Quantifying the discipline

Some anthropology statistics from the UK

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Editor’s note: This is the first of two articles describing the changing demographics of anthropology in the United Kingdom. The second will focus on anthropology’s professional bodies.

Anthropologists’ perennial fascination with the health of their discipline has recently taken a quantitative turn, if the anxious discussion of the numbers of students studying and qualifying in the discipline in the United Kingdom is representative (Sillitoe 2003; Johnston 2001, 2003). As ever, statistics can be used to tell many a tale, and the numbers conceal changing methods of counting both bums and seats, as well as the effects of successive government attempts to shift from an elite to mass higher education system.

Undergraduate applications

News that applications to study for degrees in anthropology have shown a marked decline in recent years challenges the image of the 1990s as a period of rapid expansion for the discipline. The official figures are actually worse than Sillitoe suggests, and as Figure 1 shows, the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) has recorded a 22% drop in applicants over the last five years, and a 32% drop since 1994. Yet what do such data tell us? And how do these recent figures relate to the period of 60 years overall during which anthropology has been taught as an undergraduate degree? For many, the fortunes of postgraduates and academic staff are an equally important measure of the discipline’s health, and I want to use this opportunity to explore the discipline’s demography more broadly.

If Figure 1 presents a depressing picture, it is also a misleading one. The figures go back only to 1994, as this was the point at which ‘new’ universities were included in UCAS statistics. Acceptances in 1994 were double those of the previous year. The subsequent decline shown in Figure 1 would seem to be confirmed anecdotally by the gradually increasing number of anthropology departments entering ‘clearing’ at the end of the British university application cycle. Yet there are some vital statistical caveats to be made. The figures show only the number of applicants applying to study single-honours anthropology (both social and biological) undergraduate degrees, and even this is an estimate, based on an analysis of course choices on the UCAS application form (applicants can choose up to five different courses). The figures only include those applying for single honours courses, or those in which a clear ‘major’ is identifiable. Therefore these figures do not include applicants to ‘balanced’ joint honours courses, such as the Oxford BA in Archaeology and Anthropology (which began in 1993) or combined honours courses.

Growth in joint honours. Joint honours degrees have become an increasingly important part of provision in many departments, and as the number of joint-honours options increase, it is possible that single-honours applications suffer as a consequence, though one should not assume that demand is fixed. In 2003 there are around 20 different single honours degrees on offer to potential students, but every UK department offers at least one joint honours course, and there are a total of 198 joint honours degree courses available (UCAS). This also explains the somewhat incongruous situation on the graph in which it appears that more people are accepted than applied. Where applicants apply to study a variety of subjects, only the subject group cited most frequently on the application form is counted. If a student applied only for joint honours degrees, this application would not be counted as an application to study anthropology.

The situation is further confused by the different sources of data available for those interested in higher education trends. UCAS statistics are based on an analysis of candidate application forms, whilst the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) is a statutory body responsible for the central collection of educational statistics of all sorts – from first destination surveys to academic pay. HESA student numbers are based on institutional returns, but are still limited in their level of detailed analysis. It is impossible to measure exactly the growth in numbers of students on thematic and joint honours degrees involving anthropology, other than to note that 10% of all students in the social sciences are on such programmes. It is similarly difficult to disaggregate those studying biological or physical anthropology, except through a count of students at the relatively few departments (UCL, Brookes, Durham, Roehampton) that offer courses or degrees in those fields.

The total figure of 2400 students studying single honours anthropology in 2001 is but one way of counting the data. While UCAS statistics suggest that applications have fallen during the last few years, HESA figures reveal a modest but definite increase in the total number of single-honours student numbers during the late 1990s, up to a peak in 1999. Neither graph captures the growing importance of joint honours degrees for institutional recruitment, and thus both underestimate student engagement with anthropology, as well as anthropology FTEs (Full Time Equivalents). The striking difference between Figures 1 and 2 is a consequence of the different timescales used for each graph, but also reflects the fact that the 1997 peak in acceptances fed through to a maximum number of undergraduate students in 1999.

Decline in single honours. For all this, the decline in applications to single honours social science courses is real, and reflects a broader pattern across the social sciences and humanities of a move away from ‘traditional’ single-honours academic subjects in favour of more mixed and thematic degrees and a greater attention to vocational relevance. This is the result of both demand and supply, as institutional restructuring and rationalization of departments into larger units and schools has influenced the sorts of degrees being offered. Anthropology is increasingly being taught within multidisciplinary programmes or as an element within a social science module. This raises the

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question of academic identity politics: how much anthropology makes a student ‘one of us’? It also poses a problem for any analysis of this kind – should one measure the health of a discipline by focusing on the numerical shape of its institutional footprint at undergraduate level? Is ‘recruiting’ people to a disciplinary identity really more important than ensuring the communication of its ideas and insights?

Interdisciplinary comparisons. How do these trends compare with anthropology’s cognate disciplines? Sociology has experienced a similar decline to that of anthropology, with 26% fewer applicants in 2001 than in 1996, though there are still six times as many places available to study sociology as there are for anthropology. Politics has not experienced a decline. On the other hand, 2000 more students have been accepted to study psychology over the last five years (a 30% increase), with one commentator suggesting that psychology’s focus on the individual’s make-up rather than on social processes is more attractive in a ‘deeply individualistic age’ (Williams 2002). Whatever the reason for psychology’s capture of the student zeitgeist, application trends are increasingly also correlated to media attention, whether it be last year’s docu-soaps or this year’s natural history programmes. Student numbers have also increased rapidly in media studies, social work and education. The trend may also reflect the changing profile of applicants – ‘non-traditional’ students may be more likely to apply to vocational subjects.

Undergraduate vs postgraduate

Before WWII there were, at any one time, less than a dozen undergraduates studying anthropology in British universities. In a discipline that traced its origins to a graduate research seminar, undergraduates were outnumbered by research students until the 1960s (see Fig. 2). Undergraduate numbers remained largely stable throughout the 1970s and 1980s, despite significant growth in the university sector as a whole – the same number of students were studying anthropology in 1970 and in 1987.

From 1990 to 2001 student numbers increased fourfold. The graph shows a sudden jump from 1993 to 1994 – this was the year in which, as a result of the 1992 Act of Parliament, the former polytechnics obtained university status, and so anthropology students taught at Oxford Brookes and the University of East London were included for the first time. But expansion also continued within existing departments, as is evident from the growth either side of this transitional year.

Recruitment to the discipline. What is intriguing about this decade of sustained expansion is that it was not the product of a successful marketing and promotion strategy by the discipline. In his editorial Sillitoe returns to a perennial theme of the importance of public profile, and the problem of there not being an A-level in anthropology. Is this the only way of getting schools on board?

The sporadic attempts by first the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) and then the RAI (e.g. Sallnow 1978) to promote the teaching of anthropology in secondary schools in the 1960s and 1970s would have had little impact on the 1990s application boom. Individual departments are, however, increasingly promoting their own degree programmes locally, as universities develop ‘access’ initiatives and closer links with schools. The ‘A-level anthropology’ initiative has in recent years been revived by Paul Valentine and others, but faces the tough challenge of showing the exam boards that a clear need for anthropology exists within the sixth form curriculum. This translates into a minimum of 250 students sitting the exam to make the course commercially viable, which in turn means finding at least 20 schools with teachers committed to introducing anthropology. A recent attempt to generate interest amongst potential teachers had little effect.

A more effective approach may be to encourage increased teaching of anthropology within other AS and A-level subjects – sociology, citizenship or human geography, for example. The debate also overlooks the fact that anthropology is offered as part of the International Baccalaureate.

Gender. What sort of students study anthropology? In 1965, 16 men and 29 women were accepted onto anthropology degree courses, and since then there have consistently been more women than men studying at the undergraduate level. In recent years women have outnum-bered men by a ratio of 2:1, though this reflects a gender imbalance across the social sciences as a whole.

Age. The intake of ‘mature’ students peaked in the early 1990s, with 37% of the 1994 intake aged 21 or over, though this disguised large differentials between departments. This percentage has since declined, and in 2001 only 20% of those accepted were 21 or over.

Home/overseas. In 2001, for the first time, more than 10% of students were not UK residents. The discipline has always attracted significant numbers of international postgraduates, but at the undergraduate level international students have usually made up less than 5% of each year’s intake.

Background. In 2002, 63% of anthropology students whose economic background was known came from the top two social class categories (higher and lower managerial occupations). This reflects anthropology’s resonance for young people of particular backgrounds and social experiences, but also the social composition of the old universities in which most departments are located. This figure compares with a figure of 52% for sociology, and an average for all the social sciences of 56%. Statistics relating to ethnicity and race are complex, but in 1995 only 10% percent of UK-domiciled anthropology undergraduates were from an ethnic minority, compared to 14.5% percent of students in the university sector more broadly.

Employment. Where do students go after completing their degree in anthropology? A 1995 survey (Macerenah-Heyes with Wright 1995) revealed that education, health, environment, media and housing were the most important sectors for anthropological alumni. HESA’s first destination surveys are notoriously unhelpful in revealing where graduates take their degrees, but the 2001 returns show that six months after graduating in anthropology, 50% of UK anthropology graduates were in paid full-time employment on long-term contracts (meaning longer than one year), as opposed to 59% of all students.

This may be because more anthropology graduates choose initially to work part-time, travel or do voluntary work. Average unemployment was 6%, about the same as for graduates in general. Differences associated with subject studied disappear over time, and three years on, 75% of social science graduates are employed in higher-level posts (Elias et
al. 1999). Any attempt to define an anthropological career trajectory makes the assumption that there are particular skills intrinsic to the anthropology degree. It also tenden-
tiously presumes that graduates will carry their anthropologi-
cal identity with them. It would be interesting to compare the graduate skills listed in the anthropology benchmark statement (see www.qaa.ac.uk) with those that ex-students and employers perceive graduates as having obtained. That said, what employers say they want is often very different from the skills they actually look for (Teichler 1998).

International comparisons. How do UK undergraduate recruitment trends compare internationally? In the US, anthropology is taught in 440 out of the nation’s 2000 uni-
ersities and liberal arts colleges (compared with 20 out of the UK’s 160 universities and higher education colleges). Enrolment has doubled over the last decade in the US, peaking in 1998 when 9200 US students received BA degrees (AAA 1999). The picture in Europe is varied – in the Netherlands there has been a steady decline in students studying anthropology since the 1970s (Hoogbergen 2003), whilst in Switzerland the opposite is the case (Waldis 2003).

Postgraduate studies

Back in the UK, things are more rosy at postgraduate level, though expansion is not without its problems. ‘British’ anthropology began as a research seminar and, in the eyes of many of its practitioners, is still defined by its research activities. As Figure 2 shows, postgraduate numbers have flowed and ebbed, and the striking decrease in the 1980s was partly due to funding cuts imposed during the extended economic crisis of the 1970s, prolonged by Thatcherite austerity measures in the early 1980s when the Social Science Research Council was threatened with close-
ure. At the peak in the early 1970s, more than 80 students a year received government PhD studentships. This figure dropped very suddenly to virtually none, and only slowly climbed to the 25 or so students who by the late 1990s received studentships each year. Under the new Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ‘1+3’ funding regime, which partly replaces its funding for taught MAs, 38 anthropology students received PhD awards in 2002.

Postgraduate numbers have doubled over the last decade, as Figure 2 shows. Figure 3 disaggregates taught Master’s and research students, but excludes part-time stu-
dents – a group that can double the total postgraduate body-count in some years. Numbers of taught MA stu-
dents fluctuated little until the 1990s, but in recent years have caught up with, and since 1998, overtaken research student numbers. This is the result of both the increasing number and variety of Master’s courses being offered and growing international recruitment, as shown in Figure 4. In 1980 40% of postgraduates were not from the UK; this figure is now almost 60%, with only one third of these being from the European Union. Departments are increa-
singly relying on the fee income MA students bring, and growing international recruitment risks exposing them to the vagaries of the global political economy.

Research

The growth of the discipline’s research capacity is revealed in the number of anthropology PhDs awarded over the last 60 years (Figure 5, drawing on Spencer 2000), which show constant growth apart from a plateau period for a decade during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Again, change is most marked during the 1990s, with around 40 PhDs a year being awarded at the beginning of the decade, and 100 a year by the end. These figures come initially from records kept by ASLIB, and more recently from departmental returns to the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) held in 1992, 1996 and 2001, as ASLIB records become less complete.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Professor Jonathan Spencer for the use of his data on PhD completions.

1. For example, see Benthall’s (2002: 10-11) designation of anthropology as a ‘service’ rather than a ‘master’ discipline.


Figure 3. Full-time postgraduate students in the UK. Source: UGC 1966-
1993, HESA 1994-

Figure 4. International and UK-domiciled full-time postgraduate students. Source: UGC statistical records 1980-1993, HESA 1994-

Figure 5. PhDs awarded by UK anthropology departments. Sources: ASLIB Annual reports 1950-1990; RAE returns 1990-2000 and Spencer 2000.

Intriguingly, the RAE returns, particularly in the latter part of the 1990s, are regularly 20% above the numbers of PhDs recorded by HESA. Whatever the exact figures and the cause of this discrepancy (the RAE submission unit may well have been larger than the anthropology depart-
ment itself), the figures indicate an impressive degree of intellectual (re)production. Nearly half of all anthropology PhDs awarded in the latter part of the 1990s were to stu-
dents from four universities (UCL, Cambridge, Oxford and LSE), a phenomenon that is likely to continue as funds become more concentrated in top-ranked ‘research’ universities as a result of the 2003 White Paper.

These figures are also the result of faster submissions and higher completion rates, as departments jump for ESRC carrots (recognition of training programmes) and dodge its sticks (completion rate sanctions). In fact this PhD boom raises the question – not for the first time (see below) – of the sorts of training PhD students are receiving, when many of them are likely to use the skills they have gained in non-academic settings. If the PhD is
not simply a research apprenticeship and a means to reproduce the discipline within universities, then what training is most useful and valuable for such students?

Academic positions

As Ragnar Johnson (2003) points out, the chances of many of these PhD students obtaining one of the 230 or so estimated full-time academic appointments in anthropology departments are slim (Figure 6), though he does not take into account movement within the academic labour market and the growing use of fixed-term teaching posts. Variation in the number of staff posts is directly related to changes in government funding of higher education. Figure 6 shows an overall picture of growth, though the number of posts peaked in the early 1970s and then remained unchanged for more than 10 years. The number of faculty has since doubled, but undergraduate student numbers have increased fivefold during the same period.

The gender disparity evident at undergraduate and postgraduate level is reversed as one goes up the career ladder. Sixty per cent of full-time core teaching staff in the discipline today are men (Spencer 2000), an improvement from 1983 when this figure was 82 per cent (Riviere 1985). The percentage of male professors is still closer to 80 per cent, either the legacy of an earlier period when the pool of applicants was predominantly male, or evidence of the persistence of a gendered career hierarchy.

There are many untold stories behind staff employment figures. Firstly, these numbers do not include those anthropologists employed in other university departments or as contract researchers. They also do not of course include a growing, hidden labour force of part-timers, paid by the hour as visiting lecturers or to lead undergraduate seminar groups, often with few contractual rights. Today’s concerns about employment echo those expressed in the late 1970s, the epoch of ‘man-power’ planning.

One of the outcomes of a joint SSSC-ASA conference on the topic in 1979 (Akeroyd, Grillo and Tapper 1980) was a sub-committee to examine changes in employment in the discipline. The findings of the ‘Working Party Report on training for applied anthropology’ (otherwise known as the Grillo Report) pointed to a ‘bottleneck’ of 100 unemployed PhD postgraduates, and highlighted their lack of preparation for careers beyond academia (see also Riviere 1985). By comparison, the discipline is now producing almost 100 PhDs every year, though many of these are international students, for whom a global job market may beckon. The Grillo Report recommended establishing vocational Master’s courses and training courses. The conference also led, in 1981, to the creation of GAPP, the Group for Anthropology in Policy and Practice (Wright 1995), whose courses continue to this day. This debate over the relationship between employers and anthropologists is being revisited at the ‘Applications of Anthropology’ ESRC-funded seminar series being convened by Sarah Pink this year in collaboration with the ASA and C-SAP (Centre for Learning and Teaching – Sociology, Anthropology and Politics).

Trends in the discipline

Three things strike anyone seeking to understand anthropology’s demography in the UK. The first is the close correlation between historical changes in government funding policies and the shape and size of the discipline, in terms of both student numbers and staff appointments. The current government’s predilection for policy led by centralized target setting has led institutions and departments to become increasingly proficient at using this sort of statistical data to market their wares and maximize student applications, relabelling courses in response to student fashions.

Anthropology’s scholarly bodies, caught in their awkward dual role as both disciplinary custodians and shoe-string proselytizers, are unlikely to be able to have a direct or significant influence on these trends. Their work is more likely to result in a broader public awareness of the discipline’s research contributions. Yet even here there is a paradox, revealed in the way Sillitoe couples his call for the broader dissemination of anthropological insights with an anxiety over those gatecrashers who lay claim to an anthropological identity after a two-week training course. One can’t have it every way: if anthropologists popularize their knowledge then they have to accept that it may be appropriated and used in unexpected ways.

The second point to note is that, for all Sillitoe’s fear that anthropology might seem to be going the way of Anglo-Saxon, social anthropology has historically been a small and marginal presence amidst the massed faculties of knowledge, if one with a track record of vigorously defending its particular ecological niche, primarily in the ‘old’ universities. It was anthropologists who, through their own informal networks of supervision and collegiality, sought to keep close control over who was initiated into their nascent discipline. One could argue that undergraduate and Master’s student numbers mattered primarily because they were potential PhD ‘recruits’, a rather self-interested motive for disciplinary self-promotion. But today, given the close corollary between student numbers and lecturer posts, and the increasingly strategic and savvy approach of young people – and their parents – to choosing a degree, there are other reasons to market the discipline. Anthropologists could do more to show how their research is ‘relevant’ and ‘useful’, not to mention interesting, whilst accepting that ‘pure’ disciplinary boundaries and internal theoretical skirmishes are increasingly unimportant, particularly to undergraduates. A Simon Schama-lookalike with television series in tow might be no bad thing.

One final thought. The figures suggest there is scope for further investigation into the sorts of students who study anthropology, and into where people take their subject-specific skills after their undergraduate or postgraduate training. There are a number of departmental initiatives, currently funded by C-SAP, to explore means of promoting anthropology within schools, of supporting skill development within undergraduate degrees and of researching access and student retention issues. Rather than worry about the global ‘public profile’, why not focus on engaging with specific publics – such as those who need their degrees and get jobs outside academia. Perhaps they are not all as nostalgic about their intellectual experience as their teachers are wont to imagine. Yet if universities are increasingly seeking to cultivate relationships with their ex-students, why shouldn’t disciplines have alumni too?

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Figure 6. Full-time academic staff in UK anthropology departments.