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Is art history under threat? UK universities see 28.5% drop in the subject in past decade

Latest figures show decline in first year students choosing humanities degrees in favour of business, agriculture and medicine

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There has been a 28.5% drop in the number of UK-based first year university students taking art history degrees over the decade

Humanities subjects, including art history, classics and archaeology, are continuing to lose favour with undergraduate university students, according to figures released by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) last week.

The number of UK domicile first year students (first degree) selecting historical and philosophical subjects fell by 5% between 2017-18 and 2018-19, contributing to a 17.5% decline in popularity over the past ten years. Tucked within this category sits art history, which fared a particularly rocky 28.5% drop over the decade. Between 2017-18 and 2018-19, Languages also fell by 6.2%, whilst creative arts and design saw a 1.5% decline. Conversely, business and administrative Studies saw a 7% growth from last year's figures, with agriculture and medicine also growing in popularity. "It is important that we do not lose sight of the humanities which are absorbing and important areas of study and can also lead to excellent career options," says Geoff Barton, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders.

We live in a country where millions of people visit galleries, but almost no-one studies art history. MATT LODDER, A SENIOR LECTURER AT THE SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND ART HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

Unease over dwindling numbers for these subjects is not new, in part thanks to the government's commitment to STEM subjects (that is, science, technology, engineering and maths). Indeed, an attempt by the government in 2016 to remove art history from its A-Level offering was blocked by a [high-profile campaign](#), which received widespread support from the art world, including the British artists Jeremy Deller and Cornelia Parker.

A spokesperson from the Department of Education says; "Humanities and creative arts play a major role in the UK socially and culturally and we know these subjects have wider individual and economic benefits." The department also highlighted the government's investment of around £500m in music and arts education programmes, between 2016 and 2020.

For some, these measures may not seem enough; "We live in a country where millions of people visit galleries, but almost no-one studies art history. That's got to be seen both as a failure of our cultural education and of museums to explain the intellectual edifice which lies behind their blockbuster shows," says Matt Lodder, a senior lecturer at the School of Philosophy and Art History, University of Essex. "In this culture of anxiety of 'employability', I think we're actually pushing kids to make choices which make them less employable. They're choosing things they think they should study rather than things they want to study, which means they'll have a harder time succeeding."