

The state of Humanities in post-apartheid South Africa – A quantitative story

V. Pillay

Department of education management and policy studies
Faculty of Education
University of Pretoria
South Africa
e-mail: vpillay@up.ac.za

K. Yu

Independent researcher
e-mail: shellbox@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article depicts the state of Humanities in post-apartheid South Africa by examining HEMIS enrolment and graduation data from 1999 to 2007. It demonstrates that although the decline in student enrolment and graduation in Humanities has not been severe; read in the context of substantial growth of all other disciplines, Humanities is in a crisis. The crisis is also more notable at undergraduate level. An interdisciplinary analysis of four traditional Humanities disciplines demonstrates that history, languages, linguistics and literature are the hardest hit. On the other hand, there is an evident increase in Arts (visual and performing) a discipline often associated with the potential for fame and wealth. Communication, journalism and related studies, a professional arm of the traditional Humanities discipline of Language, is also thriving. We are of the view that this trend may confirm the perception that the rising tide of consumerism underpins the overall decline in the popularity of the study of Humanities.

INTRODUCTION

There is a view articulated in the academic community, and to some extent, also in the private sector and government, that there is a grave concern about the state of Humanities in South Africa. In the last decade, the first public expression of anxiety with respect to Humanities in South Africa was a conference, 'What are the Humanities for? Valuing and re-valuing the humanities in South Africa', held at Potchefstroom University¹ in 2002. In early 2009, the ASSAF commissioned a consensus study on the state of the Humanities in South Africa. In July 2009, at the ASSAF Think!Fest in Grahamstown, a panel discussion on Humanities education was convened.

One of the most important concerns of South African academics, similar to their international counterparts centres around the pervasive 'in-your-face' consumerism evident in the country. Coetzee observes that, the 'core of the university today, . . . [is] the teaching of money making' (2001, 7). This view is widespread in the

academic community and beyond, and has been written about with passion by many who are disturbed by the direction taken by the ‘new’ South Africa. According to Morrow:

We find ourselves in a society drifting towards greed and competitive individualism, where market forces seem to override all other social ties, a society incrementally characterised by the selfish pursuit of individual or sectional interests and worrying signs of the perpetuation of the historical divisions which we hoped would have been overcome in a democratic society (2009, 1).

The dominance of market ideology in higher education institutions (HEIs) is also described by Marks:

There is no need to describe the symptoms of this crisis here: you are all doubtless very familiar with it, from the language of economic viability and the market to the constant demands for restructuring and down-sizing: the very language sends alarm signals through an humanities and social sciences community accustomed to decoding and deconstructing language. This is far from unique to South Africa (2000, 22).

There is little doubt that the language of the market and of economic viability resounds through all HEIs in the country. In adopting the instrumental rationality that guides the philosophy of the markets, HEIs align their purpose to be one that complements and feeds the market ideology rather than to the political, social and economic complexity of the nation. The simplistic logic is that higher education is the means to the end of obtaining a professional qualification that leads to employment, which, as the logic goes, leads to wealth and so to progress and development of a nation. According to Morrow, ‘promoting character comes as a faint-hearted rear guard action after the ground has been conceded to instrumental rationality’ and that ‘far from being value-neutral, instrumental rationality is itself an expression of a particular theory of values, one which claims that all values are ultimately the subjective preferences of individuals; whatever people *de facto* desire is desirable’ (2009: 1, 7). Coetzee suggests that it is this logic that has led to the death of the Humanities.

The *studia humanitatis* have taken a long time to die, but now, at the end of the second millennium of our era, they are truly on their deathbed. All the more bitter should be that death, I would say, since it has been brought about by the monster enthroned by those very studies as animating principle of the universe: reason, mechanical reason (2001, 35).

In a paper based on the data generated from a Delphi study, Viljoen argues that ‘[b]ehind the perception that humanities are socially-less useful and should therefore, receive less money and less recognition than technical rationalist knowledge, lies a hierarchy of knowledge based on the degree to which humanities are perceived as of practical utility and as scientific or methodologically rigorous’ (2008, 17).

So would this perceived crisis in Humanities translate into students abandoning their studies in Humanities for those that would provide immediate economic return; including employment, fame and wealth? In other words, does the crisis automatically imply dramatic shrinkage in Humanities students' numbers? In the light of these questions, our aim in this article is to illustrate the trend of enrolment and graduation of Humanities in post-apartheid South Africa and to examine whether Humanities have indeed endured a substantive numerical loss of students.

METHODOLOGY

Given that South African HEIs do not share a common structural definition of Humanities, we had to identify a profile of the common disciplines that fall within Humanities. Further, within faculties, Humanities there is also a variety of ways in which disciplines define themselves (Vale 2009).²

For the purpose of the analysis this article presents, we elected to follow the Classification of Education Subject Matter (CESM) definitions defined by the DoE.³ Our working definition of what falls within the traditional Humanities, summarised in Table 1 below, is informed by a common understanding of what Humanities entails worldwide.

Table 1: Working definition as per CESM classification

Humanities (Traditional)	Arts, visual and performing
	Languages, linguistics and literature
	Philosophy, religion and theology*
	History**

*We do not have a clear understanding why philosophy and religion are clustered together by the DoE, as history of the universities showed that philosophy faculties were often on the very opposite side to theology. Also, given the large number of accredited theology journals in South Africa, it is possible that the greater portion of the numbers reported for philosophy, religion and theology actually belong to theology, which may paint an even more gruesome picture for Philosophy.

**It should be noted that under CESM classification, *arts (visual and performing), languages, linguistics and literature* and *Philosophy, religion and theology* were classified into the first order disciplines, while another traditional Humanities discipline – *History* – was classified as a second order discipline, fall within first order discipline of *Social Sciences and social studies* (see DoE website for CESM classification). An example of first and second order discipline defined by CESM, see Appendix 2.

HEMIS data (1995–2007) for enrolment and graduation were obtained from the Department officials. However, it is to be noted that only data from 1999 onwards are included in this analysis because institutions across the country offered a vast number and complexity of qualifications prior to 1999.

The purpose of this review is explorative and two broad categories of aggregated data (one for undergraduates and one for postgraduates⁴) are reported. We excluded diplomas and certificates from this cohort calculation because these are often mainly linked

with professional qualifications.⁵ Raw HEMIS figures for post- and undergraduate enrolments and graduations were tallied and translated into comparable and easily readable graphs to provide a comparison between Humanities and the total graduation and enrolment figures of students in higher education in the country. In other words, Humanities data is presented as a percentage of, and relative to total student data. A comparison is then made between four core Humanities disciplines defined in Table 1 as well as Communication Journalism and related studies, a discipline often perceived as a practical alternative to the traditional Humanities discipline of literature studies. In effect the comparison is between the four Humanities disciplines and Communication and Journalism as a fifth discipline. This is done to further examine the claim that rising consumerism could be the culprit behind the fall of Humanities.

OVERVIEW

Undergraduates

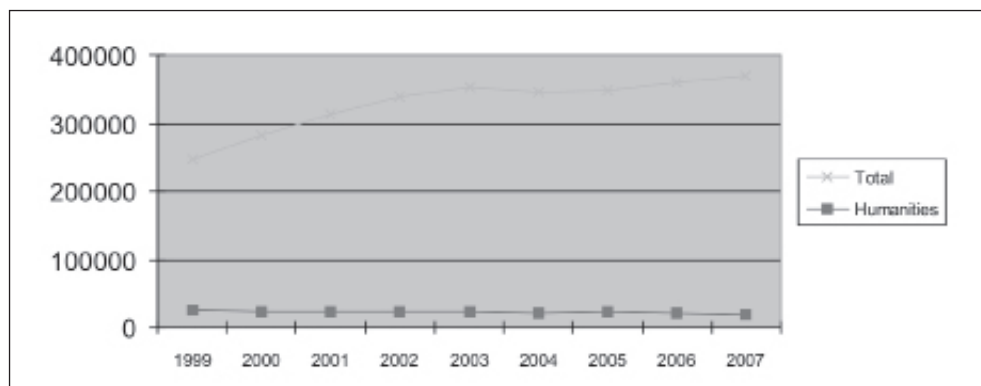


Figure 1: Undergraduate enrolment for all HEIs from 1999 to 2007

Figure 1 shows that undergraduate enrolment for all disciplines has increased by 50.11 per cent from 1999 to 2007, while enrolments for Humanities dropped by 20.31 per cent. This means that the percentage of undergraduate enrolment in Humanities to total student enrolment in 1999 was 10.13 per cent and 5.28 per cent in 2007.

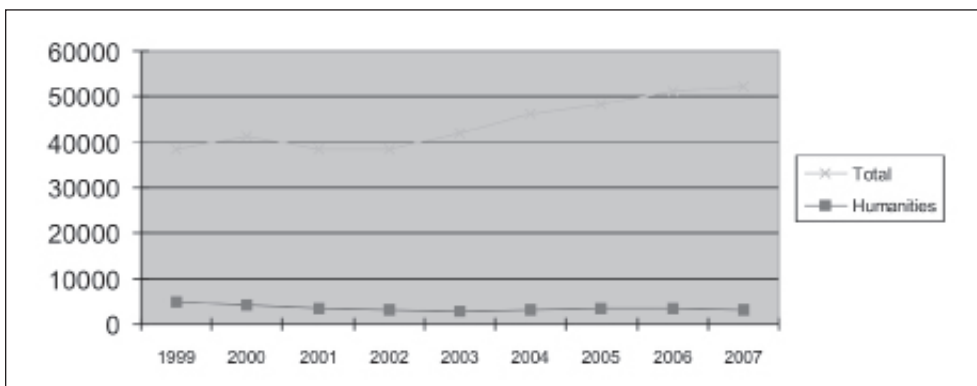


Figure 2: Undergraduate graduation for all HEIs from 1999 to 2007

During the same time period, undergraduate graduation number for all disciplines (as Figure 2 shows) increased by 36.04 per cent.⁶ A similar contraction of 31.2 per cent is observed for Humanities, meaning that the percentage of undergraduate graduation in Humanities to total student graduation figure dropped from 12.64 per cent in 1999 to 6.39 per cent in 2007.

Postgraduates

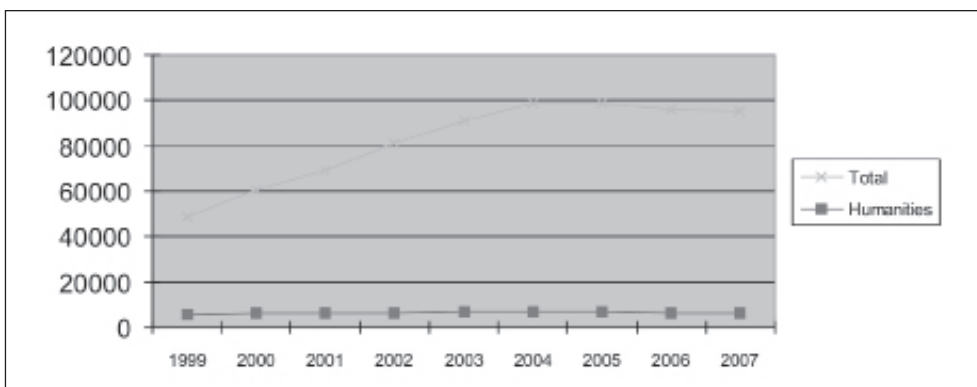


Figure 3: Postgraduate enrolment for all HEIs from 1999 to 2007

At postgraduate level, enrolment for all disciplines showed an even stronger growth than undergraduate enrolment figures. It grows at an average annual growth rate of 15.42 per cent from 1999 to 2004 and then shrunk annually by 1.26 per cent annually until 2007. This strong growth rate could be partly due to a small initial number (48 675 in 1999 as compare with enrolment number of 246 504 in 1999). However, on the whole, the 2007 figures still almost doubled those of 1999. Humanities has

also shown growth at this level (10.32% over the 8 years), a growth rate that is much smaller than that of all disciplines. At postgraduate level, the percentage of undergraduate enrolment in Humanities to total student enrolment is dropped from seen in 11.71 per cent 1999 to 6.59 per cent in 2007. Postgraduate graduation numbers, as can be seen in Figure 4, show a similar pattern to that of postgraduate enrolments.

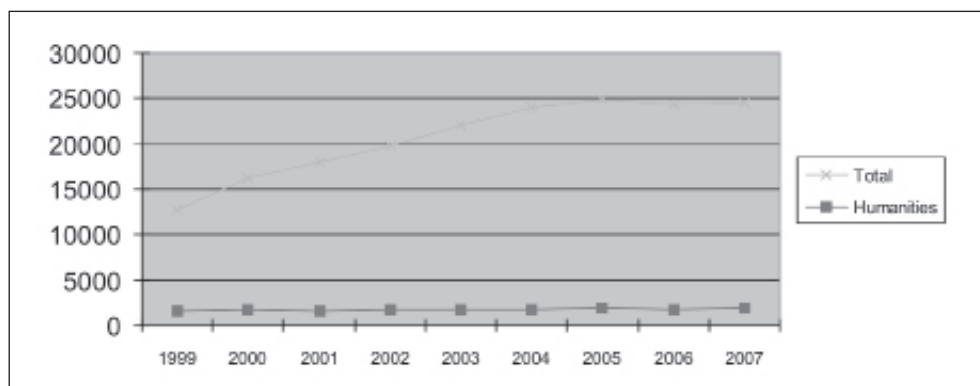


Figure 4: Postgraduate graduation for all HEIs from 1999 to 2007

HUMANITIES DISCIPLINES

Undergraduates

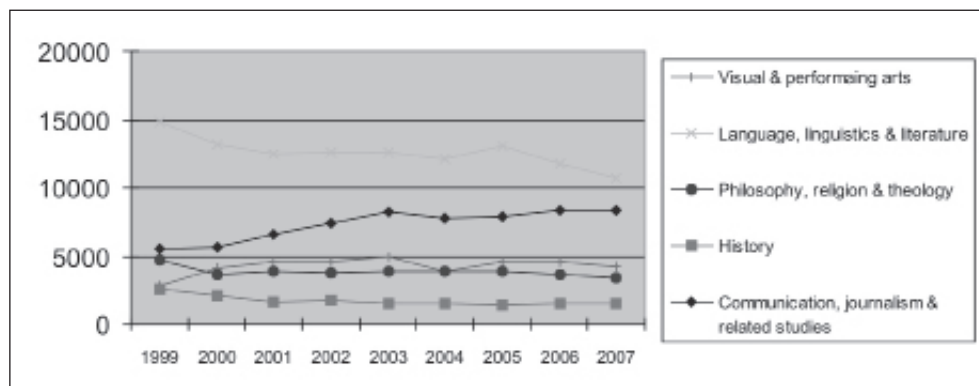


Figure 5: Undergraduate enrolment for Humanities disciplines from 1999 to 2007

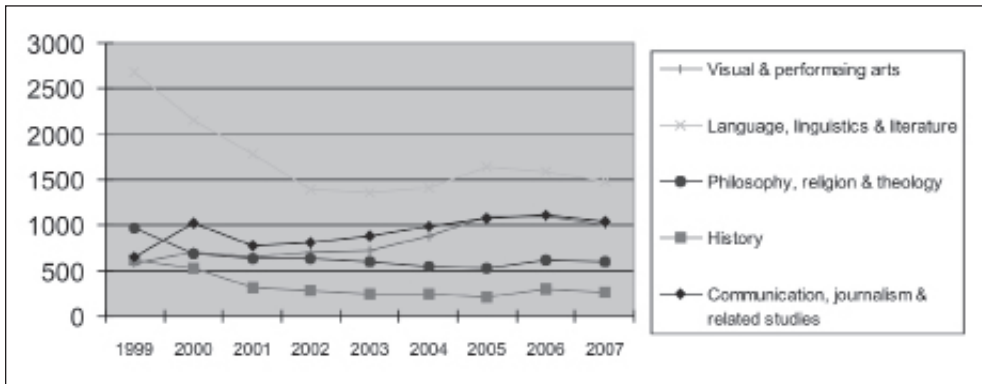


Figure 6: Undergraduate graduation for Humanities disciplines from 1999 to 2007

Figures 5 and 6 show that among the four traditional Humanities disciplines, all undergraduate enrolments and graduations have undergone substantial loss except visual and performing arts (growth rate of 48.59%). The growth of Arts could be attributed to many reasons. Among them, post-apartheid government's efforts to promote African art and culture (Marschall 2010), for reconciliation purposes (Minty 2006) or for economic purposes (for example, cultural tourism industry or art festivals Galla 1998; Rogerson 2006; Saayman and Saayman 2006). However, another factor that shouldn't be ignored is the wealth and fame that are commonly associated with artists, particularly performing artists such as singers and movie stars. Given the increasing availability and popularity of South African 'soapies', the economic value of arts is evident.

For the period under observation, undergraduate enrolments for languages, linguistics and literature shrunk by 27.68 per cent, philosophy, religion and theology by 27.46 per cent and History by 41.82 per cent. A further analysis of the growth rate of all first order⁷ discipline defined by CESM reveals that languages, linguistics and literature and philosophy, religion and theology are the only two, among all 22 first order disciplines, that suffer from negative growth at this level.⁸

It is possible that because of the smaller graduation number than the enrolment numbers the rate of decline in graduations is higher. For example, the same period witnessed a decline for Humanities undergraduate graduation, with languages, linguistics and literature enduring a loss of 44.75 per cent, philosophy, religion and theology by 39.43 per cent and history by 57.81 per cent. On the other hand, visual and performing arts graduation at undergraduate level have grown remarkably by 73.66 per cent.

Figure 5 and 6 also plotted the trend for Communication, Journalism and related studies, a discipline often perceived as an alternative to literature studies, as it is deemed to have better practical and professional relevance. Both figures reveal that until 2007, languages, linguistics and literature still remains the larger discipline, both in enrolments and graduations, than Communication, Journalism and related

studies. In fact, it remains the largest discipline in Humanities at undergraduate level. This statistic signals the need for an indepth disaggregating of figures for language study so that student patterns and behaviours with respect to enrolment for languages may be more fully understood. However, with the sharp decrease in the enrolment for languages, linguistics and literature and the steady increase of communication, journalism and related studies, the latter could overturn this situation in the near future.

Although it is not possible to conclude from these figures whether it is the same student who ran away from languages, linguistics and literature to study Communication, Journalism and related studies, the overall trend of both disciplines does affirm the increasing popularity of professional disciplines, which arguably lead to greater employment possibilities (Thurman 2007). It needs to be noted, however, that popularity does not seem to predict better graduation rate as in the case of Communication, Journalism and related studies, the enrolment figures are growing at a much faster pace than its graduation figures, implying that the throughput rate for this discipline is in fact not high.

Postgraduates

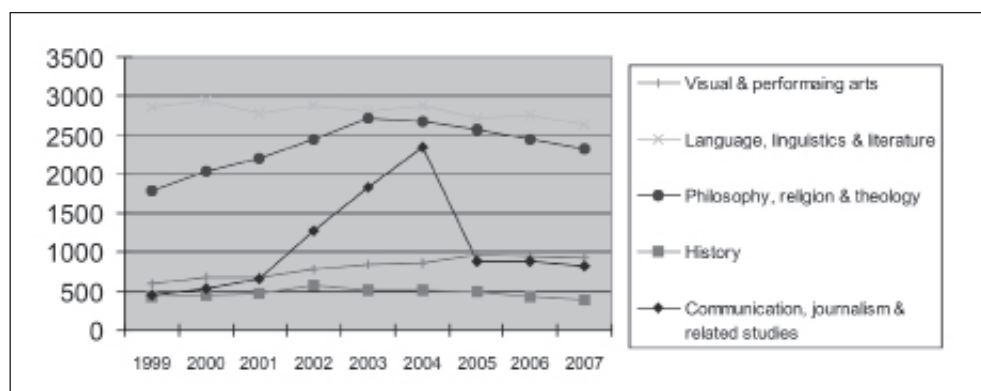


Figure 7: Postgraduate enrolment for Humanities disciplines from 1999 to 2007

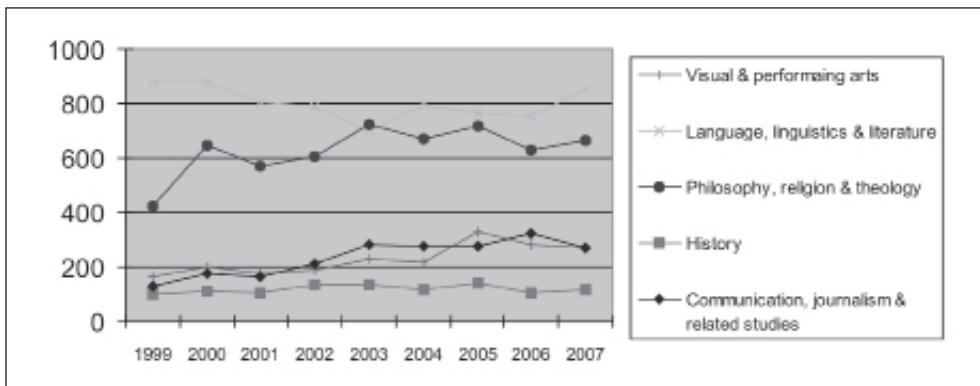


Figure 8: Postgraduate graduation for Humanities disciplines from 1999 to 2007

At postgraduate level, the performance for Humanities disciplines is less dismal. Once again, Languages, linguistics and literature is, among all first order disciplines, the only discipline that suffered from loss. However, the loss enrolments in languages, linguistics and literature at postgraduate level (7.82%) is minor compared to its loss at undergraduate level (27.68%). The enrolment figure for history in 2007 shows little change from its counterpart in 1999. Enrolment for philosophy, religion and theology has indeed grown at an average annual rate of 10.83 per cent until 2003, then decreased by an average annual rate of 3.76 per cent, with an overall growth of 29.25 per cent. The trend for visual and performing arts is once again, an overall strong growth of 53.80 per cent possibly because of the small numbers at postgraduate level, postgraduate graduation for all four disciplines showed spectacular fluctuation. Yet overall postgraduate graduation for languages, linguistics and literature in 2007 is comparable to its 1999 level; that for history gained 16.6 per cent overall; that for philosophy, religion and theology grown substantially by 57.56 per cent. The trend for visual and performing arts is a robust growth of 64.6 per cent.

Both enrolments and graduation at postgraduate level for Communication, Journalism and related studies have been increasing steadily as well. However, a comparison of Communication, Journalism and related studies with languages, linguistics and literature at this level reveals that the closing gap between the two disciplines in terms of their enrolment and graduation numbers is proceeding at a much slower pace compared with that at the undergraduate level, probably because of the less dismal performance of languages, linguistics and literature observed at this level.

It is also to be noted that enrolments in communication reflected a dramatic rise between 2001 and 2005 but this is followed by an equally dramatic downward movement in 2005. Of note too is that the rise of enrolments in communication is not reflected in an increase in graduations.

CONCLUSION

Given a ‘distorted public discourse’ that it was, ‘the idea of economics (especially its neo-liberal variant) had been at the centre of political change in the country’ (Vale 2009, 227), an explicit or implicit push from ‘northern institutions that were keen to see that South Africa should not deviate from the emerging consensus that there was no alternative to market-driven capitalism’ (Vale 2008, 125), and an understandable hope from millions of ordinary South Africans that end of apartheid would mean a chance to step out of the poverty cocoon, the rise of consumerism in post apartheid South Africa isn’t really a surprising phenomenon.

Consumerism predicts that disciplines such as Humanities, whose programmes are less demanded by employers and have a lower exchange rate in the market place (Maharasoa and Hay 2001) would likely be seen by students and their parents as ‘unnecessary indulgences’ (Furedi 2004, 3). Compounded by the shifting of funds from universities for faculties of Humanities to those that promise to produce more employable graduates, including the professional variance of traditional Humanities disciplines (Maharasoa and Hay 2001), the shrinkage of Humanities in South Africa is also not really surprising.

What this article reflects is that although enrolments and graduation in Humanities have not declined dramatically, put into the perspective that total student numbers in higher education has been grown substantially, the decrease of Humanities at undergraduate level and minor increase of Humanities at postgraduate level should indeed be seen as a state of crisis. In other words, the decline in Humanities relative to the increase in other disciplines is cause for concern. The data presented in this article also confirm that Humanities discipline such as arts (visual and performing) is well and alive in South Africa, as indicated, possibly because of the wealth, fame associated with it. The thriving of Communication, Journalism and related studies – the professional alternative to Humanities discipline of languages, linguistics and literature, is yet another manifestation of consumerism. Ironically, however, the greater popularity that Communication, Journalism and related studies enjoys does not seem to translate into a high success rate for such professional alternative. This could mean that interest in these professional disciplines could be merely a ‘quick fix’ decision as a means to a qualification and employment end.

The more pleasing trends of Humanities disciplines at postgraduate level than their respective performances at undergraduate level suggest a slightly different popularity pattern at these two levels. This could be possibly explained by that postgraduate students are usually older and more mature, and therefore not as open to the vicissitudes of consumerism and /or that they have made more conscious choices about what they want to study. They are also more likely to pursue an academic career after graduation. So if a high salary were the aim, many of these postgraduate students probably would not have entered postgraduate study in the first place.

In sum we argue that the perceived crisis in Humanities is not as much about declining student numbers as it is about why Humanities has not kept pace with other disciplines. The notable bent towards professional qualifications in Humanities

points to a reconceptualising of traditional Humanities disciplines. In other words Humanities study is no longer about character building, moral development and social consciousness (Stewart 2005 and Wright 2006). It is becoming increasing another path to employment. The question that remains to be answered is whether this is where we want to go?

NOTES

- 1 Now North-West University.
- 2 We developed a list of all disciplines that fell under Humanities faculties at each of the 21 HEIs in South Africa. What was clear was there was little common definition of what constitutes a Humanities faculty. This is also evident in other HEIs across the world.
- 3 Department of Education published a document, CESM 2008 (classification of subject matter, obtained from its website), explaining how the disciplines in the HEMISs data were defined and reported. Since the latest data presented in this report was the 2007 data, during which time the 1982 classification was still applicable, this article follows this 1982 classification.
- 4 Postgraduate is defined here as honours, masters and doctoral qualifications, and undergraduates refer to bachelor degrees.
- 5 For details of which level of degree from the original HEMIS data were aggregated into these two broad categories, see Appendix 1.
- 6 It is to be noted that this growth path has a notable dip in 2001 and 2002, possibly because of the national merger process of higher education institutions taking place in the country at the time.
- 7 HEMIS data reflect both 1st order and 2nd order disciplines. 1st order disciplines is defined by CESM as major disciplines, 2nd order disciplines are sub-disciplines of the 1st order disciplines. An example of 1st and 2nd order discipline defined by CESM, see Appendix 2.
- 8 History is not reflected here because it is a 2nd order discipline.

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APPENDIX 1: DESCRIPTION OF UNDERGRADUATE AND POSTGRADUATE QUALIFICATIONS ACCORDING TO HEMIS DATA

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2004–2007

OCCASIONAL	UG DIP/CERT (1 or 2yrs)	UG DIP/ CERT (3yrs)	UG BACH. DEGS (1st B Deg 3yrs)	UG BACH. DEG (1st B Deg 4yrs or more)	PG /DIP/POST DIP DIP/CERT	PG BACH. DEG	HONOURS/ NH DIP	MASTERS/ MASTERS DIP	DOCTORATE
			Undergraduates				Postgraduates		

1999–2003
Technikon

OCCASIONAL	21 NAT. CERT.	22 NAT. HIGHER CERT.	23 NAT. DIPLOMA	24 POST- DIP DIPLOMA	25 NAT. HIGHER DIP.	26 BACC. TECHNO-LOGIAE	27 MASTERS DIP. IN TECH.	28 MAGISTER TECHNOLOGY	29 LAUREATUS IN TECH.	30 DOCTOR TECHNOLOGIAE
						Undergraduates		Postgraduates		

University

OCCASIONAL	01 UG DIP/CERT	02 GENERAL UG 1ST BACH.	03 PROF. 1ST BACH.	04 PG DIP/CERT	05 PG BACH.	06 HONOURS	07 MASTERS	08 DOCTORATE
		Undergraduates				Postgraduates		

APPENDIX 2: AN EXAMPLE OF 1ST AND 2ND ORDER DISCIPLINE DEFINED BY CESM

Order or level	Code number	Description
First order	03	Arts (visual and performing)
Second order	0301	Dance
	0302	Film as art
	0303	Music
	0304	Theatre arts
	0305	Visual arts
	0306	Related arts
	0307	Arts therapy
	0399	Other arts (visual and performing)