
THE MASTER'S DEGREE: PERSPECTIVES ON INDEPENDENT RESEARCH ON POST-GRADUATE LEVEL.¹

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Opsomming

Die gedoseerde MA-kursusse in Geskiedenis het geweldig toegeneem. Dit bied die geleentheid om verdere studie in Geskiedenis te onderneem sonder om gekortwiek te word deur sekere logistiese probleme, soos afstand van argiewe of die tyd nodig om lang argivale navorsing te onderneem. Die groot bydrae van die gedoseerde kursusse is dat dit ook die geleentheid bied om studie op gevorderde vlak te onderneem buite die konteks van Suid-Afrika. Daar is wel potensiële probleme aan die gedoseerde kursusse gekoppel, maar met sterk eksterne eksaminering, word dit tot die minimum beperk. Die artikel verwys na verskillende modelle van gedoseerde kursusse wat by Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite aangebied word. Die artikel ontleed ook die tendens ten opsigte van stentegetalle aan die betrokke universiteite en koppel die binnelandse tendens aan bv. die Universiteit van Botswana.

Ten slotte doen die artikel 'n oproep om 'n positiewe uitkyk op die moontlikhede wat die gedoseerde kursusse bied, asook voortgesette argivale navorsing, beide in die verhandelingsgebaseerde en die skripsie MA-studies. Die uitdaging vir Geskiedenis in die volgende eeu, is om waarde toe te voeg tot mense, en in besonder Suid-Afrikaners se lewens, deur die praktisering daarvan te verhoog. Die gedoseerde kursusse bied die geleentheid daartoe.

Introduction

"The life which is unexamined is not worth living."

This quote from Plato's *Apology* 38a² was used by Beverley Southgate to argue that "unexamined history" is also not worth doing. He calls for historians as human beings to present "some self-awareness, some understanding of what it is that we are trying to do,

¹ Based on a paper presented at Biennial Conference of South African Historical Association, University of the North, 30 July 1998.

² From the translation by B. Jowett, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1875), vol. 1, p. 371, as quoted in Beverley Southgate, *History: What and why? Ancient, modern and post-modern perspectives* (London, 1996), p. 1.

and of why we are trying to do it.”³ The pursuit of History in academic, professional and other social spheres ought to be perceived as a self-conscious analysis of how we have come to where we are today. Without claiming to be offering an overall “truth”, an “objective” presentation of the “facts” of the past, Southgate calls for the essential acknowledgement of the underpinning of what has been undertaken. In essence it can be said that historians are today less dismissive of contemporary philosophy or towards post modernist theories in their endeavour to engage in the research and writing of History. This is the result of, what Southgate explains, the view that

... to be educationally important, history must of course play a practical role in human life – changing individual perceptions and hence enabling change within society ... To be of any practical benefit, historical study must result in some effect upon the future; it must facilitate, enable, and direct the course of future change. This is not in any way to suggest that our future is predetermined by our past, but that our perception of the past can be used to validate and re-enforce the future that we want.⁴

This approach to History can be explained in the light of the post-modernist challenge to subjects in the social sciences and the humanities that have for so long followed the methodologies of the natural sciences. It is acceded that the Southgate view might be disputed and openly debated amongst *inter alia* historians in South Africa, but this paper finds that perspective especially useful in assessing the historical research undertaken on master’s degree level in this country. While the practice and education of History is seen by the author as the only route towards changing and creating a new society in South Africa, nearer to home, an assessment of master’s degree studies could assist in providing a broader base for History to achieve exactly that.

This paper argues that the master’s degree generally offers the first opportunity towards a scholarly contribution to South African history. The nature of the master’s degree has changed considerably over the past decade. The statistics show dwindling master’s student numbers in History at South African universities. The paper will address the following aspects of this topic:

- What is being expected from post-honours level historical research?
- The nature of Master’s degree programmes in South Africa currently.
- Statistics regarding MA-studies in History in South Africa.
- Implications for MA-studies in History in the next millennium.

³ Southgate, *History: What and why?*, p. 1.

⁴ Southgate, *History: What and why?*, p. 132.

1. Historical research after the Honours degree

For decades, the master's degree has been regarded as the cornerstone of the writing of History, since study on that level would be the first encounter with primary sources. Writing history based on primary sources would be the ultimate goal of any practising historian. Arthur Marwick wrote: "A historical work is deemed scholarly and reliable according to the extent to which it is based on 'primary' sources, the basic, raw, imperfect evidence."⁵ Although it is seen as the ground rule of good scholarship that a historian should master all the existing secondary material on a particular topic when embarking on the writing of History on that topic, the fundamental requirement for good History is that of primary research. A historian must bring the primary evidence from primary resources together in a new synthesis, a coherent, intelligible new work of History. This demanded that the historian work through primary source materials himself.⁶ For a very long time, perhaps since the influence of the nineteenth century German school, the "scientific" study of primary sources formed the highest achievement of the historical discipline. As Tosh explains: "The fact remains, however, that the study of history has always been based squarely on what the historian can read in documents or hear from informants."⁷ He even argues in favour of that primary role of primary sources in modern History when he writes: "In a very real sense the modern discipline of history rests not on what has been handed down by earlier historians, but on a constant reassessment of the original sources."⁸

In South Africa the practice of History has progressed through the Von Ranke tradition and maybe today is still left with remnants thereof. What still looms prominent is the heavy reliance on the use of primary sources, or original archival research. Before the 1980's very few universities, in fact only one university, provided for the possibility of obtaining a MA-degree based not exclusively on archival research. For South African students in History that implied extensive periods of archival research on topics relating primarily to the History of South Africa. Traditionally the MA-degree required independent research by the student, on a neatly defined topic, a piece of original research of limited scope to illustrate the student's ability to do independent research, to master the art of the historical methodology and eventually present a thesis that displays the rules of the discipline – a coherent piece of History nobody else has written about before.

From the Master's degree new enquiry would then be taken further to the writing of a monograph or a Ph.D. study, again based on archival research, to make "an original

⁵ A. Marwick, *The nature of history* (London, 1976), p. 131.

⁶ Marwick, *Nature of history*, p. 131.

⁷ J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (second edition, London, 1991), p. 31.

⁸ Tosh, *Pursuit of history*, p. 31.

contribution to historical knowledge." The basis for scientific enquiry, analysis and interpretation would therefore lie in the initial primary research of the MA. In 1995 Professor Ken Smith of the Department of History, UNISA, wrote:

Traditionally the MA in History has been considered part of the training of a historian. The construction of a logical narrative from primary documentary material in accordance with accepted historical practices and techniques, is an essential training ground for the production of a doctoral thesis.⁹

South African universities, particularly the Departments of History, still rely heavily on the Master's degree by dissertation/thesis as the core of post-honours training. An enquiry into the requirements of seventeen South African universities, all still offered the dissertation as an option. Some of the requirements officially published in the universities' calendars explicitly stipulate the requirement of in-depth original research as the basis of such a dissertation. At the University of the Orange Free State (UOFS) a dissertation must provide evidence of penetrating research into primary sources, independent judgement and insight into the topic.¹⁰ At the University of Stellenbosch (US) the MA thesis is based solely on archival research, primarily on aspects of South African History. This thesis has to analyse and reconstruct a particular historical event in great detail.¹¹

The University of Cape Town (UCT) requires a student writing an MA by dissertation to present it as the results of "advanced study",¹² "an exercise in historical research and exposition ..."¹³ but in three different forms. It could either be a dissertation of 200 pages, or a collection of essays, each embodying original research and bearing on a common theme or subject, or a critically annotated edition of a hitherto unpublished manuscript. Whichever form is chosen, a Master's degree at UCT is awarded primarily on the basis of proficiency in the critical use of source material.¹⁴

⁹ K. Smith, "Reasons for introducing the MA degree by course work at UNISA", paper presented at RAU workshop on "MA degree by course work", 4 August 1995.

¹⁰ University of Orange Free State presentation at RAU workshop on "MA degree by course work", 4 August 1995.

¹¹ University of Stellenbosch Calendar: MA thesis (1998), p. 878.

¹² University of Cape Town Handbook (1997), p. 86.

¹³ University of Cape Town Handbook (1998), p. 26.

¹⁴ University of Cape Town Handbook (1998), p. 26.

At the University of Natal Pietermaritzburg (UNP) the MA dissertation has to be based on "original research, or an approved historical subject."¹⁵ At the Durban Campus of the University of Natal the requirement is more specific: "...MA on the History of southern Africa by dissertation consisting of an extended piece of original research ..."¹⁶ A similar requirement is put at the University of Fort Hare: "A prospective MA student is expected to complete a thesis on a topic ...the thesis must be based on primary sources (e.g. Documentary and oral sources) ...it must display a mastery of the relevant literature and employ a wide range of primary source material."¹⁷

To other universities the requirement of research from primary sources is either not stipulated or not required. No references are made to primary research for the MA dissertation by e.g. the University of Port Elizabeth, Vista University, University of Transkei, University of the Western Cape, University of Durban Westville, etc. Rhodes University explicitly stipulates that "... the choice of subject is not restricted to those based on archival research."¹⁸ At the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU) the regulation simply stipulates that a Master's degree shall consist of: "A dissertation on a subject from either Historical theory or Southern African history that demonstrates the candidate's ability to carry out independent academic research."¹⁹

It is therefore apparent that although all South African universities award MA degrees by dissertation, not all of those dissertations have to be based on primary archival research. The emphasis has shifted away from primary research to other forms of scholarly practice that could satisfy supervisors of the independent research, analytical, interpretative and writing abilities of a student. This development, together with other factors that will be discussed below, contributed to the emergence of a new brand of Master's degree in South Africa. The emphasis has shifted away from developing skills in the course of practising History only by engaging in archival research, to the development of those same skills pursuing other avenues. The essence of historical methodology requiring disciplined meticulous collection of information from primary documents, now has to be achieved through disciplined and meticulous analytical reading of other sources, be it primary or secondary sources. Where in the past History students were required to test the validity of information from primary sources through seeking corroborating evidence, History

¹⁵ University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg Calendar (1997), p. D85.

¹⁶ University of Natal, Durban Calendar (1997), p. K86.

¹⁷ University of Fort Hare, document on "Change of Syllabus for MA Programme," (10 November 1995).

¹⁸ Rhodes University Calendar (1998), p. 198.

¹⁹ RAU Faculty of Arts, "Degrees and Regulations", p. L 51.

students now have to find other means of corroborating the evidence from secondary sources. Internal and external criticism of primary sources now needs to be applied to newspapers, pamphlets, periodicals, reports etc. History students were required to reconstruct the past through the logical coherent formulation of a synthesis of the diverse and vast masses of information gathered from the archives. Now the requirement is exactly the same, but the synthesis is based on both archival research and secondary research, or only the latter.

2. The nature of Master's Degree programme in South Africa at present

In the mid-1970's the Rand Afrikaans University pioneered the field in South Africa by introducing the Master's degree by course work in History. Scepticism was expressed at the idea of awarding a Master's degree on any basis other than the presentation of a dissertation based on primary research. The new concept soon found a following, as circumstances in the country made it increasingly untenable for students wanting to further their studies in History, to spend extended periods at archives pursuing primary research. Many other factors also contributed to the dramatic increase in student numbers specifically for the course work Master's degree. The following considerations were instrumental in this shift:

The University of Natal Pietermaritzburg introduced an MA course work programme "...to provide advanced training in the discipline for students, both full-time and part-time who want to upgrade their qualifications from Honours level, but who do not have the time, the inclination or the research facilities to undertake a full-scale research MA."²⁰ UNISA and Potchefstroom also considered the increase in rurally-based students who are far from libraries and archives and who find it problematic to spend between three and six months at archives, an important consideration for the introduction of a MA by course work.²¹ UNISA felt driven to make it possible for those students to further their studies despite the logistical problems. These problems of distance, accessibility to archives and time, no doubt, greatly contributed to universities' decisions to introduce MA programme that would reduce the sole reliance on primary research in archives.

Another vital consideration with the introduction of the MA by course work, was to overcome the often very limited and specialized scope of original research, which in the end is "...highly technical and are hardly accessible to anyone but fellow

²⁰ J. Wright, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, "The MA degree by course work", paper presented at RAU workshop on "MA degree by course work", 4 August 1995. (Hereafter referred to as RAU workshop, 1995.)

²¹ Smith, "MA by course work, UNISA."

specialists," i.e., restricted in scope and applicability.²² Departments of History increasingly experienced that the scope of scientific enquiry could be meaningfully broadened. This would serve two purposes; firstly it would promote in depth research and study into other areas than South African History on an advanced level. Secondly the content of specialization could widen to encompass more of school syllabi, providing vital assistance to the teaching profession.²³ The University of Stellenbosch argued that MA studies by course work would promote a more holistic approach to History, more so than what can be expected from the restricted scope of archival research. Furthermore students who wish to do so, could opt for a broader and more general approach to History, rather than the more restricted focus on one aspect of the South African History only. The outcome, it was argued, would be an improved preparation of more students for a greater variety of employment opportunities, in e.g., journalism, foreign affairs, the diplomatic corps as well as education and libraries.²⁴ Simultaneously a more problem orientated approach to the study of world history was expected to be encouraged, since students would not only be collating narratives from archival resources, but presenting an exposition of an issue or current debate in secondary scholarly work.

A more practical, but often more pressing consideration in introducing MA degrees by course work, is the tendency for dissertation degrees to fall by the wayside and not to be completed – or to stretch over a lengthy period of time. This ties up with students' occupations and inability to take time off to work full time in archives. It has been argued that a more structured study and research programme for a Master's degree would encourage and contribute to the finalisation of the degree in a shorter time. This time factor has become more and more pressing when the South African government adjusted the funding formula for tertiary institutions to link up with the completion of qualifications in a minimum time frame. The MA by course work would then simultaneously provide an opportunity to diversify the content of Master's degrees and to finish in a shorter time or a more reasonable affordable time.²⁵

The time consideration has also become more important in the light of the change in student composition at most universities. More and more students have applied

²² Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, p. 120.

²³ This was strongly argued by both the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and UNISA at RAU workshop, 1995.

²⁴ University of Stellenbosch presentation at RAU workshop, 1995.

²⁵ Potchefstroom University presentation at RAU workshop, 1995.

for accreditation of honours degrees from the previously Black universities. Unfortunately the component independent research, familiarity with archives and methodological training has not always fully met with the requirements put to the prospective new Master's student at other universities. Not wanting to refuse such students the opportunity of obtaining a further degree, students have been admitted to the Master's programme, since they needed assistance and bridging tuition before they would be able to embark on independent primary research. The experience of the Department of History at the Rand Afrikaans University has been an example of this. To require from some of these very enthusiastic students to plan, execute and write a dissertation, while he/she is not familiar with primary research, archives or the writing of history, would result in the waste of time and a possible loss of self confidence. A structured programme provides the framework for methodological and practical skills development, while other training deficiencies can be addressed. The regular evaluation of different aspects of the course work, enables the supervisor to correct and direct the student in order to prepare him/her for the independent research activity of the mini-dissertation. UNISA has also referred to the problem of selecting an appropriate MA topic from archival sources, as a stumbling block to prospective students. "Although lecturers do their best to assist once a student comes up with a tentative proposal, a good number of prospective students fall by the way as a result of not being able to settle on a viable topic."²⁶ The gradual guidance of a student through a course work degree offers the opportunity to identify a topic in the course of the seminar work. The topic then furthermore does not have to be based on primary sources exclusively, it does not have to be as extensive as for a full dissertation and by the time the topic has been selected, almost 50% of the degree should be completed. The structured nature of the Master's degree by course work has definitely acted as a motivational factor in encouraging students to take up the task and finish in the foreseeable future – even those students who needed guidance and bridging.

The latter consideration for the introduction of course work MA's might in future become even more realistic with the expected influx of students from outside the South African borders. As it stands currently, the Minister of Education, Sibusiso Bhengu, announced in Durban in April 1998 that arrangements were in hand for free inter change of postgraduate students to enroll at SADC universities.

The different considerations stated above have prompted other Departments of History at South African universities to follow the Rand Afrikaans University's example in offering Master's degrees by course work. A wide variety of models are available. In most cases the structure provides for extensive seminar work, an examination or examinations and a dissertation of limited scope. The University of Pretoria requires only seminars in one

²⁶ Smith, "MA by course work, UNISA."

course (four options offered) and a mini-dissertation. Seminars do not have to be based on archival sources, but have to include problem statements, hypotheses, historiographical and historical context. The dissertation must be approximately 90 typed pages, not necessarily based on archival research.²⁷ Potchefstroom University requires seminars and a three hour examination on two topics (from a four option list) as well as an oral, before the mini-dissertation is undertaken. The required 80 page length compares well with the requirement of the University of Pretoria. The Department does not require the use of primary sources for topics on Africa or World History, but both secondary and primary sources are required for topics on the South African History, the latter in archives, when possible. The emphasis is on the critical use of sources in the dissertation.²⁸

At UNISA students are required to choose one field of study from five options and then do three papers per field of study. Two seminars are required per paper, as well as a three hour exam per paper. On completion of the above, the mini-dissertation can be commenced upon, with the topic from the chosen field of study as well.²⁹ The University of the Witwatersrand course work model provides for four papers from three sections (one on theory of History, one on directed readings as prescribed by the Head of the Department, and two from African, Southern African, British, European and American History). A three hour examination is written in each of the four papers, followed by a "research report" of approximately thirty thousand words. The research report must be of such a standard that would make it worthy of publication in a recognised learned journal. Students with honours degrees from other universities than the University of the Witwatersrand, are required to do six papers.³⁰

The University of Stellenbosch offers three possible course work MA models. Students can choose to do a one year course post honours degree, consisting of advanced studies in two modules. Students have to do structured studies, one research essay and an examination in each module. The examination takes the form of an evaluation project. Finally a mini-dissertation, contributing 50% to the final mark, must be completed. The second option provides for a two year MA course work directly after a BA-degree, with History as a major. Students have to complete four modules, with two compulsory modules on History as a discipline and one on the methodology and historiography of History. A mini-dissertation is still required. The third option can be compared to an option of the University of Cape Town, i.e. a two year M.Phil-degree directly following a BA-degree (with

²⁷ University of Pretoria presentation at RAU workshop, 1995. The University of Pretoria has offered MA degrees by course work since 1995.

²⁸ Potchefstroom University presentation at RAU workshop, 1995.

²⁹ Smith, "MA by course work".

³⁰ University of Witwatersrand presentation at RAU workshop, 1995.

History as a major) plus an educational qualification and education experience. Students have to complete the two compulsory modules required for an MA immediately after a BA-degree, plus two History Education specific modules. Only one module is taken from the three theme options for the MA degree following an honours in History. A mini-thesis is also required.³¹ The UCT M.Phil in History Education requires the completion of three research modules (one in educational research, one in historical research and one in research in History Education) and two in topics in Cape History. Only after the successful completion of these five modules can students submit research proposals for the 50% dissertation. This dissertation must comprise of a literature/historiographical survey of a specialised historical topic, original historical survey of a specialised historical topic, original historical research and issues which the topic raises in classroom teaching.³²

The other MA Course work option offered by UCT might perhaps not be classified as course work as such. The degree is a BA (Honours)/MA Course work degree in Western Cape Historical studies, jointly offered by the Departments of History and Archaeology. Students do the BA (Honours) (HIS406W) degree in History the first year. The following year, on satisfactory completion of all courses in the first year, their registration for the second year will be upgraded to HIS506W (MA in Western Cape Historical Studies). The latter requires "the submission of an acceptable research proposal", of which the length and research requirements are not fully stipulated in the Student Handbook.³³ It seems as if the HIS506W dissertation could by itself constitute the MA-degree, which would then be a degree based on research with no lectured or seminar work treated in separate modules. This interpretation is supported by a recent communication from the UCT Department of History that the Department is considering further taught MA options, but that those are unlikely to be launched before 2000.³⁴ UCT therefore basically relies on independent research and the writing of a longer or shorter dissertation for a MA degree in History.

At the moment the MA course work pioneers, RAU, and the University of the Orange Free State, offer the widest course work options available. The UOFS offers one option as a strictly taught option. Students complete four papers in two years time, writing an examination in each paper. Students are also required to write seminars in each paper, but no dissertation is required afterwards. The MA by course work consists of three

³¹ University of Stellenbosch, Department of History, Departmental publication, "Behoeftegerigte keuses vir 'n meestersgraad" (April 1998).

³² University of Cape Town, Department of History, "Student handbook" (1998), pp. 27-28.

³³ University of Cape Town, Department of History, "Student handbook" (1998), p. 26.

³⁴ B. Nasson, University of Cape Town, Department of History, to G. Verhoef, e-mail message, 4 May 1998.

papers. Students do two seminars in each paper, two three hour and two one hour oral examination as well as a mini-dissertation. This option is offered on an individual basis for a particular student. Paper topics have a common theme and the seminars and dissertation link up with it. The same central theme does not necessarily apply to the four taught papers in the taught MA option.³⁵

In the case of the Rand Afrikaans University the initial course work MA option provided for five in depth seminars on clearly spelt out topics within a range of fields of study. Students can choose to specialize in e.g. General History, Contemporary African History, Contemporary South African History (with specialisation in political and economic history and urbanisation) and American History. Within each field of study the lecturer prepares specific seminar themes or more specific topics that enables the student to choose five topics for seminar purposes. Students have to prepare in-depth seminars for presentation either to the lecturer only, fellow MA students or members of the Department. Usually secondary resources are used for these seminars, but strong emphasis is placed on recent articles, debates and the historiography on the topic. Seminars can not only be narrative, but must present a thorough analysis of the issue based on a problem statement, multi-dimensional analysis and a well argued conclusion. On completion of the seminars, students write a three hour examination on the fields of study selected for the seminars. The seminar work can also be examined by means of an oral examination. External examiners are always part of the evaluation process – be it as examiner of a written paper or as co-examiner during the oral exam. The last requirement is the mini-dissertation of approximately 100 typed pages, in some cases not requiring the use of archival or primary sources. In the studies on South African History, the use of primary sources is required.³⁶

Similar to the UOFS taught MA, a new option was introduced in 1998, providing far more intensive source analysis (secondary sources) and lecturing on two themes in twentieth century South African History. Students are evaluated on preparation and contributions for lectures, one assignment (seminar) and a test in each of the two themes. This option thus provides for more structured guidance to students in an attempt to bridge a skills and background deficiency. Only if a minimum of 40% has been obtained in the class work, seminar and test, will a student be permitted to write the examination on both themes at the end of the two semesters. Finally a mini-dissertation has to be written on a topic relating to either of the two themes studied. It is therefore not possible to obtain an MA degree from RAU without writing at least a mini-dissertation – in both course work MA's contributing 50% to the final mark.³⁷

³⁵ University of the Orange Free State Calendar (1998).

³⁶ RAU, "Post graduate studies in History (MA)" (1997), pp. 1-11.

³⁷ RAU, Faculty of Arts: "Degrees and Regulations" (1998), p. 72.

Since 1990 the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) also introduced an MA by course work option, primarily "to try to attract students from outside the university: in the case of the MA in History ... it was aimed mainly at teachers."³⁸ When students interested in studying the course did not comply with the 65% pass on honours level, an admission examination, based on two components, was required. Firstly it required the critical analysis of extracts of primary documents relating to South African and British History and secondly, an essay on a broadly worded topic in the Philosophy of History. The course itself consists of two subjects from eight subject options offered. In each subject two papers are written, one involving intensive study of a set of original documents, the other involving in-depth secondary reading into the historical context in which the documents were produced. In each of the two subjects, students are required to attend twelve seminars, each time producing a piece of written work ranging from comments on selected documents to ten page contextualising essays. Each student then writes four examinations: one in each paper of the two subjects. The mini-dissertation then has to be approximately 15,000 words of text and be based on research into primary documents.³⁹ Unfortunately by 1995 only one student registered for this option and by 1998 the option was available in print in the University Calendar, but not operational.

An interesting perspective to this analysis, is the MA programme of the University of Botswana. The MA programme is a two-year programme consisting of four courses, which are prerequisite to the writing of a 25,000 - 40,000 word dissertation. There are two compulsory courses, i.e., a course in research methods and philosophy of History and one on historiography of Southern Africa. Students are then free to choose another two courses from options on History of African Diaspora, Economic History of Africa and an advanced seminar in either History of Imperialism or Prehistory of Southern Africa.⁴⁰ This model seems comparable to the UCT two-year programme after the BA degree. The interesting aspect is the mix of teaching and examination (as is familiar in the South African course work programmes) and a substantial dissertation. The University of Botswana does therefore not rely on a dissertation only for an MA degree in History.

This discussion portrays the immense diversity currently existing in MA programmes in South Africa. On the one hand it sounds an alarm on the equality of qualifications bestowed upon students, and on the other hand it has contributed to an immense broadening of historical studies on an advanced level. As far as the traditional requirement of independent primary archival research is concerned, the mini-dissertation

³⁸ Wright, "MA degree by course work."

³⁹ Wright, "MA degree by course work"; University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, Calendar, (1997), p. D86.

⁴⁰ N. Parsons, University of Botswana, History Department, to G. Verhoef, e-mail message, 14 May 1998.

does not provide assurance that primary research will be undertaken any longer. Although the mini-dissertation is still required in most cases (with the exception of the UOFS tutored MA), it seems to have become more a test in problem solving, argument analysis, critical assessment and evaluation of ongoing academic debates. Specifically in the cases of the UOFS and RAU a mid-course termination possibility exists to allow Departments to terminate students' participation in the programme on grounds of insufficient performance and progress. This does strongly indicate the growing perception that the MA through course work has become an advanced bridging course towards the PhD.

3. Statistics regarding MA studies in History in South Africa

A frustrating, but in some unexpected cases a very rewarding survey of the tendency in the development of master's degrees, has shown a definitely stronger growth in course work degrees. Information specifically for the Rand Afrikaans University since 1990 indicates a movement away from dissertations in general, towards course work degrees, of approximately 3,5% for the period 1990-1997.

Table 1. Total Number of Master's Degrees completed at the Rand Afrikaans University, 1990-1997.⁴¹

| | <i>Dissertation</i> | <i>% of Total</i> | <i>Course Work</i> | <i>% of Total</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| 1990 | 267 | 48,3 | 285 | 51,6 | 552 |
| 1991 | 362 | 51,9 | 335 | 48,1 | 697 |
| 1992 | 308 | 45,3 | 372 | 54,7 | 680 |
| 1993 | 271 | 47 | 306 | 53,04 | 577 |
| 1994 | 213 | 41 | 312 | 59,4 | 525 |
| 1995 | 259 | 41,3 | 368 | 58,7 | 627 |
| 1996 | 350 | 49,3 | 360 | 50,7 | 710 |
| 1997 | 578 | 44,8 | 711 | 55,2 | 1289 |
| <i>Average % annual increase</i> | 16,64 | -3,5 | 21,36 | 3,6 | |

As reflected in Table 1, the slower increase generally in dissertation master's degrees (approximately 16,6% per annum) as compared to course work degrees (approximately 21,4% per annum) points towards a tendency of more structured tuition on post-honours level at the Rand Afrikaans University. Two possible explanations could be considered. On the one hand this tendency might reflect the occupation patterns of students, i.e. that full time work makes it more convenient to embark on a structured study programme with reasonable expectation of completion within a set period of time, as compared to only

⁴¹ Source: RAU Student Statistics, 1998.

dissertation work that would require lengthy disciplined independent work. The other possible explanation is that the vast increase in knowledge and the rapid development of information might require more structured teaching for longer than before. Whatever the reasons behind this tendency, the shift towards the course work master's degree at RAU, is clear.

In the Department of History at RAU a similar tendency can be observed.

Table 2. Total Number of Master's degrees in History registered at the Rand Afrikaans University, 1990-1998.⁴²

| | Dissertation | % of Total | Course Work | % of Total | Total |
|------|--------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------|
| 1990 | 7 | 70 | 3 | 30 | 10 |
| 1991 | 4 | 26,7 | 11 | 73,3 | 15 |
| 1992 | 4 | 26,7 | 9 | 60 | 15 |
| 1993 | 2 | 66,7 | 1 | 33,3 | 3 |
| 1994 | 4 | 50 | 4 | 50 | 8 |
| 1995 | 6 | 30 | 14 | 70 | 20 |
| 1996 | 5 | 31,2 | 11 | 68,7 | 16 |
| 1997 | 2 | 12,5 | 14 | 87,5 | 16 |
| 1998 | 4 | 26,7 | 11 | 73,3 | 15 |

Although sharp fluctuations can be observed in the composition of History Master's degrees between 1990 and 1993, (see Table 2) a steady decline in master's degrees by dissertation can be seen since 1994. The strong increase in students registered for the course work degree coincides with the steady increase in students from other universities than RAU, entering the programme. The RAU History Department experienced that those students generally fitted the category of students not yet prepared and able to embark on independent research. Only in a limited number of cases did students decide to do a course work degree in order to study a non-South African topic in-depth, e.g. the course work programme in American History. The Department does not foresee this tendency to change, in fact the introduction of the latest course work option based on more intensive lecturing and critical source analysis in 1998, bears testimony to the fact that the need for even more structured tuition is expected to increase.

The RAU experience was duplicated at certain other universities in South Africa, but it is not a universal or general tendency.

⁴² Source: RAU Student Statistics, 1998.

Table 3. Master's Degrees by Dissertation and Course Work registered at selected South African Universities, 1997 and 1998.⁴³

| | Dissertation | | Course Work | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | 1997 | 1998 | 1997 | 1998 |
| University of Stellenbosch | 4 | 4 | 6 | 8 |
| UOFS | 5 | 5 | 4 | 7 |
| University of Durban | 13 | 13 | 1 | 2 |
| University of Pietermaritzburg | 8 | 2 | - | - |
| University of Potchefstroom | 6 | 5 | 2 | 5 |
| University of Fort Hare | 5 | 3 | - | - |
| University of Pretoria | 20 | 13 | 15 | 20 |
| University of Cape Town | 14 | 14 | 4 ⁴⁴ | |
| UNISA | 10 | 11 | 13 | 15 |
| University of the Witwatersrand | 3 | 9 | - | |

Table 3 reflects the stronger tendency towards course work degrees at traditionally Afrikaans universities. The English speaking universities have a considerable lack of either the programme or the students in those programmes. The UCT numbers do not really reflect the course work model and at the University of Natal, Durban, the balance is completely tipped in favour of the dissertation. University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, suspended their course work programme. Wits and Fort Hare have no course work students, although the option exists. The interesting trend is that displayed in the University of Pretoria and UNISA statistics. UP only introduced the course work programme in 1995 and by 1998 the majority of their MA's were by course work. UNISA introduced the course work programme in 1996 and by 1997 already the course work students overtook the traditional dissertation students. The US composition is the most balanced of all the History Departments reflected in the table. Both at RAU and the UOFS, MA degrees by dissertation have been reduced to the smaller component.

The more interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the sample of History Departments reflected in Table 3, is that the dissertation as an option remains the dominant form of MA study undertaken in South Africa. In 1997 there were 88 Master's degrees by dissertation at the Departments of History in the sample and 79 in 1998. At the same time there were only 41 course work Master's degrees in 1997 and 57 in 1998 in the same sample. Despite the strong growth in course work degrees, the latter has not

⁴³ Source: Annual newsletter of the South African Historical Society (1997); Various telephone calls and e-mail correspondence.

⁴⁴ These are M.Phil degrees in History and Education.

yet become the dominant form of post-honours History degree. The statistics do indicate though, that the course work option is growing in popularity. In 1997 course work degrees made up roughly 47% of the total number of Master's degrees represented in the Table 3 sample. By 1998 the figure was 58%. This is the tendency that needs to be considered.

4. Implications for MA-studies in History in the next millennium

The dwindling student numbers in History, both on graduate and post-graduate level, together with the growing interest in course work master's degrees, require a conscious rethinking of what we as historians are doing. As Southgate was quoted at the outset of this paper: historians should consciously know what they are doing or why they are trying to do that. Representing a History Department with increasing course work Master's student numbers, concern has developed about the real contribution made to History as an academic discipline and to the practical role of History in human life through the course work model. Two closely related issues need to be considered. Firstly, is History, *examined History*, served by the increasing emphasis on taught work through structured courses? Keeping in mind the vital role of primary research and archival research, does course work qualifications contribute towards a lived-through reconstruction of the past, in order to serve the society in which we live, better? Secondly, does the course work model contribute towards improved social responsibility? Here historians have to consider the needs of their society in the broadest sense of the word.

The emphasis on the critical analysis of primary resources, primarily through archival research, has been highlighted in part one of this paper. It might be argued that that perspective is "traditional" or "old fashioned," but statistical evidence in part three of this paper shows that such requirements are still widely held at South African universities. Full Master's degrees by dissertation have maintained steady ground in the making of historians in South Africa. The watering down of the requirement to do research from primary sources for the mini-dissertation in the course work programme has therefore not contributed significantly to the promotion of original historical research. Often mini-theses are based only on secondary material and no analysis is based on or enquiry made into original source material. Mini-dissertations in course work degrees therefore generally do not contribute to the type of historical enquiry explained in part one of this paper. The question is: does history based on the use of primary documents offer the only contribution to historical enquiry and the "examined" history Southgate called for? Following from that, is it not the Ph.D.-studies that must make "an original contribution" to the body knowledge of History and not yet the Master's degree?

Although it can be argued that less and less original research from primary source material is increasingly done in Master's degrees, the focus should perhaps shift towards the other vital aspects of training in History that are addressed in the course work programme. I would argue that the promotion of problem orientated historical enquiry in order to

understand the dynamics of social, economic, cultural, political and religious development of societies, demands the development of analytical, critical, and inquiring intellectual skills. These skills can be developed through the structured course work programme. In the South African experience it has perhaps become necessary to strengthen these skills before original research can be undertaken purposefully and successfully. The quality of History is not guaranteed by the use of primary source material, but by the intellectual enquiry, analysis and reconstruction of past events enhancing understanding of the past for insight into the present. It can be argued that the trend towards the structured Master's programme is therefore not negative. It provides an extended opportunity beyond the honours degree for methodological and skills enhancement, which could improve the quality of the study of History. This is not to argue that the above could not be achieved through the traditional dissertation degree. The general lack of such skills often observed with students already in possession of an honours degree, has prompted universities to introduce programmes to guide students in a structured manner towards the acquiring thereof. These skills are the vital tools for enquiry and reconstruction, which will assist practitioners of History to produce the "lived through" or "examined" History – be it based on primary source material or secondary work.

It is in any case important to define "primary sources" carefully. Sources in archives are primary sources, but original sources not in archives, for example those in private collections, sources with nonofficial institutions, organisations operating outside the South African borders and oral testimony, are all primary sources worthy of historical enquiry. The old argument in favour of contemporary research was that historical enquiry and analysis into contemporary or current material required even more discipline and analytical skills from the student, since he is part of the time he is analysing. In that sense the mini-dissertations contribute towards a reconstruction of the past, sometimes the very recent past. It presents analysis and reconstruction that is open for reconsideration, as are all dissertations in any case. The course work programme therefore contributes towards the use of a wider variety of sources in a critical manner.

The second issue is whether the course work degrees are serving the social responsibility of History? This is not the place to engage in an extensive debate about what the purpose and responsibility of History is or should be. I would argue with Southgate in the introduction, that History must contribute to the understanding of the past in order to facilitate actions in future. In a very practical sense this means that firstly, students must be encouraged to undertake studies in History, and secondly, that their studies should promote their understanding of the past and help society to deal with the present and the future in a better informed manner. The course work programmes have contributed towards increased access to further studies for students who want to improve their qualifications, but do not qualify for entrance towards a dissertation. The statistics in Table 3 illustrate this point. The course work MA's have definitely broadened the scope of topics into which historical research can be undertaken. It has also promoted the comparative

perspective, since topics on eg. Africa and the USA have been undertaken and are studied in the context of the South African problems.

The South African society needs more historians, more inquiry about our own society and about the South African society in the context of Africa as well as the international community. The globalization of everything leads to the desire to know and understand more about the context of South African society. The fact that historical enquiry can be exercised outside the spheres of South African archives and therefore South African topics, makes the course work programme ideally suited. In this sense the course work programme can make a vital contribution towards the understanding of South Africa in Africa and in the international context.

The further important contribution that the course work programme makes, is that students have more success in completing degrees in three to four years. South African universities benefit from the completion of qualifications in a minimum time, but so does society. The structured nature of course work degrees assist students in making disciplined progress, completing parts of the degree and then not leaving an insurmountable task ahead, i.e. the mini-dissertation. Students' knowledge of a broad spectrum of related topics through the seminar work and extensive reading, is enhanced. It cannot be argued that the MA by course work is a lesser requirement than the full dissertation - it is equally in-depth, analytical and critical.

The difference lies with the more structured and directed approach. The strong emphasis on critical analysis and enquiry in the course work programme, provide a strong skills building tool that can only benefit the study of History on doctoral level.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the tendency towards more course work Master's degrees in South Africa must not be seen as an alarming trend. It provides an opportunity of extending the study of History beyond the limited elite. It also opens up historical enquiry outside the South African context. This is a very strong point of recommendation. The strong emphasis on critical analysis and engaging in theoretical debates on diverse subjects in course work, is an equally important recommendation. The shift away from limited scope topics and archival research based History resulting in less narrative-like research reports, is also positive. This development can contribute towards taking History nearer to society in its full context. This means that social, political, economic, cultural and religious phenomena in South African society can be researched in comparative perspective through the course work programme that focus more on coherent themes or topics, rather than topics of limited scope. This paper would like to call for more emphasis on primary research in mini-theses as far as topics allow. The model for Master's degrees at the University of Botswana serves as an example of advanced tuition and seminar work,

combined with substantial research into primary sources leading to a dissertation. Better co-operation between South and Southern African universities on Master's degree programmes, could make further contributions to the study of History, as well as encouraging students to embark on further studies in History after an honours degree. This is the challenge to academic practice in History in the next millennium.