very helpful comments on an earlier draft. Earlier versions were presented at events at St. Andrews, Cambridge, Lancaster and London and I thank these attentive and imaginative audiences. Warmest thanks for the invitation to give the 2014 Pimlott Lecture to the editors of *Twentieth-Century British History*, for hospitality to Oxford University Press, and to the audience for constructive feedback, especially from Jean Seaton.

¹ See, for two important interventions in the historiography, David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006), ch. 5; Jim Tomlinson, ‘Inventing “Decline”: The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 49 (1996), 731-57.

in a strong position in the immediate postwar period – and if anything got a little stronger through the 1960s – though not much stronger, despite the best efforts of polemicists and policymakers. This was because, in the longer term, broader social and cultural trends favoured non-science subjects, and in these conditions the humanities fared surprisingly well – with no obvious effects (for good or ill) on economic performance. Whether these relatively good times are set fair to continue is, however, another matter, which I will address in my conclusion.

I

In 1930 the American educationalist Abraham Flexner produced an influential comparative study of British, American and German universities. In it he provided a picture of British universities that remained recognizable a generation later and to some extent still today. In contrast to the democratic American university and the elite professionalized German universities, the British universities offered a high-quality specialist education to elites like the Germans, but viewed their graduates more like the Americans, as liberally and not vocationally educated amateurs. The system was small and compact and academically intense – no sign of the ‘academic orgy’ of ‘anything goes’ that Flexner deplored in America – but wasteful of resources and ‘not co-extensive with modern life - the life of a democratic society, involved in intellectual and industrial competition with all the rest of the world’.²

Flexner’s generalizations assumed, to some extent correctly, that the British system (if that is the word for it) was modelled on the two ancient English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, that retained the national authority that the American Ivy League had lost. This system comprised at the time of Flexner’s writing ten newer English universities and one in Northern Ireland, mostly of very recent foundation, two federal Universities for London and Wales, five ‘university colleges’ that awarded degrees accredited by the University of

² Abraham Flexner, Universities: American, English, German, 1st pub. 1930 (London, 1968), 224-9, 264, 274-8.

London, and four ancient Scottish universities much smaller and more local in character than Oxford and Cambridge, although like the other institutions increasingly modelling themselves on ‘Oxbridge’.

The Oxbridge model which defined the public image of the university assumed that students would study a single subject full-time for three years, terminating in a ‘single honours’ B.A. degree. They would reside together, ideally in close proximity to their teachers, and would combine their studies with an equally rigorous course of extra-curricular activities, including religion, amateur sport, and related character-building avocations. Their studies would be overseen by a tutor – a member of academic staff who directed and taught them individually or in very small groups – and their characters by a ‘moral tutor’. They would choose their single area of study not with a career directly in mind, but for the general intellectual and moral advantages of studying a subject (itself preferably a character-building subject) in great depth and in such close association with their elders.

This model hovered in the background of most mid-twentieth century discussions about the expansion of the system after the Second World War. Its high cost was seen necessarily to constrain the extent to which the system could expand, without sacrificing the high academic quality of its output. And the model was to some extent enforceable on the whole network by the oversight of the University Grants Committee (UGC), a government body set up after the First World War, which provided a growing share of universities’ income and thus had a growing say in their composition and ethos. The UGC itself had a gentlemanly cast, its membership larded heavily with Oxbridge grandees, usually chaired by a present or former Oxford ‘head of house’.

In these circumstances, the expansion of numbers in higher education that Britain experienced along with nearly every other industrialized country immediately after 1945 was relatively limited both quantitatively and qualitatively. Britain experienced the bulge in

numbers caused by accommodating servicemen returning from the war, and then another, less sharp and continuing expansion caused by demographic growth, growing access to secondary education (and the university entrance qualifications) and rising educational aspirations. Yet its student population as a share of the total population remained low by OECD standards.³ Before the war Britain had only 50,000 full-time university students, 1 per 1000 population, well behind its obvious comparators, and while those numbers quadrupled to 200,000 (4 per 1000) by 1960 Britain still lagged and between it and many of its comparators the gap was growing. This lag was not as yet much of a cause for concern. Slow growth was seen as a sign that standards of quality were being upheld. The UGC exercised a relatively light touch on the nature and extent of growth. It was thought that students and their parents were the best judge of who should study and what they should study; growth was thus read as a response to the supply of suitably-qualified applicants. It was the overall ethos that the UGC was most determined to maintain, in certain respects after the war driving the non-Oxbridge institutions to become more like Oxbridge, for example in urging them to provide more residential accommodation and lower staff-student ratios.⁴

There has long been a general assumption that this system privileged the arts over the sciences, although interest in or concern about this bias has varied considerably over time. Classics has been seen to be the ideal Oxbridge subject, for its combination of academic rigour and moral training, although historically Classics was the dominant subject only at Oxford, a place held by Mathematics at Cambridge. The intimacy of the individual or small-group tutorial seemed designed to generate humane enthusiasms – the cult of Greece in the late nineteenth century, ‘practical criticism’ in the early twentieth, ‘ordinary language’

³ Student numbers as share of the population is a crude measure, but it is probably a more accurate one than various attempts to compare participation rates, as the ages at which students entered higher education varied substantially between systems. This measure probably underestimates the British lag as it may under-count part-time students and Britain had many fewer part-time students than other systems.

⁴ University Grants Committee [hereafter, UGC], University Development: Interim Report on the Years 1947 to 1951, Cmnd. 8473 (1952), 9; UGC, University Development 1952-1957, Cmnd. 534 (1958), 10.

philosophy in the mid-twentieth, ‘history from below’ in the later twentieth. Furthermore, the expense of these intensive teaching methods was seen to shackle opportunities for expansion of the system, therefore tending to freeze the arts-science balance in favour of the arts. The ideal-type professional destinations for graduates – the domestic and imperial civil services, the law, the clergy, or less professionalized forms of public service – have also been associated with the arts rather than sciences. While it was assumed that the ancient professions would naturally be recruited from the ancient universities, with their traditional humanistic biases, a lot of attention was focused then as now on the continuing hegemony of Oxford and Cambridge in recruitment to the burgeoning domestic civil service – or at least to its elite – principally from graduates with History and Classics degrees.⁵

These casual assumptions were not, however, borne out by the actual student profile of universities even at mid-century. Since the early twentieth century, when degree subjects were proliferating, the picture had become more mixed. As the cultural prestige of Classics dimmed, a wide variety of subjects were claiming to provide the intellectual and moral training that had formerly been associated with Classics, and it was the ‘single honours’ degree rather than Classics *per se* that became the talisman. History and Law grew dramatically at Cambridge, but so did Engineering and the Natural Sciences. The newer ‘civic’ universities were anxious not to compete for Oxbridge-bound students and experimented with an even wider range of subjects, including ‘applied’ scientific and technological subjects aimed at local industry. By 1939 about 45% of university students were studying for degrees in arts subjects; the remainder were equally split between science and technology on the one hand, and medicine on the other.⁶

⁵ For some classic formulations, see e.g. Henry Parris, *Constitutional Bureaucracy* (London, 1969), 288-92; Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power*, 1st pub. 1972 (Basingstoke, 2002), 38-43; Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 1981), 22-4, and see below n. 13; for a critique of this tradition, see Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 108-12.

⁶ UGC, *University Development 1952-1957*, 8; and see David Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial ‘Decline’, 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 1996), 18-22, giving an even stronger showing to science.

There was not a great deal of evidence of increasing or unsatisfied demand for university graduates from employers seeking specific technical expertise. As Leonard Schwarz has emphasized, most university graduates up to and beyond the Second World War found employment as teachers. In Schwarz's sample year of 1937-8, employment in schools accounted for 84% of male arts graduates and 88% of female arts graduates from Birmingham, but also 54% of male science graduates and 90% of female science graduates.⁷ Most employers were at this stage only just coming to recognize the school-leaving qualification (School Certificate, taken at 16) as the crucial marker of quality, and were content to train their non-graduate employees themselves in whatever technical skills they needed. As the ranks of university graduates swelled in the 1960s, employers found that the pool available to them of skilled school-leavers was shrinking and began to recruit from amongst graduates instead, but they still showed no particular interest in science or technical degrees. British employers were said to be the most likely across Europe to advertise for graduate posts without specifying the kind of degree they were seeking. In any case the kinds of jobs into which graduates were moving in the postwar years – high-level clerical jobs in local government, social work and other welfare professions, the lower reaches of the legal profession, accountancy, teaching – rarely required advanced technical skills; still the single-honours degree of any variety would do.⁸ Without nudges of this kind, the proportion of

⁷ Leonard Schwarz, 'Professions, Elites, and Universities in England, 1870-1970', *Historical Journal* 47 (2004), 942-51. Robbins estimated that before the war about 40% of all graduates went into schoolteaching, and as late as 1961 the proportion remained as high as 35%, i.e. 43% of male arts graduates, 80% of female arts graduates, 23% of male science graduates, 54% of female science graduates. Committee on Higher Education, *Report*, Cmnd. 2154 (1963-4) [hereafter, *Robbins Report*], Appendix I: The Demand for Places in Higher Education, Annex BB, 303-4.

⁸ Schwarz, 'Professions, Elites and Universities', 951-6; Joseph Ben-David, *Centers of Learning: Britain, France, Germany, United States* (New York, 1977), 75-7; Gareth Williams and Tessa Blackstone, *Response to Adversity: Higher Education in a Harsh Climate* (Guildford, 1983), 42-3; UGC, *University Development, 1957-62*, Cmnd. 2267 (1963-4), 25, 34; David Stevenson, 'The End of History? The British University Experience, 1981-1992', *Contemporary Record* 7 (1993), 71-2. These trends were already apparent in some of the testimony to the Robbins Committee: see, for example, the prescient testimony of the Fabian Society or the memorandum submitted by Jean Floud in *Robbins Report*, Evidence: Part I, Vol. B, 519, Evidence - Part II, Documentary Evidence, 45-8.

students taking arts degrees remained remarkably stable – 44% in 1962.⁹ It is sometimes said that in this period the middle classes were finally coming to see university education as a ‘positional’ good, as if this were a rather snobby aspiration for status, again illegitimately favouring the arts; but it looks rather as if parents and students were simply seeking markers of general educational quality, giving access to growth sectors in the labour market, which was relatively indifferent to arts and sciences.¹⁰

This is not to say that there was no contemporary discourse favouring the sciences over the arts, for there was. Postwar governments of right and left were determined to restore Britain’s industrial supremacy and saw the universities as an increasingly powerful tool to help achieve that. A series of government enquiries recommended the reinforcement of scientific, technical and industrial manpower, and the UGC rather prided itself on acting as an efficient conduit for communicating these ‘national needs’ to the universities without impairing their independence. Yet until the late 1950s these concerns were expressed *sotto voce*, and in practice no strong-arm methods were employed to force universities to shift their supply of courses in the direction of science and technology. Manpower needs were taken care of through expansion in total numbers rather than a change in the character of university education. As we have seen, this essentially demand-driven system did not shift much in the desired or predicted direction. The UGC noted this repeatedly, puzzled, perhaps uneasy, but not panicked.¹¹ That stance would change dramatically as the ‘50s drew to a close.

II

⁹ The impression that ‘more students were studying the sciences’ by 1960 is exaggerated by excluding medicine from the sciences total: Michael Sanderson, ‘Higher Education in the Post-War Years’, *Contemporary Record* 5 (1991), 418; Edgerton, *Warfare State*, 179. The proportions studying the humanities and the pure sciences remained very stable, while the proportions studying medicine fell and those studying technology rose. In the 1950s there was a swing to the sciences at A-Level and at university – A-Level passes in maths and science rose from 49% of the total to 55% in 1952-9, and the proportion of degrees in the sciences from 49% to 55% in 1950-65 – but the A-Level swing began to reverse in 1959, and the degree swing in 1965. *Robbins Report*, 163; all figures for degree completions in the period before 1967 are taken from UGC reports.

¹⁰ A.H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 10, 104, 106-9.

¹¹ UGC, *University Development 1947-51*, 7-8; UGC, *University Development 1952-57*, 8; UGC, *University Development, 1957-62*, 2, 25, 82-3, 153-4, 159-60.

As historians have lately recognized, almost every aspect of British society came under intense scrutiny in the late 1950s and early 1960s through a particular analytical lens, which has been dubbed ‘declinism’. The postwar economic miracles experienced by Germany, France and Italy – largely fuelled by their relatively late transfer of populations from rural to urban occupations, such as Britain had experienced a century or more earlier – were perceived in Britain not as convergence or ‘catch up’ but as Britain’s relative economic decline. Increasingly after a second consecutive Conservative election victory in 1955, left-wing and liberal intellectuals began to point polemically to systemic flaws in British society that made it seem backward, even feudal; and after a third consecutive Conservative victory in 1959, even right-wing intellectuals, especially those with an enhanced appetite for rapid capitalist growth on the American model and dissatisfied with the managerial style of the Conservative governments, began to take up this analysis.¹² Universities were far from the principal object of this critique, but they offered tempting targets: the dominance of Oxbridge was taken as a metaphor for the wider hegemony of the amateurish, gentlemanly class, the presumed dominance of Classics and other outmoded intellectual pursuits as a simple explanation for Britain’s alleged lag in scientific, technological and industrial achievements, and the failure of the UGC to shift the arts-sciences balance in universities as a sign that the whole system needed a good shake-up.¹³

Two polemics against the alleged dominance of the humanities dating from this period have been enduringly influential, one in general educated culture and the other in academic treatments of postwar British ‘decline’. The first, C.P. Snow’s celebrated dissection of The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution, was first delivered as the Rede

¹² On ‘declinism’ in recent historiography, see for example Marcus Collins, ‘The Fall of the English Gentleman: The National Character in Decline c. 1918-1970’, Historical Research 75 (2002), 90-111; Richard English and Michael Kenny (eds.), Rethinking British Decline (Basingstoke, 2000); Jim Tomlinson, The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain (London, 2000).

¹³ For example, from one of the leading exemplars of this tradition, Anthony Sampson, Anatomy of Britain (London, 1962), 197-205, 209, 213-14; Michael Shanks, ‘The Comforts of Stagnation’, in Arthur Koestler (ed.), Suicide of a Nation?: An Enquiry into the State of Britain, 1st pub. 1963 (London, 1994), 60.

Lecture at Cambridge in May 1959. It developed a thesis that Snow, an academic chemist turned novelist, had been unfolding in a series of writings since 1956. Snow argued not only that intellectual life in modern Britain had split into ‘two cultures’ – one essentially ‘literary’, the other essentially ‘scientific’ – unable to communicate with each other, but also, more controversially, that ‘traditional culture’ and indeed contemporary culture in general remained in thrall to the ‘literary intellectuals’, actively hostile to science and industry, and therefore impediments to progress in Britain and even moreso in the developing world.¹⁴ In the year of the third consecutive Conservative victory, Snow’s thesis tapped into the Zeitgeist, once again scapegoating the humanities for British failures in economic growth, and indeed for the failure of the Left to take Britain and the world into a new era of prosperity and social justice.¹⁵

At the peak of the popularity of Snow’s ‘two cultures’ thesis, in early 1964, the then-Marxist intellectual Perry Anderson published his own polemic, a powerful indictment of British culture in New Left Review under the title ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’. Citing the ‘declinist’ literature, though not explicitly Snow, as his take-off point, Anderson advanced theses on British decline that similarly focused attention on the blighting effect of the humanities. As a Marxist of structuralist bent, Anderson devoted most of his energies to identifying the underpinning historical flaws that had led to this sorry state – Britain’s incomplete bourgeois revolution, its improperly rampant aristocracy, its unfortunately subordinated working class – but among the key contemporary manifestations of these structural defects were ‘[t]he peculiar salience of Oxbridge’ (‘in contrast with the normal situation on the Continent’) and the ‘still largely aristocratic framework’ of the culture, in which ‘science and technique went by the board’ and ruling-class manners remained

¹⁴ C.P. Snow, The Two Cultures, intro. Stefan Collini (Cambridge, 1993).

¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

dominant.¹⁶ In a follow-up essay a few years later, Anderson specified more precisely what was wrong intellectually with the aristocratic framework – ‘the reactionary culture inculcated in universities and college’ stemmed from a British disease of empiricism and anti-intellectualism which prevented the normal, healthy development of a science of society (such as both ‘classical sociology’ and Marxism provided). The result was, indeed, the two cultures – on the one hand, the natural sciences, which tell us nothing at all about society, and on the other, the arts, which ‘treat of humanity in society, but do not provide us with their concepts’. Thus Anderson’s antidote was not, like Snow’s, less humanities and more sciences, but rather less sciences and humanities and more social science. Anderson had some sympathy for English and History as subjects, but he thought them desperately impoverished by British empiricism (and its obverse, romanticism), and thus just as Snow did saw their current practice in Britain as obstacles to progress that needed to be swept aside.¹⁷

The alleged dominance of the humanities in British universities and its malign effects on progress and social justice were not only talking points for liberal and leftist intellectuals in these years; they also became the stuff of public policy. In February 1961 the Conservative government commissioned a major enquiry into the state and prospects of higher education, chaired by the LSE economist Lionel Robbins. The resulting report, which appeared in October 1963, is routinely hailed as a landmark of British higher education policy; the period of postwar expansion is normally referred to as ‘the Robbins era’, although as we have seen expansion was already well underway in the 1950s, and the new basis on which the continuing expansion of higher education was justified is termed the ‘Robbins principles’. The principles themselves appeared rather bland. The UGC thought that the Robbins remit was to move universities from the demand-led system they had been operating to a longer-term responsiveness to ‘national needs’. Yet Robbins’ main principle for

¹⁶ Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’ (1964), in *English Questions* (London, 1992), 41, 45.

¹⁷ Perry Anderson, ‘Components of the National Culture (1968), in *English Questions*, 48, 50, 53-6, 57-8, 73-7, 96-103.

expansion was the demand-led principle that higher education should be ‘available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so’. The bulk of the report was devoted to consideration of how the organization and funding of universities could be managed so as to accommodate the larger proportion of the population that it was expected would ‘wish to do so’. Provision for ‘skills demanding special training’, ‘sometimes ignored or undervalued’, was given due but not inordinate weight; other, more traditional justifications for higher education, ‘the advancement of learning’, ‘the transmission of a common culture’, were restated; economic growth was validated but so was the production of ‘cultivated men and women’. ‘None of this implies a reduction...in the proportion of students taking arts subjects,’ insisted Robbins. ‘This we should view with concern...any decline or weakening in the study of the humanities would impoverish the intellectual and spiritual life of the country.’ But most of all, partly for humanistic reasons and partly driven by Lord Robbins’ own preference for market choices, it would remain students and their parents who would choose the direction of travel. Whatever they chose, the economy would not suffer. ‘The majority of graduates will, we hope, be sufficiently versatile to be capable of varied employment.’¹⁸

Especially on the Left, critics complained that Robbins had set his sights too low. Expansion was contemplated, but only up to the meagre levels of age-cohort participation that France had achieved. Although Robbins had called for less specialization at university level, the old straitjacket of the intensively-taught single honours degree in a residential university seemed to remain intact. New universities were planned but they looked like old universities. Fortunately for these critics, after its three successive defeats the Labour party won the General Election of 1964 and politicians who had been stoking the fires of ‘declinism’ and its indictment of the university system for years came to power. The new

¹⁸ Robbins Report, 6-8, 163-5, 170; UGC, University Development, 1957-62, 2.

Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, promised to bring the ‘white heat’ of the technological revolution to bear on Britain’s ills. C.P. Snow was elevated to the House of Lords and given a prominent position in a new Ministry of Technology. A crusading education reformer, Anthony Crosland, was made Secretary of State for Education and Science – the conjunction of the two portfolios was itself novel and telling. Crosland tried to divert the Robbins expansion in ways that specifically favoured science. He promoted the existing Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) to university status, thus at a stroke substantially shifting the UGC’s portfolio. He grouped together a diverse array of smaller, local-government run colleges into university-type institutions, called polytechnics, and placed them under their own degree-granting authority, the Council for National Academic Awards, so that they could expand and experiment outside the UGC straitjacket. The UGC got the message, publicly regretted that Robbins had not more overtly challenged the demand-led model, and now embraced the mission to plan expansion to meet ‘national manpower needs’ that had been assigned to it by the new government.¹⁹ By the late 1960s it looked like the ‘declinist’ recipe for sweeping away the dominance of the humanities and substituting a modern, progressive system more oriented to science and technology was finally being adopted.

In these circumstances, no wonder some commentators spoke of a ‘crisis in the humanities’. In a book under that title, edited by the Cambridge historian J.H. Plumb and published in 1964, Plumb announced that whereas in the old world higher education for the elite had comprised History, Classics, Literature and Divinity (admittedly ‘with Mathematics’), in the modern world, with ‘the rising tide of scientific and industrial societies, combined with the battering of two World Wars’, the humanities had to ‘either change the image that they present, adapt themselves to the needs of a society dominated by science and technology, or retreat into social triviality’. Disciplines like History and

¹⁹ UGC, University Development 1962-1967, Cmnd. 3820 (1968-9), 50, 61-2, 92-3, 94, but cf. 95-6, 98 on difficulties encountered in estimating and meeting ‘national needs’.

Philosophy had to adapt themselves to ‘industrial-scientific societies’, as one of the contributors, Ernest Gellner, wrote, or die. This manifesto was not quite what it seemed – not so much a cri de coeur from the heart of the humanities as a Trojan Horse, well stocked by close friends of Snow’s in humanistic disciplines, and its message was, essentially, ‘you can’t beat them, so join them’.²⁰ Yet in the event the seeming triumph of ‘declinism’ in the 1960s did not spell a crisis for the humanities, any more than the similar though more muted assumption in the 1950s that expansion would benefit science had done.

III

Why did science not in fact triumph over the humanities in the 1960s? There is of course a ‘declinist’ explanation for that too – the continuing hegemony of the old order, as evident in Robbins’s faintheartedness. As we will see, this argument would remain part of the conversation in each decade until the end of the 20th century. With each repetition, however, the argument looked thinner. It is worth making at least an attempt to consider other arguments.

First, it should be noted that not everyone at the time shared Snow’s and Anderson’s twin diagnoses of the defects of British culture. Famously, both Snow and Anderson met with powerful counter-arguments from within the Left.²¹ Snow’s most celebrated antagonist, the Cambridge literary critic F.R. Leavis, was not really a man of the Left himself, but many of his school were – Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, for example, owed a great deal to the Leavisite tradition – and together they mounted a powerful defence of literary criticism as a crucial tool for understanding and democratizing the modern world. Anderson’s most celebrated antagonist, E.P. Thompson, was decidedly a man of the Left, and in his 1965 riposte, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, he provided an alternative narrative of Britain’s

²⁰ J.H. Plumb (ed.), Crisis in the Humanities (Harmondsworth, 1964), 7-8, 34-44, 63, 80.

²¹ For the former, see Guy Ortolano, The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain (Cambridge, 2009); for the latter, among many treatments, Dennis Dworkin, Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain (Durham NC, 1997).

historical development which both vindicated the healthiness of its intellectual culture and itself instantiated the productive uses of History as a discipline for dealing with ‘the present crisis’. Pointing out the affinities between Anderson’s anti-capitalist and many of the declinists’ pro-capitalist whinges about British inadequacy, Thompson triumphantly reaffirmed ‘certain strengths and humane traditions in British life which Other Countries, including those whose airports are superb, whose Marxism is mature, and whose salesmanship is high-powered, do not always display’.²² Both Leavis’s rebuttal to Snow and Thompson’s to Anderson, therefore, demonstrated that even in the early 1960s the anti-humanist critique did not have things entirely its own way.

But second, notoriously, the fond expectations that modernizers of the early 1960s had for the triumph of science and technology were not realized in the actual development of British intellectual life in general or universities in particular. The rise of the New Left and the radicalization of the universities, as Guy Ortolano has recently demonstrated, very soon after 1964 put the Snow-Leavis controversy in the shade.²³ Instead of the white heat of the technological revolution, British universities embraced successive waves of French philosophy, post-structuralist literary criticism, and above all politics. In what remained essentially a demand-led system, the new demand was not for science and technology, but for certain elements in the humanities and, especially, ‘social studies’. The UGC made some feeble attempts to interpret ‘social studies’ as a ‘bridge’ between the sciences and the humanities, but in fact they were much more humanistic than scientific in orientation – they included law and business studies and new disciplines such as cultural and media studies which owed more to literary criticism and history than to social sciences. Even the ‘hard’ social sciences in Britain, economics excepted, preferred non-quantitative methods. When the statisticians counted up the subject choices of students, they lumped social studies in with

²² E.P. Thompson, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978), 266.

²³ Ortolano, *Two Cultures Controversy*, ch. 7.

the arts, not with the sciences, and the arts-science divide remained pretty much as it always had been, 46% arts vs. 54% science in 1967, with social studies now accounting for nearly half of the arts' share. As the boom in social studies continued, the balance began to shift against the sciences, such that by 1975 the balance was now pretty nearly 50-50 arts and sciences.²⁴

The failure of government policy to shift the balance in favour of the sciences cannot, of course, be laid wholly or even largely to the waves of radical politics sweeping through the universities, which only ever affected a minority, though they also established a mood. The diversification of the graduate labour market away from teaching accelerated in the 1960s and '70s, especially latterly when de-industrialization began to bite, and neither the new employers of graduate labour – local and central government, the professions, commerce – nor even industry, which was increasingly looking for management rather than scientific and technical skills, was in particular need of science and technology graduates. Insofar as subject choice had implications for career choice, 'social studies' was significant not only because it seemed exciting and 'relevant' but also because it seemed good preparation for careers in local government, social work, commerce and management.²⁵ The Dainton Report in February 1968 publicised a worrying swing away from science in the subject choices of Sixth Formers, that had begun in the early 1960s but showed no signs of abating, to the benefit not only of social studies but also music, drama and the visual arts.²⁶

In certain circles the 'Dainton swing' was read to suggest that Britain was sinking ever deeper into the declinist mire. But the UGC showed remarkable good sense. It noted, 'This swing away from specialist science subjects in the sixth form, coupled with a growth in sixth form preferences for courses bridging the arts and science groups of subjects, was a

²⁴ See Fig. 1 and n.49 below.

²⁵ Robbins Report, Appendix II (B): Students and Their Education, 154; W.A.C. Stewart, Higher Education in Postwar Britain (Basingstoke, 1989), 203.

²⁶ Council for Scientific Policy, Enquiry into the Flow of Candidates in Science and Technology into Higher Education, Cmnd. 3541 (1967-8), 8, 30-1 [hereafter, Dainton Report].

feature of the position not only in Britain but in a number of other countries including Germany and the Netherlands'.²⁷ Recent research had cast doubt on the correlation between science education and economic growth. An OECD report showed that Britain, far from being a laggard in science education, had 'the greatest concentration on science and technology in higher education and the biggest proportion of qualified scientists and technologists (graduates, diplomates and certificate holders) in relation to population and labour force' of all the advanced economies, including the U.S., Germany and Japan; in fact there had been a 'Dainton swing' in most countries, rather more adverse to science and technology than in Britain.²⁸ Furthermore, by 1974 the UGC had finally noticed that arts graduates were not notably disadvantaged in the labour market and that employers were on the whole happy with the 'general powers of the mind' that Robbins had attributed to any university education, especially as in the 1970s services and professions were taking precedence over industry.²⁹ The OECD had pointed out that other countries, too, were moving towards the British model of only a loose relationship between the course of education and the nature of employment.³⁰ What the UGC did not pick up as quickly as did the OECD was that the proportion of women in the higher education system, formerly about a quarter, was now rising steadily towards 40%, and their much greater participation rates in

²⁷ UGC, University Development 1962-1967, 101. This was based on the research of Celia Phillips at the LSE which had been available to both Dainton and the UGC before its publication in 1969: Changes in Subject Choice at School and University (London, 1969).

²⁸ UGC, University Development 1967-1972, Cmnd. 5728 (1974), 25. This was based on OECD, Development of Higher Education 1950-1967 (Paris, 1971), 125-6, 129-33, 227. The same report showed that Britain had a relatively low proportion of its students in higher education in the humanities. Ibid., 134. In fact, Robbins had shown some awareness of these international comparisons even before the Dainton swing had really got under way: Robbins Report, Appendix V: Higher Education in Other Countries, 11; the UGC was keenly aware of them by the late 1960s: National Archives, Kew, UGC 7/1245.

²⁹ UGC, University Development 1967-1972, 25-8; Schwarz, 'Professions, Elites and Universities', 961-2; and see further Kenneth Gannicott and Mark Blaug, 'Scientists and Engineers in Britain' (1973), in Carolyn Baxter, P.J. O'Leary and Adam Westoby (eds.), Economics and Education Policy: A Reader (London, 1977), 128-46, and Laurence C. Hunter, 'Employers' Perceptions of Demand', in Robert Lindley (ed.), Higher Education and the Labour Market (Guildford, 1981), esp. 15, 20-2, 38-9.

³⁰ OECD, Towards New Structures of Post-Secondary Education (Paris, 1971), 11. An even stronger statement from OECD circles was made somewhat later, suggesting that the UK had trained too many highly-specialized scientists and technologists in the 1960s: Eric Esnault and Jean Le Pas, 'New Relations Between Post-Secondary Education and Employment', in Towards Mass Higher Education: Issues and Dilemmas (Paris, 1974), 133-4, 140, 145.

both the higher education system and the graduate-labour market were swinging demand factors even more firmly against science.³¹ Not even Dainton and certainly not the UGC wished to challenge a demand-led system which seemed to meet the needs of both democracy and the market.³² In this context, critique of the existing system began to focus less on the alleged dominance of the humanities and more on other attributes of the system, including early specialization and high cost, which were held to be constraining the universities' utility to the labour market.³³

The higher education landscape of the 1970s – 'post-Robbins' – was therefore more variegated, less scientific, though still not as extensive as many had hoped. Not only had Britain failed to catch up with France in terms of the relative size of the student population, but growth in the British system stagnated through much of the 1970s and the gap in comparison with the French and other obvious comparators actually widened. The straitjacket seemed not to have loosened much: British higher education was expensive, heavily subsidised, relatively elite. It provided correspondingly high levels of quality and high levels of success – the staff-student ratio in 1971-2 remained roughly where it had been in 1956-7 at 1:8, and while its age-participation rates were amongst the lowest in Europe its graduation rates were amongst the highest.

It was also a system in which the humanities thrived, certainly more than had been expected in the 1960s. Nine new universities had been created in the 1960s, nine CATs had been promoted to university status, and no fewer than 30 polytechnics were created between

³¹ Stewart, Higher Education, 278. Gender was cited as a factor in the OECD report, as was class, as the humanities were seen across Europe as more socially accessible than the high-prestige professional subjects such as medicine or law or, indeed, engineering. Development of Higher Education, 130, 134-5, 138, 149, 227. The OECD tended to be more sensitive to the long-term impact of gender because the shift towards greater female participation came late in the UK.

³² Dainton Report, 84-5. Cf. Michael Shattock, The UGC and the Management of British Universities (Buckingham, 1994), 11, which considers the UGC's acceptance of these trends to be complacent, and John Carswell, Government and the Universities in Britain: Programme and Performance 1960-1980 (Cambridge, 1985), 65-6, which argues that to have attempted otherwise would have been 'impracticable, and perhaps conceptually unsound'.

³³ e.g. Dainton Report, 85-6; Williams and Blackstone, Response to Adversity, 4-6.

1959 and 1973. As we have seen, the place of the humanities in the old universities remained secure, fortified by the social sciences. ‘Declinist’ critics scorned the new universities for apeing Oxbridge – sticking to single honours, organizing themselves into residential colleges, snobbily preferring rural or cathedral-city sites; Warwick University was teased mercilessly for choosing the name of the county town rather than Coventry. The new universities also followed older universities – but of course also student demand – in registering the ‘Dainton swing’ against science. Even the CATs, who in their testimony to Robbins had predicted for themselves a subject split of 65% technology/15% science/10% social science/10% arts, found themselves in the 1970s with an actual subject split of 43% technology/25% science/20% social science/13% arts.³⁴

The outcome in the polytechnics, where most of the Robbins-era growth had taken place, was even more surprising, and misunderstood. The polytechnics were popularly seen to represent the ‘white heat’ of the technological revolution and the very word ‘polytechnic’ – which simply means ‘many arts’ – was taken to imply ‘mechanical’ or ‘artisan’ skills, an implication reinforced by the polytechnics’ avowed vocational orientation, at a time when ‘jobs’ and ‘technology’ were widely but mistakenly seen as synonymous. The committee of polytechnic directors wrote a broadside in 1974, Many Arts, Many Skills, to correct this misunderstanding, though few pundits listened.³⁵ Of course some polytechnics did try to connect to local industry, much as the ‘civics’ of the prewar period had done; thus Lanchester Polytechnic, which really was sited in Coventry (and took its name in 1987), continued the work of a local technology college with longstanding ties to the local aircraft industry. But Lanchester like many polytechnics was created by amalgamating diverse institutions, and its other main component, as with many polytechnics, was a college of art. Polytechnics were famous in the 1970s as hotbeds of student radicalism, not because aircraft-

³⁴ Sanderson, ‘Higher Education in the Post-War Years’, 424.

³⁵ Committee of Directors of Polytechnics, Many Arts, Many Skills: The Polytechnic Policy, and Requirements for its Fulfilment (London: CDP, Nov. 1974).

design students were likely to be Trotskyists but because art students were. The subject split in the polytechnic sector at the end of the 1970s was by one estimate 34% technology/14% science/30% social science/22% arts – only mildly more scientific than the oldest universities, ‘as might have been expected by any reader of the Dainton Report’, in the words of one of the leading civil servants. Even this probably underestimates the presence of the humanities, as the polytechnics’ vocational studies were notoriously hard to categorize; the polytechnic directors and other commentators put technology and science together at only around 35%, and an array of social, commercial, administrative, professional and educational courses together comprised 50%.³⁶ One of the strongest growth areas in the polytechnic sector was modern languages, seen at the time as a highly vocational subject and consonant with a forward-looking nation about to join the European Community; the polytechnics’ contribution to language studies, often as part of area, media or cultural studies, kept the subject buoyant until the early 1990s.³⁷ Thus the idea that polytechnics’ shift away from the sciences in this period was due to ‘academic drift’, as they sought to ape the universities, is doubly wrong: all parts of the higher-education sector were responding to a shift in student demand, and the polytechnics were responding to the very distinctive demands of their own constituency.³⁸

IV

³⁶ Carswell, Government and the Universities, 139; CDP, Many Arts, Many Skills, 9; Stewart, Higher Education, 202-5; Halsey, Decline of Donnish Dominion, 112-13, 118-19. Science and technology garnered an even smaller share of all ‘advanced courses’ in public-sector institutions – about 30% - while social studies accounted for another 30%: DES, Statistics of Further Education (1980), Historical Data for 1970-1980, Table F17(1).

³⁷ James A. Coleman, ‘Modern Languages in British Universities’, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education 3 (2004), 149-52.

³⁸ For accusations of academic drift, see, e.g. Tyrrell Burgess, ‘Autonomous and Service Traditions’, in Leslie Wagner (ed.), Agenda for Institutional Change in Higher Education (Guildford, 1982), 73; Stewart, Higher Education, 140-1; Sanderson, ‘Higher Education in the Post-War Years’, 425; Robert Anderson, British Universities Past and Present (London, 2006), 158-9; and cf. the very conflicted views of Peter Scott, ‘Has the Binary Policy Failed?’, in Michael Shattock (ed.), The Structure and Governance of Higher Education (Guildford, 1983), 172-4, 182.

Although the humanities flourished in the 1970s – especially compared to expectations to the contrary that had been cultivated by ‘declinism’ – the universities did not, any more than the rest of the public sector did in that economically troubled decade. It was not only the straitjacket of ‘quality’ that restricted the growth of higher education in these years, it was also severe pressure on the public finances and, perhaps most of all, a crisis of confidence in higher education more generally. Declining public confidence in higher education was evident in a sudden levelling-off of take-up first of A-Levels and then of higher-education places, such that the Robbins targets for the 1970s were not met, to general bewilderment. Student numbers stagnated, budgets were cut, and the universities looked ahead apprehensively to a ‘baby bust’, the downside to demographically-fuelled growth in the 1960s. But worse was to come. Within the Conservative party, resentment at the universities had long been building. Their twin roles in left-wing activism and the welfare state had branded them as a nuisance, and an expensive nuisance. Furthermore ‘declinism’ had now shifted from left to right. The failure of the universities to reorient to industry was one among many explanations that leading Conservative intellectuals cited to explain Britain’s rocky economic performance in the 1970s. But when the Conservatives came to power in 1979, it became clear that the political consequences of right-wing declinism for universities would be very different from the consequences of left-wing declinism. Thatcher was no friend of planning. She did not believe that the UGC should or could be tweaked to turn it to her desired ends. Nor, despite her own university degree in chemistry (from Oxford), did she see universities as crucial to her strategies for economic growth. Their political activism and dogged persistence in the humanities made them seem enemies rather than engines of growth. In any case her strongest supporters were small business people without contact with or interest in higher education. Their and her preferred instrument was the free market. That meant breaking up State monopolies and vested interests, cutting back

on State subsidies and investments – and the universities were to suffer as surely from this strategy as other nationalized industries.³⁹

From 1981 a five year ‘run-down period’ was announced in which the UGC was required to take a 13% real-terms cut. Despite abjuring planning, the Thatcher government could not resist asking for a readjustment of the arts-sciences balance towards the sciences to result from the run-down.⁴⁰ Whereas the UGC had bustled around the country in the 1960s setting up new departments – notably Asian, African, Latin-American, Slavonic and East European studies – in the 1980s it found itself tasked more sadly with consolidating and winding up departments that were surplus to requirements. In a series of ‘subject reviews’, while Asian and African studies won continued investment, Hispanic studies, Philosophy and Classics lost out – but then so did a host of small science subjects such as Earth Sciences and Mining Engineering. In fact it proved easier to shrink science staff, because they could turn more readily to the private-sector job market.⁴¹ And Thatcher’s market orientation actually encouraged the retention of the demand-led model that had always remained at the heart of higher education funding. A 1987 review of the UGC led by Lord Croham proclaimed, ‘the pursuit of a general plan for higher education output is a chimera’. Croham pointed to a new model where the UGC would abjure subject-specific planning and simply disburse block grants to institutions, on the basis of ‘selectivity’ exercises which would apply efficiency and market tests to institutions. This model was duly adopted in 1989 when the UGC was replaced by a new set of higher-education funding councils.⁴² Overall the humanities

³⁹ This is a completely inadequate account of a very complicated situation; for an extended attempt at explaining the slump in higher education in the 1970s and ‘80s, see ‘Educating the Nation II: Universities’, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, forthcoming 2015.

⁴⁰ In Whitehall, both the Unit for Manpower Studies and (more predictably) the DES were very hostile to a return to ‘manpower planning’, while the Central Policy Review Staff were keenest; see M. Elliott to C.H.K. Williams, 4 Nov. 1982: TNA, CAB 184/712.

⁴¹ House of Commons, Education, Science and Arts Committee, ‘Higher education funding. Minutes of evidence together with appendices Monday 28 March 1983’, HC 293 (1982-83), 1-2, 27, 34, 35, 38.

⁴² Review of the University Grants Committee. Report of a committee under the chairmanship of Lord Croham, GCB, Cmnd. 81 (1986-87), 18, 24-5, 30, 43-5; and see Robert Lindley, ‘Education, Training, and the Labour Market in Britain’, European Journal of Education 16 (1981), 7-27.

survived the ‘run-down’ surprisingly well in terms of market share, though the budget cuts and efficiency measures induced demoralization and threatened quality.⁴³

It is hard to predict how the humanities would have fared in a continued run-down, although the weight given to student demand and the buoyant demand for the humanities did not necessarily spell disaster. In fact, student demand remained buoyant – and indeed took off – in the extraordinary about-face that the Thatcher government executed in the late 1980s, from run-down to pell-mell expansion. It is still unclear what motivated this turn. Thatcher may have felt that her market reforms had done their work in taming the universities. Some weight is given to the advent of the more emollient Kenneth Baker to the Education Department. But it seems that just as in the early 1970s international comparisons cast doubt on the declinist critique of the universities, so in the late 1980s there was a growing awareness that international comparisons were showing Britain lagging behind its competitors in access to higher education.⁴⁴ As economic growth recovered in the 1980s, there was a renewed concern that the UGC straitjacket might indeed be constraining it.⁴⁵ Thatcher’s core middle-class constituency was showing more appetite for getting a university education for its own children, and educators were showing more appetite for taking them on than the UGC straitjacket allowed. Advocates for expansion cleverly played on Thatcher’s consumerism – if there was obvious student demand, and it could be catered for efficiently and along lines at least mimicking a free market, why should the State stand in the way?⁴⁶

Thus the government that had just presided over a run-down now ushered in the era of mass higher education. A sustained period of growth in the student population from the late 1980s through the 2000s meant that by this measure the UK not only achieved the long-

⁴³ Stevenson, ‘End of History?’, 70.

⁴⁴ Sanderson, ‘Higher Education in the Post-War Years’, 427; Stevenson, ‘End of History?’, 76; Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, 5.

⁴⁵ This is the dominant rhetoric of the White Paper that first signalled the U-turn, *Higher Education. Meeting the Challenge*, Cmnd. 114 (1986-87), 3-5, 7.

⁴⁶ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, 98-9, 105-9.

desired target of matching France but it also overtook Japan and Germany (which admittedly had profound problems of their own in this period) and had begun to chase after Denmark and Sweden. Participation levels amongst 18 and 19 year olds, long stuck beneath 15%, surged to 35% by 2001, by which point a New Labour government had set a target of 50% participation (though one now craftily measured by new indices putting Britain at or above 40% already).⁴⁷

These levels were achieved essentially within the more commercialized, demand-led system constructed by the Thatcher government during the run-down period. In 1992 the ‘binary divide’ between polytechnics and universities was erased; the polytechnics were rebadged as universities and both groups were put under a single funding regime. Both ‘pre-1992’ and ‘post-1992’ universities were encouraged to compete for much larger allocations of funded undergraduate places, based on their ability to attract applicants and to teach them more cheaply. The ‘unit of resource’ – public funds allocated to each individual student – fell by about one third in real terms until 1996, although after an initial period of further run-down the total public expenditure levels on higher education began to mount significantly from the early 1990s. The ‘unit of resource’ was already levelling off before the election of the New Labour government in 1997, after which it stabilized, and after New Labour introduced a student contribution (in the form of a tuition fee) in 1998 the ‘unit of resource’ from public funds and tuition fee combined had climbed back to early 1990s levels by 2009. With an entirely new fee regime, transferring most public expenditure for university teaching to publicly-guaranteed student loans, the unit of resource is meant to climb further still, although now mostly deriving from the students rather than from government.⁴⁸

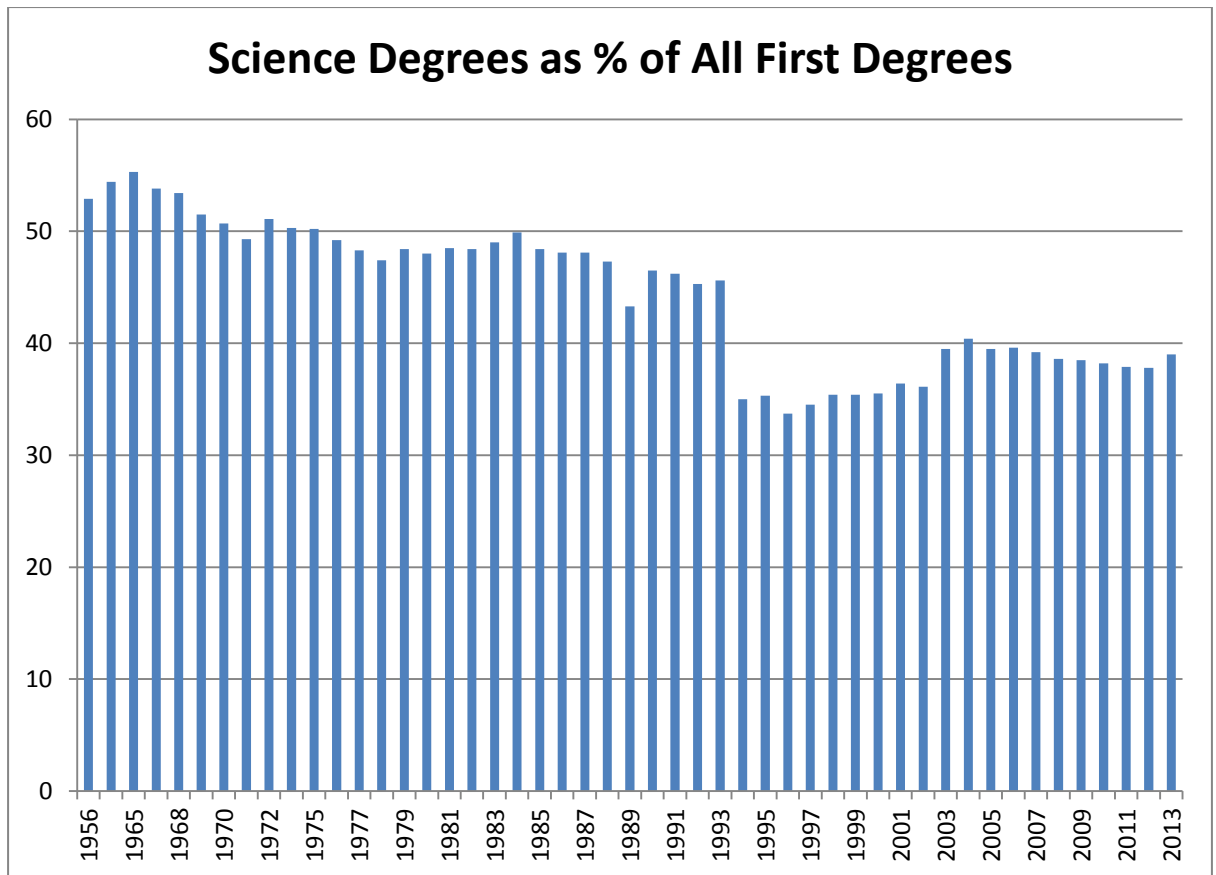
⁴⁷ Until 2000 government used API (Age Participation Index), after which API was replaced by HEIPR (Higher Education Initial Participation Rate); data for 2000-2013 from ‘Participation in Higher Education’, Commons Library Standard Note SN02630, Sep. 2014: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN02630/participation-in-higher-education-social-indicators-page> [accessed 16 Dec. 2014].

⁴⁸ Data supplied by Mario Ferelli of HEFCE Analytical Services, Dec. 2010. Data for 1989-1998 from Department for Education report, *The Effects of Public Funding on Higher Education Institutions*, July 1996,

The effects of this revolution in higher education are still being registered. Opinion currently differs wildly as to whether it represents the salvation of British universities, finally bringing them within reach of the majority of the population, or their downfall, the erasure of the binary divide and subsequent expansion having ended the golden age of academic quality, or – possibly the majority view, more acquiescent than analytical – simply a grimly realistic adjustment to a neo-liberal age of rising individual expectations and falling public expenditures. For present purposes, we have to ask only what were the implications for the balance between the arts and the sciences. Given the long-term trends in a demand-led system already indicated, it will hardly be surprising to learn that the swing away from science has continued. Whereas the proportion of science degrees had declined gently since an early ‘60s peak, to just under 50% in the 1980s, this proportion dropped more rapidly once expansion began, to 45% in 1992, and dipped under 40% by 2003, where it remained in 2013 (Fig. 1).⁴⁹

and DfEE update 3 April 1998; data from 1998 onwards from Department for Education grant letters to HEFCE.

⁴⁹ Data in Fig. 1 from UGC reports (to 1967), DES, *Education Statistics of the United Kingdom* (1967-1978), DES, *Statistics of Education*, vol. 6: *Universities* (1979), *Universities’ Statistical Record*, *University Statistics*, vol. 1: *Students and Staff* (1980-1992), HESA, *Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom* (1993-1997), HESA online statistics, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1973/239/> [accessed 16 Dec. 2014] (from 1998). Values for 1994-2002 are artificially depressed, as the amalgamation of the polytechnics introduced too many uncategorizable ‘combined’ degrees, but by 2003 the statisticians had managed to redistribute most of these to the pre-existing categories. ‘Science’ includes medicine and allied subjects but excludes architecture and allied subjects.



However, the decline in the share of the sciences does not mean a rise in the share of the humanities, or even in the share of the ‘arts’, unless construed simply as anything but science. Just as the Robbins-era expansion witnessed a broadening of the portfolio of courses on offer – in that phase, a broadening primarily benefiting ‘social studies’, which could be construed broadly as the ‘arts’ – the post-1992 expansion (which was quantitatively much larger) saw a greater qualitative change in the nature of courses on offer. In this later phase it becomes harder to say who benefits, not least because it is harder to categorize courses. Only some broad generalizations are possible.

‘Social studies’ has fallen well past its peak; in 1967 these subjects accounted for nearly 20% of all students, and in 2013 only 10%. The growth areas in the non-science subjects have been law and business, now accounting for nearly 20% (although many of these students would previously have been counted under ‘social studies’). The share of the humanities has however held up well. The traditional humanities subjects – history,

philosophy, languages and literatures – have been joined inside universities by new humanistic subjects – principally art and design, which continue to grow strongly – and by education and communications students for whom the humanities form a substantial part of their education. Depending on how you divide those education and communications students, about a quarter of all university students are today studying broadly humanistic subjects, a very similar proportion to that registered in 1967.⁵⁰ Even if we confine ourselves to the traditional humanities subjects – history, philosophy, languages and literature – we will find them holding steady today at just under 10% of the total. Is that a lot or a little? It's no less than the share these same subjects can claim in the U.S., just under 8%.⁵¹ More pertinently, as a result of the rapid expansion in the university sector as a whole, the proportion of the population holding humanities degrees has of course expanded enormously. Whereas 10,000 students in total were studying History in single or joint honours courses in the early 1980s, History degrees are awarded to 10,000 students a year today – a trebling of the number of History graduates that more or less parallels the trebling of the number of graduates in all subjects.⁵²

What do these figures tell us about the fortunes of the humanities in the period for expansion and what do they bode for the future? We must first acknowledge that there remains a declinist explanation – the national fatality for ‘gentlemanly’ subjects is still occasionally deplored, particularly in the context of the erasure of the binary divide, when the

⁵⁰ UGC figures for 1967; HESA figures for 2013.

⁵¹ U.S. figures based on research by Ben Schmidt, ‘Some long term perspective on the “crisis” in humanities enrollment’, <http://sappingattention.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/some-long-term-perspective-on-crisis-in.html#more>, accessed 30 Sep. 2014. As Schmidt shows, enrolments in traditional humanities subjects have held a level share of the total for the past 30 years. There had been a humanities boom in the 1960s, particularly among women, which then fell off sharply in the 1970s, but leaving the humanities not much worse off than they had been in the 1950s, and stable since the 1980s. Schmidt does not supply information on the social sciences, but a good guess would be that the U.S. humanities boom was equivalent to (and driven by some of the same motivations as) the U.K. social studies boom.

⁵² These statistics derive from a query to HEIDI (the Higher Education Information Database for Institutions), based on JACS Principal Subjects V1, V2 and V3 (History by period, area and topic). A consistent series can only be derived for 2002–10, as a different subject classification system prevailed previously. Thanks to Margot Finn and Natalie Snodgrass of the University of Warwick for making these HEIDI queries on my behalf and for explaining them to me.

polytechnics are seen to have lost their vocation and to have been sucked (just as the ‘civics’ were generations before) into the Oxbridge vortex of single-honours degrees in impractical subjects. As I’ve tried to show, this elegy is based on a misunderstanding of what the polytechnics were about in the first place, but it probably also represents a misunderstanding of what has been driving student choice in the post-1992 expansion era.

First, the much-maligned single-honours degree continues to be recognized as providing the kind of intense intellectual training (regardless of subject) that parents and students value in its own right and British employers have accepted as a general mark of quality. As two of the fiercest critics of the single-honours degree have allowed,

it is centred on the idea of an academic discipline: a coherent body of knowledge or range of subject matter that ‘holds together’ in proven ways as well as providing recognized methods of analysis. If successful, it trains the student in a particular way of thinking and provides him or her with an epistemology that has been legitimated by the wider intellectual community. It discourages superficiality and produces graduates with considerable knowledge and depth of understanding in their chosen fields.⁵³

Many polytechnics sought to offer complex American-style course menus to new entrants during the post-1992 expansion, but they found applicants gravitating to the single-honours options, whether for reasons of familiarity or simplicity or indeed its acknowledged intellectual virtues. Employers, encouraged by policymakers, continued to talk loudly about ‘transferable skills’ but equally continued to solicit graduate applicants generically rather than graduates in particular subjects. In this context, a single-honours humanities degree looked as promising an option as any other subject.⁵⁴

Second, as its stable market share suggests, a humanities degree continued to appeal to prospective students and employers alike, even as the size and nature of the student cohort extended well beyond its traditional elite redoubts. This fact has been obscured somewhat by the ebb-and-flow of humanities students between the pre-1992 and the post-1992 sectors.

⁵³ Williams and Blackstone, *Response to Adversity*, 42-3.

⁵⁴ Peter J. Beck, ‘History, the Curriculum and Graduate Employment’, in Alan Booth and Paul Hyland (eds.), *History in Higher Education: New Directions in Teaching and Learning* (Oxford, 1996), 244-8.

The post-1992 universities immediately saw the continuing appeal of traditional humanities subjects such as English and History. Initially they tried aggressively to compete with the pre-1992 universities by offering single as well as combined-honours programmes in these subjects, especially amongst the social groups entering higher education for the first time, who often bore school-leaving exam results below the levels that the pre-1992 universities had habitually accepted. However, over time, as the pre-1992 universities were also looking to expand, and as continuously improving exam performance put larger proportions of applicants within their catchment area, it was in fact the pre-1992 universities who soaked up much of the surging demand for arts degrees, including in the traditional humanities subjects. The post-1992 universities' expansion therefore drew more largely on the more vocational courses with which they were popularly associated, not in technology but in business, communications and creative arts. Again the continuing rise in the proportion of women in higher education, now at 57%, reflecting their greater participation in the labour market, surely had a great effect on the mix of subject choices in both pre- and post-1992 sectors.⁵⁵

Since 1998 with the introduction of student-paid tuition fees, and most especially from 2012 with the trebling of student-paid tuition fees, students are being ever more strenuously encouraged to think vocationally about their subject choice. Given the incessant drumbeat of advice to students from parents, policymakers and often from pundits purporting to speak for employers, to get them to think 'practically', the continuing vitality of the supposedly unpractical humanities subjects remains impressive, including amongst non-elite entrants. In the tuition-fee era, since 1998, the absolute numbers of humanities degrees continued to increase and, as we have seen, their relative share remained stable, even slightly improved, as compared to the sciences.

⁵⁵ Apart from subjects allied to medicine (e.g. nursing, pharmacy), most of the growth areas since the 1980s where women are heavily represented lie in non-scientific subjects, especially education, creative arts and law (but not business).

In the two years of the high-tuition fee era so far, there are not as yet any signs of a major redistribution of students numbers between subjects. This may reflect the continuing credibility of the traditional argument that employers do not seek graduates in particular fields and that a humanities degree is as good if not better preparation for the world of work – or for life in general – as any.⁵⁶ But today the balance is finely poised. Both government and even the universities themselves seem determined – once again – to talk up the sciences, not now so much in the name of ‘national needs’ as in the more individualistic cause of ‘employability’.⁵⁷ Having seen off the ‘declinist’ threat, the humanities are now faced with a more formidable adversary in the form of narrowly vocational understandings of what a university education is for.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ David Nicholls, The Employment of History Graduates: A Report to the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology (2005), 3-7.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Universities UK, Trends in Undergraduate Recruitment (August 2014), 28-32.

⁵⁸ For recent treatments of this theme, see Jonathan Bate (ed.), The Public Value of the Humanities (London, 2011), and Stefan Collini, What Are Universities For? (London, 2012).