

# Tracking enrolments and graduations in humanities education in South Africa: Are we in crisis?

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## **Abstract**

In this article we respond to the perceived crisis in humanities education in South Africa which posits firstly that large numbers of students are leaving this field and that secondly, the value of a humanities education has declined. To do this we track the enrolments and graduation rates in humanities at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels between 1999-2007. We disaggregate the data using the racial quantifiers identified in the HEMIS data base. We show that the small overall numeric decline of students in humanities education does not constitute a crisis in itself. Instead, it is disturbing that humanities education does not parallel the patterns of growth evident in higher education as a whole, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups. We use Waghid's ideas on the civic role and responsible citizenship roles of higher education to comment on the numeric trends we observe with respect to humanities education and argue that the second perceived crisis, namely that of the declining value of humanities education deserves national attention.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this article we respond to the perceived crisis in humanities education in South Africa which posits firstly that large numbers of students are leaving this field and that secondly, the value of a humanities education has declined. To do this we track the enrolments and graduation rates in humanities at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels between 1999-2007. We disaggregate the data using the racial quantifiers identified in the HEMIS data base. Our intention here is not to offer any unpacking of the notions of race but to read this data within the broader transformation of higher education project to increase access to higher education for historically disadvantaged groups. We show that while the small overall numeric decline of students in humanities education does not constitute a crisis in itself, however, it is

disturbing that humanities education does not parallel the patterns of growth evident in higher education as a whole, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups. We use Waghid's ideas on the civic role and responsible citizenship roles of higher education to comment on the numeric trends we observe with respect to humanities education and argue that the second perceived crisis, namely that of the declining value of humanities education deserves national attention.

## **BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

There have been waves of intense debate and discussion about the crisis in Humanities since 1960s. It first erupted in United States (see Ellis 1997; Bloom 1987) and quickly spread to other parts of the world, including Australia, Japan and Russia (Pillay, Yu and Esakov 2009). Much of the debate in the 60s to 80s focused on the political and intellectual climate which challenged the legitimacy of white, western and masculinist knowledge as dominant forms of knowledge. The voices of challenge articulated a powerful call for the knowledges of minority groups, of multiculturalism, feminists and other marginalised groups to be recognised. In other words, the perceived crisis was about what should be taught and what was the role and purposes of a Humanities education (Pillay, Yu and Esakov 2009). Unlike its international counterparts, humanities education in South Africa between the 60s and 80s was seen to be a powerful intellectual space for students and academics to organise against apartheid (Vale 2009). It is arguable that the humanities occupied centre stage in the fight against apartheid in the context of higher education institutions. In more recent times, however, the demise of the value of a humanities education seems to become a central concern. The ASSAF Thinkfest of July 2009 signalled the beginnings of an effort to understand what was happening in Humanities education in post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee, one of South Africa's foremost writers and liberal arts thinkers articulated a grave concern with respect to the future of humanities education in the country. In using the voice of Sister Bridget in *The humanities in Africa*, Coetzee argues that a humanities education offered 'guidance in how to live our lives' (2001, 45), but that in more recent times the 'core of the university today ... was the teaching of money making' (2001, 7).

In the current context, the main concerns of South African academics centre around three main issues, of equal importance and linked to each other. These are: the extreme focus on vocational training; the national, government-driven promotion of Science and Technology at all education levels; and the pervasive 'in-your-face' consumerism that is paralleled by disturbing levels of violence in the country (Pillay, Yu and Esakov 2009).

Waghid (2008) points to neo liberalism's market driven assault on universities which has led to the belief that '[k]nowledge with a high market value (for instance, science and engineering) is what counts, while those fields such as the fine arts and humanities that cannot be quantified in corporate terms will either be downsized or allowed to become irrelevant in the hierarchy of academic knowledge' (2008, 23). He

goes on to show that universities should produce students that think critically, take controversial positions, examine their role in lessening human suffering and their role as the conscience of our society rather than simply ensuring the maximisation of profit.

The prevailing perception seems to be that the value of a higher education qualification is becoming increasingly market driven. This perception prevails despite the heightened call for the values enshrined in a Humanities education to be pivotal to the workplace. Berube argues that the connection between work and education needs to be more carefully unpacked in order to understand the value of Humanities education.

While we want to deconstruct that sense of “work”, we also want to talk about the reality of the present, material connection between education and that standardized definition of paid work .... Education is about critical literacy, it is about a struggle to name the world; that goes on even if there is no connection between schooling and paid work. That is what cultural struggle is about (1995, 4).

Contrary to the expectation that the corporate and business sectors have little need for Humanities graduates, Lankard argues that the workplace of the twenty-first century will expect far more than vocationally trained individuals:

Since the 1970s, education has increasingly focused on the teaching and learning of competencies related to vocational-technical occupations and the professions. However, as the next millennium approaches, the ability to analyze information and solve problems, the flexibility to cope with change and the skill to communicate effectively in a culturally diverse workplace will assume equal importance (1994, 20).

Marra and Palmer too reiterate this point and say that, ‘business leaders are calling for more and better liberal education to address the dynamic nature of today’s job market and the global economy’ and that ‘they do not need graduates who have a narrow understanding of one discipline but, rather, an integrated understanding of the complexities of the world and workplace’ (2008, 114). The point is repeated by Van der Merwe when he says that a ‘liberal arts and social science education can develop individuals who can think independently, ask significant questions, analyse and weigh ideas, draw logical conclusions and put forth sound arguments. These are precisely the skills business and industries are looking for. The days of the one-dimensional person are over’ (2004, 58). This view is similarly expressed by Giroux and Giroux (2004) and Waghid (2008; 2009).

According to a study conducted by Allen (Canada) the highest rated skills in the market are the ability to understand information that is now easily accessible, to make critical and independent judgements of such information and to develop interpersonal and communication skills vital to the workplace (1999, 50). These attributes are intimately linked to Humanities education. This is confirmed by Acquah (2009) in her analysis of Labour Force Survey data obtained from Statistics South Africa, where she shows that in 2007, human and social studies was the highest paid discipline in terms of predicted wages for graduates. Further, Morrow reminds us

that although it is often Mode 2 knowledge that is required in the workplace namely, application, analysis and context relevance, these are dependent on a solid Mode 1 foundation (2009, 128) and Mode 1 knowledge forms the core of a Humanities education. Therefore, the perceived lack of market value of Humanities education might well be not caused by the lack of relevance of Humanities curriculum or skills potentially acquired through a Humanities education, but rather a lack of deliberate marketing of Humanities (Pillay, Yu and Esakov 2009).

While there does appear to be a growing, albeit small, literature in South Africa on the crisis in humanities from a values perspective, there is limited numeric explication of this apparent crisis. This article seeks to unpack the declining number, albeit small, of Humanities enrolments and graduates using race as the disaggregating variable. Our purpose here is not to show that the small numeric decline is cause for comfort. Contrary to the pattern in Humanities, the remarkable increase of the total number of students in the country is primarily explained by a spectacular increase in African students. The numbers for other races have also been increasing steadily, although much less dramatically (see Figure 1 and 2). A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 shows that there while there has been significant numeric growth, particularly of African students, in all faculties in all higher education institutions in South Africa post democracy, there has been a marked decline of African student numbers in humanities education. We set these numeric patterns within the context of Waghid’s ideas with respect to the civic value and responsible citizenship role of higher education and argue that the greater crisis in humanities education is the declining scope for promoting social and civic responsibility.

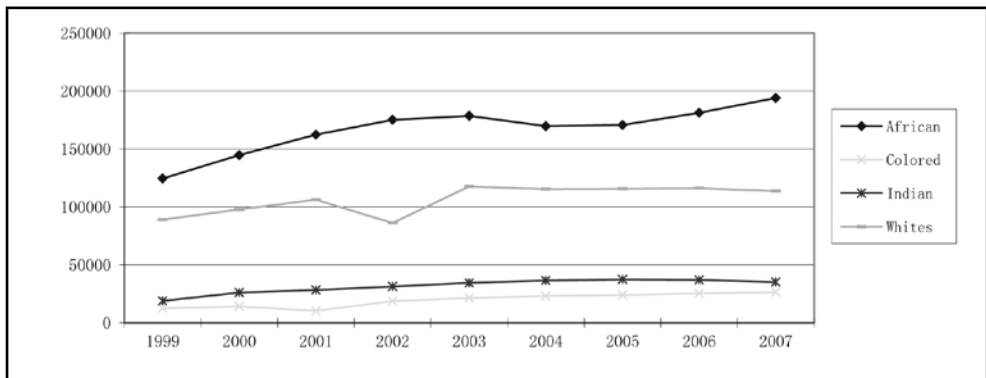


Figure 1: Undergraduate enrolment for all faculties across all Higher Education Institution (HEIs) in South Africa

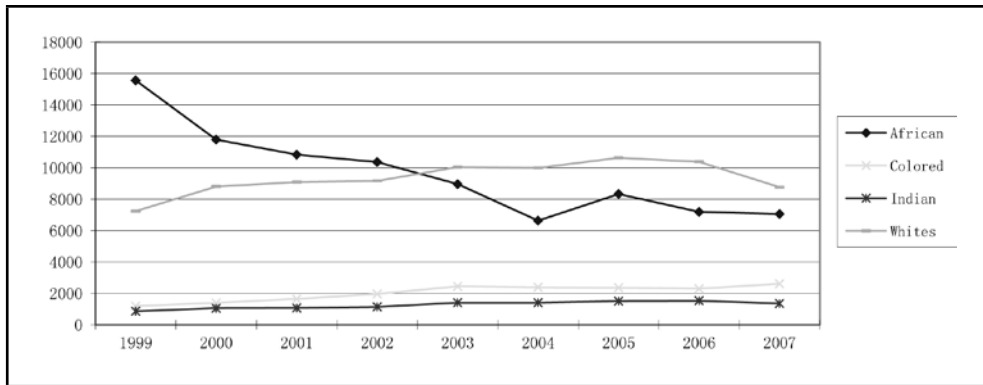


Figure 2: Undergraduate enrolment for Humanities across all Higher Education Institution (HEIs) in South Africa

While we offer some plausible explanations with respect to the racial patterns evident in humanities enrolments and graduations, our concern is that the patterns evident in humanities education are not consistent with that of higher education as a whole. We argue therefore that perceived crisis in humanities education is marginally a numeric one.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK CIVIC ROLES AND RESPONSIBLE CITIZENSHIP

We use Waghid's articles 'The public role of the university reconsidered' (2008) and 'Education for responsible citizenship' (2009) as conceptual foundations for this article. In the first article (2008) he argues that universities have a role to play in cultivating democracy and that this can be achieved through the promotion of critical reasoning, social justice and deliberation with others (2008, 19). He goes on to suggest that 'for the university to enact its civic role, it ought to produce graduates who can engage in critical reasoning' and not just to 'perform as technicians executing decisions they have expertly acquired at the university' (2008, 20). He argues further that the social justice imperative with respect to higher education is about graduates need to consciously respond to injustices through, inter alia, striving to eliminate exclusion and building an awareness of social vulnerability. He builds on this argument in the second article and suggests that responsible citizenship is also about developing the ability to engage in discussion and deliberation with compassion. He argues that universities have a powerful role to play in this regard as it is here that this ability should be actively pursued and encouraged. Universities therefore should be creating opportunities for learning that inscribe these values. We read Waghid's views against the background of the literature reviewed in which a common theme is that the ability to develop mode 2 knowledge (critical thinking, analysis, contextual relevance and) and sensitivity and application of knowledge) is fundamental to humanities education.

## METHODOLOGY

Given that South African HEIs do not share a common structural definition of Humanities studies, we had to identify a profile of the common disciplines that fall within Humanities. Further, within Humanities faculties, there is also a variety of ways in which disciplines define themselves (Vale 2009). For the purpose of the analysis this article presents, we elected to follow the Classification of Education Subject Matter (CESM) definitions defined by the DBE of South Africa. Our working definition of what falls within the traditional Humanities, summarised in Table 1, is informed by a common understanding of what Humanities entails worldwide.

Humanities	Arts, visual and performing
	Languages, linguistics and literature
	Philosophy, religion and theology
	History

Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) data (19952007) for enrolment and graduation in undergraduate humanities faculties 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. We focus on undergraduate patterns of enrolment and graduation in this article as the most significant movements of students occur at this level and that the number of post graduate enrolments and graduations are small and numeric changes in this regard are minor. Further it is at the undergraduate level that dramatic numeric shifts are evident (Pillay and Yu 2010).

Raw HEMIS figures were tallied and translated into comparable graphs. This article plots the racial profile for Humanities as a whole as well as that for each of the core Humanities disciplines. We use racial profiling as it is presented in the HEMIS data base because increasing access of previously disadvantaged students to higher education institutions was a central aim of the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act 101 of 1997). Further the changes in the patterns of enrolment and graduation of African students in humanities education were markedly obvious. Given that African students constitute the largest student base in the country, this trend could not be ignored. However, we acknowledge that racial profiling, whether pre or post democracy, has never been innocent.

## RACIAL PATTERNS FOR HUMANITIES

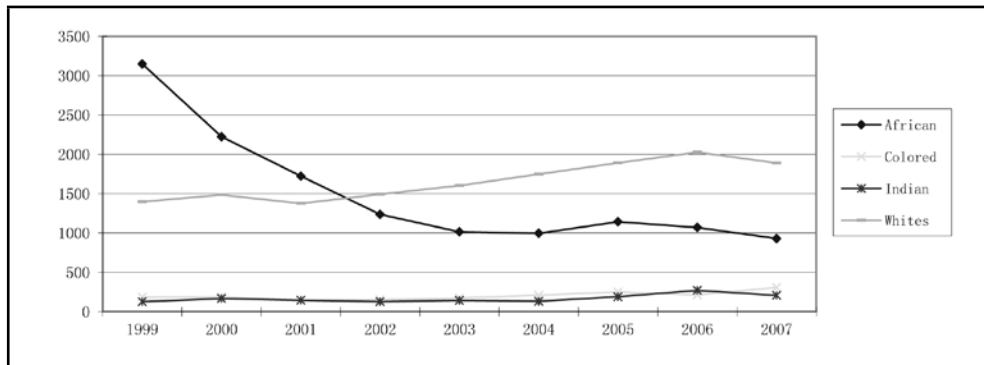


Figure 3: Undergraduate graduation for Humanities across all Higher Education Institution (HEIs) in South Africa

Figure 3, together with Figure 2, demonstrates that Humanities' dismal loss of students at undergraduate level, both in terms of enrolment and graduation, is most evident in the dramatic decline in the number of African students (enrolment fell from 15 563 to 7 053, graduation fell from 3 149 to 929). It is arguable that this is not surprising and indeed should be welcomed, given the artificial inflation of African enrolment in humanities education in apartheid South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, whites, coloureds and Indians have demonstrated a moderate increase for both enrolment and graduation, without which, the fall of Humanities is likely to have been more severe. What is also evident from Figure 2 and 3 is that Humanities at undergraduate level used to be a discipline dominated by Africans, but with its sharp decrease and steady increase of White students, the racial profile of students has altered dramatically at this level.

Read in conjunction with Figure 7, it is clear that the striking decline in African enrolment in Language, linguistics and literature between 1999 and 2007 is primarily responsible for the numeric decline in Humanities in the country.

Using graduation/enrolment ratio as a crude indication of throughput rate, Figure 4 shows that African students' throughput rate has worsened considerably over the years and that the worsening graduation/enrolment ratio for African students has advanced at a disturbing pace. Figure 4 also shows that this ratio for other racial groups has revealed both losses and gains at varying points, but overall the ratio of graduation/enrolment at for Whites and Indian has improved, while that for Coloured and African has worsened.

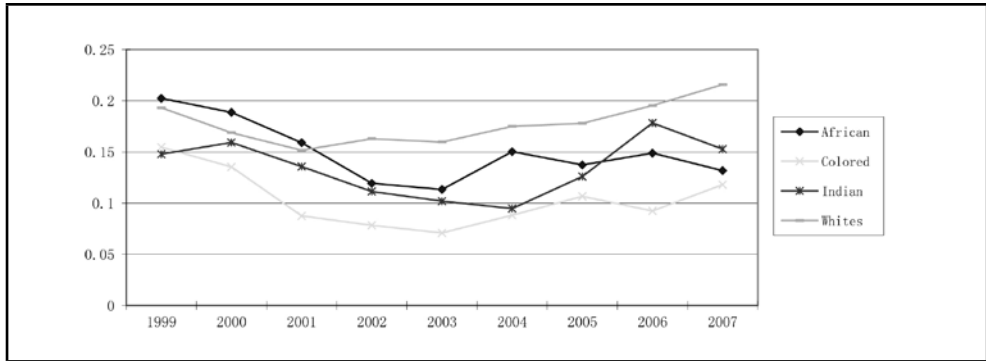


Figure 4: Graduation/enrolment ratio for undergraduate Humanities

### Intra-disciplinary analysis

In the section that follows we look at numeric patterns within the following humanities disciplines: Arts, visual and performing; languages, linguistics and literature; philosophy, religion and theology; and history. As indicated in the methodology section, we use the HEMIS categorisation of humanities disciplines as a guide.

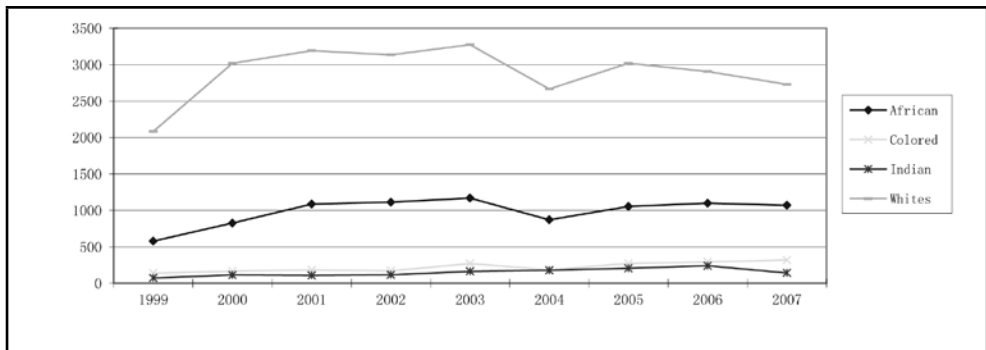


Figure 5: Undergraduate enrolment: Arts, visual and performing

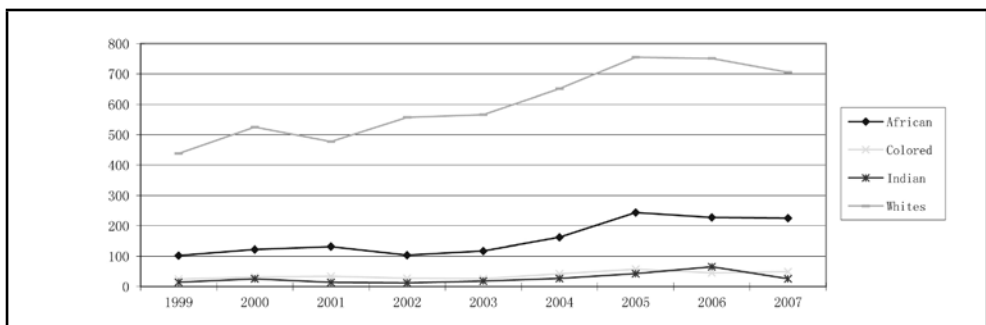


Figure 6: Undergraduate graduation: Arts, visual and performing



Arts, visual and performing is the only discipline among Humanities disciplines that has expanded at undergraduate level (Pillay and Yu 2010). From Figure 5 and 6, it is evident that this is because of the strong growth (both for enrolment and graduation) from all race groups. It is also evident from those two figures that this is also a discipline, both historically and currently, dominated by White students. From a small base, undergraduate enrolment and graduation of African and Coloured students have also more than doubled in the period under review. This may be explained by the visible growing interest and opportunity for African and Coloured students in the performing arts (see Pillay and Yu 2010).

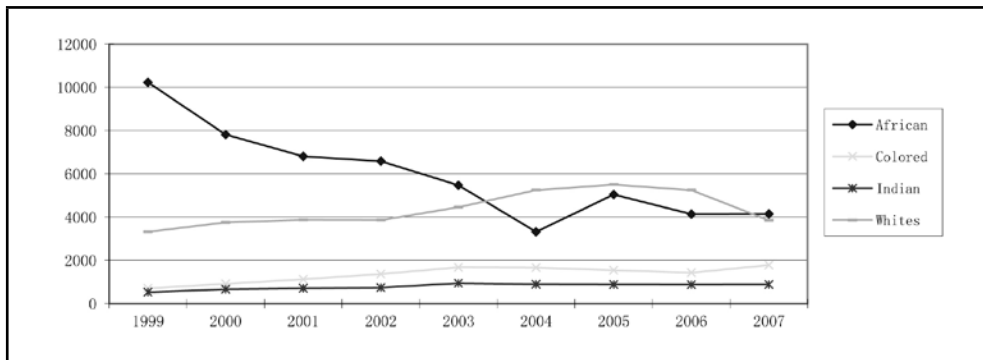


Figure 7: Undergraduate enrolment: Languages, linguistics and literature

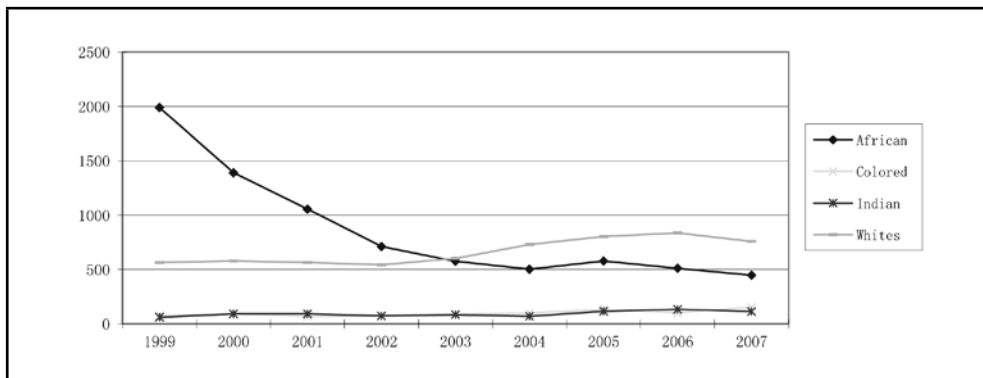


Figure 8: Undergraduate graduation: Languages, linguistics and literature

Languages, linguistics and literature is the only discipline, among all 22 major disciplines defined by CESM that suffered a loss at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Pillay and Yu 2010). Figure 7 and 8 demonstrate that the loss of African enrolment and graduation was so severe that the numerical growth for all other races in the discipline could do little to overturn the plunging trend. In 1999, African enrolments (10 231) far outnumbered white enrolments (3 317), but by 2007 their numbers are similar (4 145 for African and 3 849 for Whites). With the decline

of African student numbers and steady increase of White student numbers, the race that dominates this discipline has also shifted from African to White.

There are a few possible explanations for the notable drop in African student numbers at undergraduate level in Languages, linguistics and literature. It is possible that African students now have a wider range of educational options to choose from, and that there has been a concerted effort by the current ANC government to promote the participation of African students in science and technology programmes and that this may have meant a move away from Languages, linguistics and literature. Further as indicated earlier, pre democracy the study of African languages and the study of literature were ‘encouraged’ among African students. Arguably, this could have artificially inflated the enrolment of African students during that period.

The low throughput rate of African students is once again evident. For example, the 2007 comparable number of White and African enrolment produces roughly half African graduates, compared with that of White graduates.

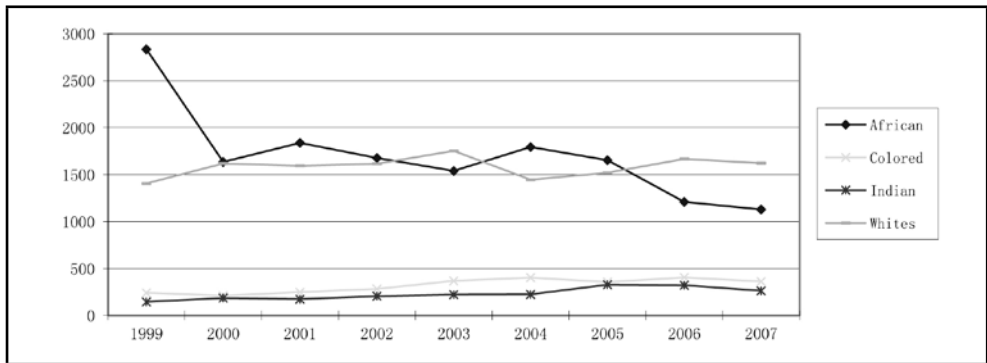


Figure 9: Undergraduate enrolment: Philosophy, religion and theology

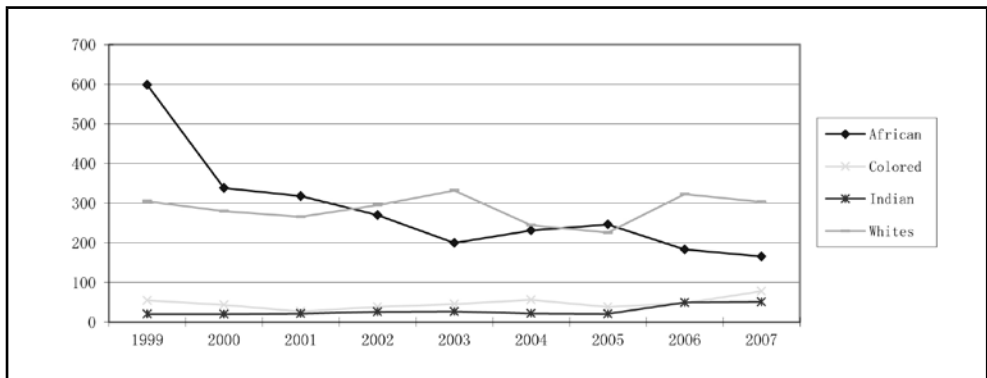


Figure 10: Undergraduate graduation: Philosophy, religion and theology

Philosophy, religion and theology has also witnessed a fairly large decline in African student number and a shift of dominant race group for the discipline. Coloured and

Indian participation here has increased, in their enrolment as well as their graduation. For White students, enrolment has increased while that for graduation did not, implying a diminished throughput rate.

Enrolment in History shows a similar patten to that of Philosophy, religion and theology, in terms of a sharp decrease of African students and slight increase of White students. Different from Philosophy, religion and theology, however, is that up to 2007, this discipline still has more African students enrolled than White students (although how long Africans can hold onto this domination is a question). Enrolment and graduation from Indian students have both dwindled, making it the only Humanity discipline that sees a decline in Indian participation. The graduation number for Coloured has also decreased despite its increase in enrolment.

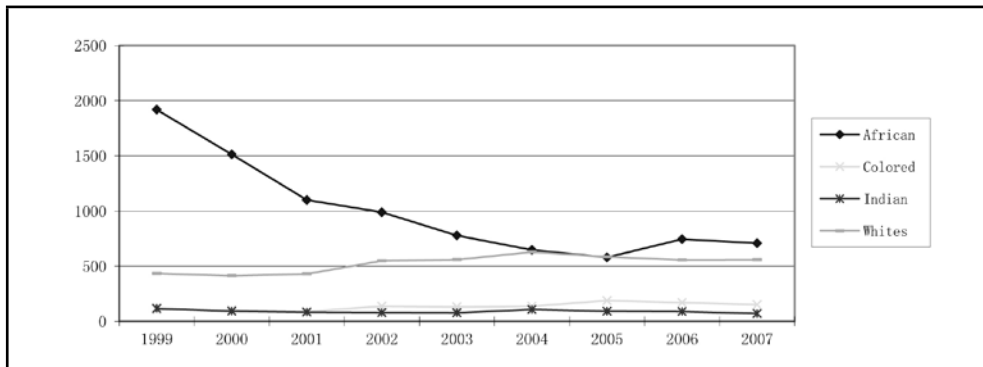


Figure 11: Undergraduate enrolment: History

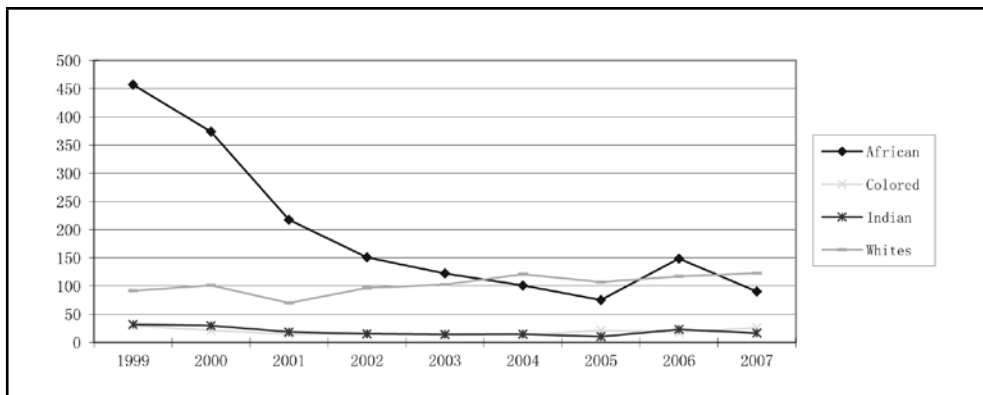


Figure 12: Undergraduate graduation: History

## CONCLUSION

As Languages, linguistics and literature is the single largest discipline within the Humanities domain in South Africa (Pillay and Yu 2010), its disturbing fall

contributes to the overall declining student enrolment and graduation in Humanities at undergraduate level in the country. The disaggregated race data in this article shows that while White, Indian and Coloured enrolment and graduate has shown moderate growth, the greatest loss is in the number of African enrolments and graduations, a trend contrary to that for all disciplines nationwide. This statistic signals the need for an in depth disaggregating of figures for language study, which unfortunately could not be explored more in detail in this article, so that student patterns and behaviours with respect to enrolment for languages may be more fully understood.

While there is an encouraging overall increase of Indian and Coloured participation in Humanities (with the only exception of Indian enrolment in History), their numbers remain too small to dramatically affect the future of Humanities.

The data presented here shows that some core disciplines in Humanities, such as Arts, visual and performing has historically been dominated by White students. Others, including Languages, linguistics and literature, Philosophy, religion and theology, have experienced a shift from African dominance to White dominance. The only exception to this is History, where there were still more African students than Whites in 2007.

Given the perception that a Humanities qualification has a lower market value, (Higgins ASSAF 2009; Maharasoja and Hay 2001; Waghid 2008) and that education is increasingly seen as a primary vehicle for economic mobility, it is arguable that Humanities education is not viewed as a potentially successful route to economic mobility. As Humanities education is sometimes viewed as an 'unnecessary indulgence' (Furedi 2004, 3) and that only the rich can afford such luxury, the flight of African participation may not be surprising.

However, the market logic cannot directly explain the rapidly declining throughput rate of African students in Humanities. In short even though there are fewer African students entering Humanities, there are even fewer who graduate. Cross and Carpentier (2009) point out that the academic trajectory of historically disadvantaged students is often characterised by low throughput, drop-outs and failures. This is caused sometimes by these students' under-preparedness both in academic and financial terms, but also often exacerbated by less strict selection process in certain faculties. The fast deteriorating throughput rate reported in this article could plausibly be explained by the argument that 'better' African students with a good matriculation exemption now have significantly extended careers choices and there is no reason for them to be 'limited' to studies in Humanities. This logic alongside the government support for increasing the number of African students in science and technology related qualifications, may explain the decline of African students in Humanities education.

Certainly, one needs to bear in mind as well that the racial pattern configured in the past itself was never innocent. When large number of African students literally couldn't sensibly register for a whole range of subjects and professions, where they could have encountered not only discrimination in access but also in evaluation, and therefore forced to be shoe-horned into the vernaculars, the number of African

enrolment could be artificially enlarged. In this sense, maybe the loss of African enrolment could merely represent a correction to an era in which African students had little effective choice, and settled on the Humanities as the easiest access to a degree.

However, as Vale's (2009) examines the past and present Humanities and Social Sciences and reveals that despite the possibility that Humanities was among the limited choices for African students and could also be used as an easier option to obtain a qualification, he emphasises that the relative strength in Humanities in apartheid claims a central role in the struggle ending apartheid. He proposes that the loss of Humanities in the contemporary SA is more explained by the quick rise of country's 'manufactured rejection of what the humanities can offer both the country and humankind' (2009, 234, emphasis added), rather than merely a well deserved market's self-corrective measure for the African students.

In the context of the data we note a singular concern. Our concern is the overall apparent devaluing of humanities education. In the context of Waghid's arguments with respect to civic roles and responsible citizenship, read in conjunction with the view that humanities education is often the site where such is learned, our concern is whether the numeric decline in humanities education signals a potential threat viability of responsible citizenship. Put simply, where are students going to learn about responsible citizenship, democracy and compassion and their civic roles, if they do not encounter this humanities education? And if we agree that the role of universities is not simply to produce individuals who will contribute to the economy, then universities must act to assert the value of a Humanities education. Jansen argues that all higher education students be irrespective of the area of study require a core Humanities education (Jansen ASSAF 2009). If however, as we have shown above, the Humanities graduate is a powerful asset in the workplace, and the numbers show that Humanities is slowly but surely losing ground, why are we not asserting the value of a Humanities education for all South African graduates?

## NOTES

1. Across the country and especially in historically disadvantaged higher education institutions, African students were primarily registered for humanities degrees. African students were often 'forced' to study religion, theology and the African languages and to some extent, literature as this was considered appropriate by the apartheid regime. Access to other areas of study, for example engineering, medicine and technology were limited. Further there was little hope of African graduates being employed even if they did manage to complete science degrees (Jansen 2003).

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