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THE DISCIPLINES KNOWN ELSEWHERE AS “the humanities” have traditionally been known in Britain as “the arts,” the older denomination that lingers in North American usage in the phrase “arts and sciences” adorning many faculties and colleges. While the North American usage of “the humanities” has gained purchase in recent years, “arts” versus “sciences” remains a convenient means of dividing up the disciplines. The conventional view of the postwar period holds that it witnessed a contest between the “two cultures” of arts and sciences—a tussle between pundits and policy-makers, on the one hand, pushing for more science, and a backward-looking establishment, on the other, making a rearguard defense of the arts. I, however, see the fortunes of both arts and sciences in British universities as having risen on a wave of growing student demand for a widening portfolio of subjects, resulting in the relative decline of the sciences and a surprisingly strong long-term showing on the part of the arts, including the traditional humanities subjects.

In 1930 the American educationalist Abraham Flexner produced an influential comparative study of universities in Britain, the United States, and Germany. In it he provided a picture of British universities that was still recognizable a generation later and remains so to some extent 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, 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.”¹

Flexner’s generalizations assumed that the British system (if that is the word for it) was modeled on the two ancient English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, central institutions that also federated independent residential colleges, and that even in a period of higher-education expansion retained the national authority that

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¹ Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American, English, German* (1930; repr., London, 1968), 224–229, 264, 274–278.

the American Ivy League had lost. The “Oxbridge” model assumed that students would study a single subject full-time for three years, terminating in a “single honors” 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 extracurricular activities, including religion, amateur sports, and related character-building avocations. Their studies would be overseen by a tutor—a member of the academic staff who would direct them and teach 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 was not in fact widely imitated by the newer “civic” universities, which were mostly associated with northern industrial towns far from the centers of “gentlemanly” authority in Oxbridge and London, and in any case were anxious not to compete for students with the ancient universities. Nevertheless, it hovered in the background of many 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 that 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” (i.e., a master of a college).

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. Like other advanced economies after the war, Britain experienced a steady, continuing higher-education expansion caused by the advent of universal secondary education and rising educational aspirations. Yet its student population as a share of the total population remained low by the standards of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Before the war, Britain had only 50,000 full-time university students, 1 per 1,000 population, well behind its obvious comparators, and as Figure 1 indicates, while those numbers quadrupled to 200,000 (4 per 1,000) by 1960, Britain still lagged, and the gap between it and many of its comparators was growing. This lag was not at first a great cause for concern. Slow growth was seen as a sign that standards of quality were being upheld. The UGC exercised a relatively light touch. 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, which in certain respects after the war drove the non-Oxbridge institutions to become *more* like Oxbridge, for example, in urging them to provide more residential accommodation and lower staff-to-student ratios.²

² University Grants Committee, *University Development: Interim Report on the Years 1947 to 1951*, Command Paper 8473 (1952), 9; University Grants Committee, *University Development 1952–1957*, Command Paper 534 (1958), 10.

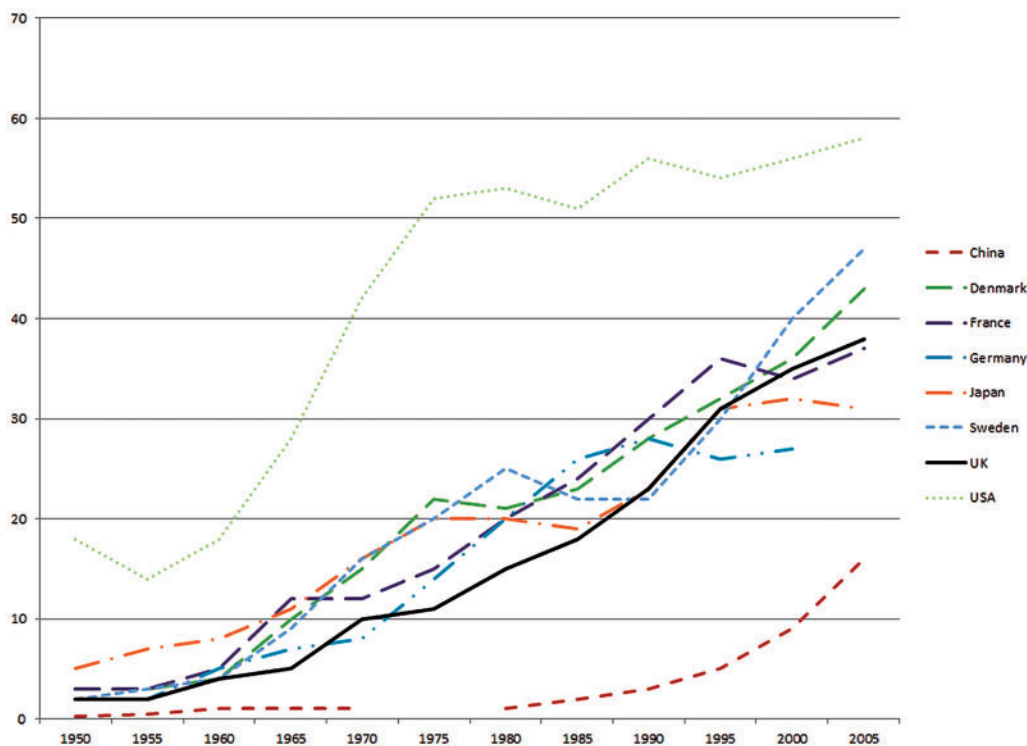


FIGURE 1: Numbers of students in tertiary education per thousand population. *Source:* UN Statistical Yearbooks.

To what extent did this system privilege the arts over the sciences? There has long been a general assumption that it did. Classics has been seen as the ideal Oxbridge subject, for its combination of academic rigor and moral training. 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” philosophy in the mid-twentieth. Furthermore, the expense of these intensive teaching methods shackled opportunities for expansion of the system, therefore tending to freeze the arts-science balance in favor of the arts. The ideal-type professional destinations for graduates—the domestic and imperial civil services, the law, the clergy, and other forms of public service—have also been associated with the arts rather than the sciences, and especially with classics, history, and, latterly, philosophy and politics.

These casual assumptions were no longer so well grounded in the mid-twentieth century. Since the early twentieth century, when degree subjects were proliferating, the picture had become more mixed. As the cultural prestige of the classics dimmed, a wide variety of subjects were claiming to provide the intellectual and moral training that had formerly been associated with the classics, and it was the “single honors” 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, only about 40 percent of

university students were taking degrees in arts subjects; the remainder were equally split between science and technology, on the one hand, and medicine, on the other.³

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 demonstrated, most university graduates up to and beyond the Second World War found employment as teachers. In Schwarz's sample year of 1937–1938, 84 percent of male arts graduates and 88 percent of female arts graduates from Birmingham were employed in schools, but so were 54 percent of male science graduates and 90 percent of female science graduates. As the ranks of university graduates swelled in the postwar years, employers found that the pool of skilled school-leavers available to them was shrinking, so they began to recruit from among graduates instead, but they 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, the lower reaches of the legal profession, accountancy, teaching—rarely required advanced technical skills.⁴ Without nudges of this kind, the proportion of students taking arts degrees remained remarkably stable—42 percent in 1960.⁵ Parents and students continued to seek markers of general educational attainment aligned with the labor market, which remained relatively indifferent to the arts and sciences.

This is not to say that there was no contemporary discourse favoring the sciences over the arts, for there was. Postwar governments 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 inquiries recommended the reinforcement of scientific, technical, and industrial manpower. 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. 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 in the desired or predicted direction. The UGC noted this repeatedly, puzzled, perhaps uneasy, but not panicked.⁶ That stance would change dramatically as the 1950s drew to a close.

³ David Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial "Decline," 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 1996), 19–22.

⁴ Leonard Schwarz, "Professions, Elites, and Universities in England, 1870–1970," *Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 941–962, especially 942–952; Joseph Ben-David, *Centers of Learning: Britain, France, Germany, United States* (New York, 1977), 75–77; Gareth Williams and Tessa Blackstone, *Response to Adversity: Higher Education in a Harsh Climate* (Guildford, 1983), 42–43; University Grants Committee, *University Development 1957–1962*, Command Paper 2267 (1963–1964), 25, 34; David Stevenson, "The End of History? The British University Experience, 1981–1992," *Contemporary Record* 7, no. 1 (1993): 66–85, here 71–72.

⁵ The opposite is often asserted, that "more students were studying the sciences" by 1960; Michael Sanderson, "Higher Education in the Post-War Years," *Contemporary Record* 5, no. 3 (1991): 417–431, here 418; David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970* (Cambridge, 2006), 179. In fact, the proportions studying the humanities and the pure sciences remained stable, while the proportions studying medicine fell and those studying technology rose.

⁶ University Grants Committee, *University Development: Interim Report on the Years 1947 to 1951*, 7–8; University Grants Committee, *University Development 1952–1957*, 8; University Grants Committee, *University Development 1957–1962*, 2, 25, 82–83, 153–154, 159–160.

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 fueled 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, began to take up this analysis.⁷ 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 at universities as a sign that the whole system needed a good shake-up.⁸

The most celebrated exposition of this critique was C. P. Snow’s *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959), a liberal (though statist) call for a scientific renaissance in British education, but there were conservative (sometimes statist) and Marxist (necessarily statist) versions as well, in what became in the 1960s nearly a consensus that Britain’s higher-education system needed simultaneously state-driven expansion and a skewing back toward the sciences in order to become “modern” and remain internationally competitive. The principal manifestation of this consensus in the policy realm is often taken to be the Robbins Report of 1963, a major inquiry into the condition and prospects of higher education, commissioned by a Conservative government and chaired by the economist Lionel Robbins.⁹ However, the Robbins Report neither initiated expansion—as we have seen, it was already well underway in the 1950s—nor substantially challenged the demand-led character of the system, which remained relatively neutral between the arts and sciences.

Especially on the left, critics complained that Robbins had set his sights too low. Expansion was contemplated, but only up to the meager levels of age-cohort participation that France had achieved. Although Robbins had called for less specialization at the university level, the old straitjacket of the intensively taught single honors degree at a residential university seemed to remain intact. Fortunately for these critics, after its three successive defeats the Labour Party won the general election of 1964,

⁷ On “declinism” in recent historiography, see, for example, Jim Tomlinson, “Inventing ‘Decline’: The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years,” *Economic History Review*, n.s., 49, no. 4 (1996): 731–757; Richard English and Michael Kenny, eds., *Rethinking British Decline* (Basingstoke, 2000).

⁸ For an example from one of the leading exemplars of this tradition, see Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962), 197–205, 209, 213–214; Michael Shanks, “The Comforts of Stagnation,” in Arthur Koestler, ed., *Suicide of a Nation? An Enquiry into the State of Britain* (1963; repr., London, 1994), 51–69, here 60.

⁹ Committee on Higher Education, *Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–63*, Command Paper 2154 (1963).

and politicians came to power who for years had been stoking the fires of “declinism” and its indictment of the university system. The new prime minister, Harold Wilson, promised to bring “the white heat of the technological revolution” to bear on Britain’s ills. 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 in order to divert expansion in ways that specifically favored 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, so that they could expand and experiment outside the UGC straitjacket. 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, it is no wonder that some commentators spoke of a “crisis in the humanities.” In a collection of essays under that title that was published in 1964, the editor, the Cambridge historian J. H. 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 would have 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.”¹⁰ Disciplines such as history and philosophy, one of the contributors, Ernest Gellner, wrote, would have to adapt themselves to “industrial-scientific societies” or die.¹¹ In the end, however, 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.

WHY DID SCIENCE NOT IN FACT triumph over the humanities in the 1960s? In what remained essentially a demand-led system, we have to look not primarily to state policy but to the more pressing and enduring influences of culture, society, and economics. Culturally, as Guy Ortolano has pointed out, the early 1960s debates over the “two cultures” were by the late 1960s very rapidly displaced by new ambitions and influences connected with the New Left and a wave of radicalization in the universities.¹² The new demand was not for science and technology, but for certain elements in the humanities—philosophy, literary and historical studies, and especially “social studies”: politics, sociology, cultural studies, and media studies. When the statisticians

¹⁰ J. H. Plumb, “Introduction,” in Plumb, ed., *Crisis in the Humanities* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 7–10, here 7–8; Plumb, “The Historian’s Dilemma,” *ibid.*, 24–44.

¹¹ Ernest Gellner, “The Crisis in the Humanities and the Mainstream of Philosophy,” *ibid.*, 45–81, here 63, 80.

¹² Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), chap. 7.

counted up the subject choices of students, they lumped social studies in with the arts, not with the sciences, and the arts-science divide remained pretty much as it always had been, 44 percent arts versus 56 percent science in 1967, with social studies now accounting for nearly half of the arts' share. Then the boom in social studies began to shift the divide against the sciences, such that by 1980 the balance was nearly 50-50 between the arts and sciences.

The failure of government policy to shift the balance in favor of the sciences cannot, of course, be attributed wholly or even largely to the waves of radical politics sweeping through the universities, which only ever affected a minority, even though they also established a mood. The trends in the employment market remained a potent force, probably more potent now as de-industrialization began to bite. The Dainton Report in February 1968 detected a worrying swing *away* from science in the subject choices of sixth-formers (students between the ages of 16 and 18 who in Britain's early-specialization system were already narrowed down to three subjects, normally all arts or all science).¹³ 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 common sense. "This swing away from specialist science subjects in the sixth form," it noted, "coupled with a growth in sixth form preferences for courses bridging the arts and science groups of subjects, was a feature of the position not only in Britain but in a number of other countries including Germany and the Netherlands." Recent research had cast doubt on the correlation between science education and economic growth. A report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 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. Furthermore, by 1974 the UGC had finally noticed that arts graduates were not notably disadvantaged in the labor market.¹⁴ What the UGC did not note, oddly, is that the proportion of women in the higher-education system, formerly about a quarter, was now rising steadily toward 40 percent, and their much greater participation rates in both the higher-education system and the graduate-labor market swung demand factors even more firmly against science.¹⁵

The higher-education landscape of the 1970s—"post-Robbins"—was therefore more variegated and less scientific, though still not as extensive as many had hoped; as Figure 1 indicates, Britain fell further behind its obvious comparators in the 1970s and 1980s. The straitjacket was obviously still in place: British higher education was expensive, heavily subsidized, and relatively elite. It provided high levels of quality: the staff-student ratio in 1971–1972 remained roughly where it had been in 1956–1957, at 1:8, and while its age-participation rates were among the lowest in Europe, its graduation rates were among the highest. It was also a system in which the

¹³ F. S. Dainton, *Enquiry into the Flow of Candidates in Science and Technology into Higher Education*, Command Paper 3541 (1969).

¹⁴ University Grants Committee, *University Development 1962–1967*, Command Paper 3820 (1978–1979), 101; University Grants Committee, *University Development 1967–1972*, Command Paper 5728 (1974), 25–28; Schwarz, "Professions, Elites and Universities in England," 961–962.

¹⁵ W. A. C. Stewart, *Higher Education in Postwar Britain* (Basingstoke, 1979), 278.

humanities thrived, certainly better than had been expected in the 1960s. Responding to student demand, not only the new universities of the “Robbins era,” but even the colleges of advanced technology and polytechnics taught more humanities and much more social science, and less science, than their funders had predicted.¹⁶ By one estimate, only a third of all polytechnic students were studying science and technology. Polytechnics were famous in the 1970s as hotbeds of student radicalism, not because aircraft-design students were likely to be Trotskyists, but because art students were.¹⁷

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. Student numbers stagnated, budgets were cut, and the universities looked ahead apprehensively to a “baby bust,” the downside to the demographically fueled growth in the 1960s. But the worst was yet to come. Within the Conservative Party, resentment toward the universities had long been building. Their twin roles in left-wing activism and the welfare state had branded them as an expensive nuisance. Furthermore, “declinism” resurfaced. The failure of the universities to reorient to industry was one among many factors that leading Conservative intellectuals cited to explain Britain’s rocky economic performance in the 1970s. But the anti-planning, neoliberal shift within conservatism meant that this new wave of declinism would lead not to fresh investment but to the reverse. Despite her own university degree in chemistry (from Oxford), Margaret Thatcher did not see universities as crucial to her strategies for economic growth. 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 and cutting back on state subsidies and investments—and the universities were to be no exception.

However, 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.” In 1989 the UGC was replaced by a new set of funding councils, which abjured subject-specific planning and simply disbursed block grants to institutions on the basis of “selectivity” exercises that would apply efficiency and market tests to institutions.¹⁸ Although public-expenditure cuts demanded alongside this market model a “run-down” of the university system, cutting back student numbers, overall the humanities survived the “run-down” surprisingly well in terms of market share. For example, while the number of permanent history staff was cut by more than 12 percent in the 1980s, the numbers

¹⁶ Sanderson, “Higher Education in the Post-War Years,” 424.

¹⁷ Stewart, *Higher Education in Postwar Britain*, 202–205; A. H. Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion: The British Academic Professions in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1992), 112–113, 118–119.

¹⁸ *Review of the University Grants Committee: Report of a Committee under the Chairmanship of Lord Croham*, GCB, Command Paper 81 (1986–1987), 18, 24–25, 30, 43–45.

working toward undergraduate history degrees held up and were accommodated by means of deteriorating staff-student ratios.¹⁹

It is hard to predict how the humanities would have fared in a continued run-down, but in fact the Thatcher government executed an extraordinary about-face 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. There was a renewed concern that the straitjacket of “quality” might indeed be constraining economic recovery.²⁰ Thatcher’s core middle-class constituents were showing more appetite for getting a university education for their own children, and educators were showing more appetite for taking them on. Advocates for expansion cleverly played on Thatcher’s consumerism—if there was obvious student demand, and it could be catered to efficiently and along lines that at least mimicked a free market, why should the state stand in the way?²¹

Thus the government that had just presided over a run-down now ushered in the era of mass higher education. As Figure 1 shows, 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-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 among 18- and 19-year-olds, long stuck beneath 15 percent, surged to 35 percent by 2001, by which point a New Labour government had set a target of 50 percent participation (though one now craftily measured by new indices putting Britain at or above 40 percent already).

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, competing for much larger allocations of funded undergraduate places, based on their ability to attract applicants and to teach them cheaply. The “unit of resource”—public funds allocated to each individual student—fell by about one-third in real terms until 1996, then began to recover 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 2009.²²

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

¹⁹ Stevenson, “The End of History?,” 70.

²⁰ This is the dominant rhetoric of the White Paper announcing the U-turn, *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge*, Command Paper 114 (1986–1987), 3–5, 7. See also Sanderson, “Higher Education in the Post-War Years,” 427; Stevenson, “The End of History?,” 76; Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, 5.

²¹ Halsey, *Decline of Donnish Dominion*, 98–99, 105–109. I discuss in greater detail the start-stop-start pattern of expansion in British higher education in “Educating the Nation, II: Universities,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, forthcoming 2015.

²² Data supplied by Mario Ferelli, Analytical Services, Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), December 2010; data for 1989–1998 from Department for Education and Employment, *The Effects of Public Funding on Higher Education Institutions: Report to the Secretary of State* (London, 1996; updated 1998); data from 1998 onward from Department for Education grant letters to HEFCE.

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 neoliberal age of rising individual expectations and falling public expenditures. Here we have to ask only what the implications were 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. In 2012, fewer than 38 percent of undergraduate degrees were taken in science subjects; this represented the sciences' lowest share in the postwar period.²³ (See Figure 2.)

However, the decline in the share of the sciences does not mean a rise in the share of the humanities. Just as the Robbins-era expansion witnessed a broadening of the portfolio of available courses, the post-1992 expansion (which was quantitatively much larger) saw a greater qualitative change in the nature of courses being offered. 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 percent of all students, and in 2010 for only 9 percent. The growth areas in the non-science subjects have been law, business, and communications, now accounting for 20 percent (although many of these students would previously have been counted under "social studies"). The share of the humanities, however, has held up well. Figure 2 counts as "science" all science subjects, including new courses in electrical engineering and computer science, and new vocational courses in "subjects allied to medicine" that were not previously degree-level courses. But it counts as "humanities" only the traditional core disciplines—languages, literatures, history, religion, and philosophy. Even so, the respective paths of "science" broadly construed and "humanities" narrowly construed have followed similar trajectories. If we were to broaden the definition of the humanities to follow the broadened definition of sciences—harder to do, as courses such as communications, education, and creative arts are difficult to categorize—then the humanities broadly construed would be seen to have fared rather better than the sciences. Accounting for 24 percent in 1967, they probably hover around the same level today; if we add only creative arts to the traditional humanities, they stand at 21 percent. Again, the continuing feminization of the undergraduate body—women now account for 56 percent of the total—has undoubtedly played a strong contributing role.²⁴

What do these figures tell us about the fortunes of the humanities in the period of expansion, and what do they bode for the future? First, the shrill noises made by politicians, policymakers, and pundits, based on a now very dated "declinist" diagnosis that still favors science and technology, are consistently drowned out by the *basso profundo* of student and parent demand, based on powerful currents in society and

²³ In Figure 2, "science" includes all science disciplines (excluding architecture); "humanities" is confined to the traditional core disciplines: languages, literatures, history, religion, and philosophy. The "new" universities are included from 1994. Between 1994 and 2002 inclusive, both counts are artificially depressed by the inability of the statisticians to distribute multi-subject degrees; a new formula was applied in 2003, and the trend lines resume. In the latest figures, for 2014, science has rebounded to 39.3 percent.

²⁴ Women were awarded 56 percent of undergraduate degrees in 2014, according to the latest figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

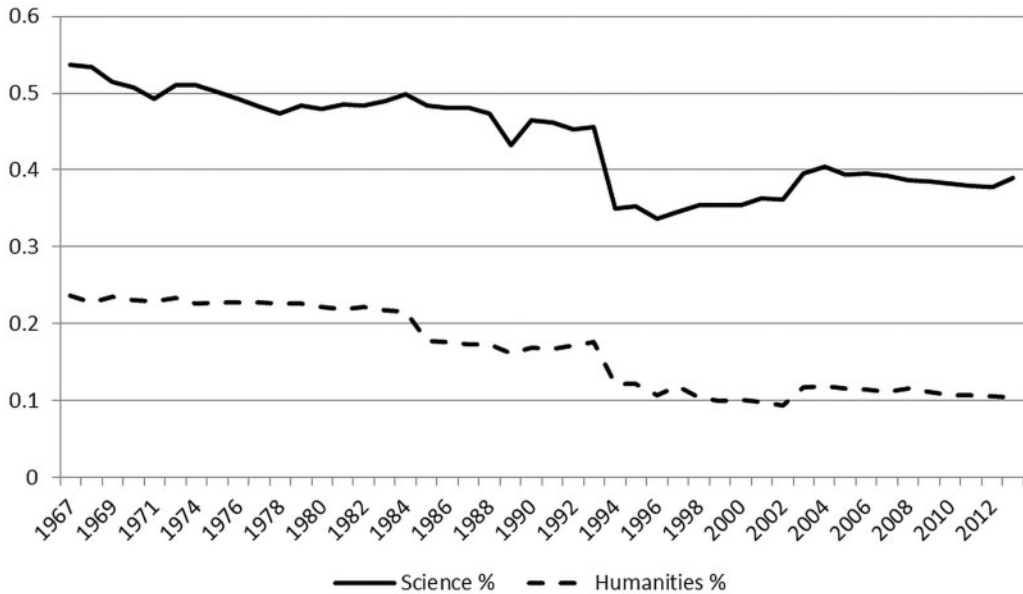


FIGURE 2: Proportions of university students taking degrees in science (broadly defined) and humanities (narrowly defined), 1967–2013. *Source:* Education Statistics for the United Kingdom; Universities' Statistical Record; Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom.

culture, including feminization of the student body, but also by a labor market that continues to value a single honors degree in any subject. Second, throughout the period of expansion since 1960, the effects of student and parent demand have favored a diversifying menu of subjects, which initially leaned toward social studies and now leans toward business and communications. Third, the share of the humanities has been maintained throughout all of these twists and turns. The illusion of a “crisis of the humanities” has been sustained not by real trends in student numbers, but by successive alarms raised by (probably predominantly humanities-educated) political elites, driven by economic motives and false correlations between economic growth and science degrees. A similar effect has been observed in the United States, where the impression of a nearly continuous “crisis of the humanities” is belied by statistics on enrollments.²⁵ Finally, 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 and 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 among non-elite entrants. The rise of more obviously vocational courses, such as business, law, and communications, sends warning signals, but as yet the take-up of these options does not seem to have undermined the place of the humanities significantly. Nevertheless, having seen off the

²⁵ Jennifer Schuessler, “Quants Ask: What Crisis in the Humanities?,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2013, C4, http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/27/quants-ask-what-crisis-in-the-humanities/?_r=0. I am currently working on a more systematic comparison of the long-term fortunes of the humanities in Britain, the United States, and Australia.

“declinist” threat, the humanities may now be faced with a more formidable adversary in the form of narrowly vocational understandings of what a university education is for.²⁶

²⁶ 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).

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