# History and Employability

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We in history at Preston have always tried to show the relevance of academic study to getting jobs and doing well in them, since there are careers which do build directly on the study of history and the skills acquired while doing it. Our strong contribution towards the initial CETL proposal rested primarily on what we had been doing for some time, not what we hoped to do in future.

Given the almost universal teaching of history in some form right across the HE sector, and given the general tendency among those entering HE direct from A levels to follow established names as a guide to applications, it has always been clear to us that recruitment depends very much on establishing a distinctive and attractive profile. Indeed, even for local mature students who have restricted choice of destinations, a sense that we are oriented towards the real world of getting jobs may tip the balance towards taking a degree at all, or towards us instead of another north-western university.

Subject meetings regularly discuss these issues, and ways we can address them, and I am unaware of any significant division within the group over their importance. Teaching and museum and heritage work are the most obvious career routes that we pay attention to. At the same time, feedback on many levels and from many sources has always supported our contention that history is also one of the most respected non-vocational degrees in the job market. Building employability into history therefore first of all requires respect for what is intrinsic, and also what has been achieved already.

Our programmes, from three-subject entry to single honours, all build on a spine of core courses that teach at level 1 what history is and what it does; how it does it at level 2; and requires students to implement what they have learned in their dissertations at level 3. Beyond that, in level 1 we try to make students aware of the fundamental importance of communication skills; to accept and act on constructive criticism of the standard they have reached on this; and to seek remedial help if it is needed. We have tried to deliver PDP within this format, using the departmental approach. Level 2 requires a balance of skills-based and content-based modules so that students think about processes as well as facts and interpretations. Levels 2 and 3 offer options that allow direct engagement with vocationally oriented study that vary from those that are classroom-based to work placements, via more informal

individual investigations of professional issues. A key module in the past which has faded entirely due to a steady decline in student response is the *Community History Project*, HY2068, which ideally gets small teams of students to address a real commission from an outside client relating to some historical issue. They are assessed primarily on the appropriateness of their response and some final mode of delivery whereby the results are communicated, most obviously via a display. If sufficient real commissions are not available, staff simulate them and this can be very successful, as in last year's Friargate study. The dissertation can also be slanted towards issues relating to a vocational approach rather than purely academic topics.

However, lest this all appear too neat and easy, it must be said that significant numbers of students, especially the weaker ones, do not engage readily with the process, and effectively spend much of their energies trying to subvert it, consciously or unconsciously, rather than engaging with it as something that will ultimately be of great value to them. In addition, some of the most instrumental mature students have such a stereotyped idea of the irrelevance of the curriculum to the real world, even when they enjoy it, that they also paradoxically are hard to involve. The most recent Staff-Student Liaison Committee meeting (admittedly with a very poor attendance) registered what can only be described as zero interest in PDP as it is presently structured. There was a recognition that what lies behind PDP could be important, but there was no sense of how this could be harnessed at the moment, and no sense that it is important to students to find a method.

To extend and improve this requires a two-pronged approach:

1) Identifying those aspects of study which directly contribute to careers, and reinforcing their impact. Over the last decade, therefore, we have developed new specialised modules designed to prepare students for the transition to teaching or working in museums and heritage if that is where their interest lies. We now even have a small degree programme titled Museums, History & Heritage, and we should have out first graduate this year.
2) Showing all students what it is about the degree programme that makes it so much more than a rite of passage. We must get students to accept that research and analytical skills are generic, and that the general problem-oriented approach of historical study transfers readily into administrative and managerial roles. Moreover, the emphasis on investigating actual events and causal chains, which has been central to history for at least the last two centuries, rather than accepting received wisdom is also vital in business and administration.

The CETH allows us to develop both aspects in ways that we could not do alone, especially as we have been overstretched lately. The RWE and its manager clearly fit very well with pathway (1), preparing directly for careers, and I see my role as SC being partly in (2) and partly in making sure that the two prongs do not peel away from each other over time and become rivals. Therefore I think it is a virtue of the system that I remain firmly rooted in the subject area, linking it to the CETH, rather than vice versa. It should also be pointed out that employers in neither teaching nor museums would give credit for training given to students in particular skills at our stage, and that we must keep the primary focus on academic history if we are to fulfil the expectations of most students.

The delayed appointment of an RWE manager means the programme is not as far on as in some subject areas. Moreover, I was unable to take on these duties before semester 2, so we are still in the early stages.

However, the fortuitous success of the 2005-06 Community History Project on the history of Friargate that was undertaken by two HMH students and a historian has given us a flying start in some respects. The students managed to secure a site for their final display in the Harris Library which demonstrated that people are very receptive to history when it is put where they see it, and which talks about things they are interested in. It demonstrated to the students who took part that they had got very practical skills, and could take on project management. The history student commented recently that the module dovetailed perfectly with the level 2 core course in showing the links between academic skills and practical applications, and wished that everyone experienced this.

However, it is unclear whether this will spark a renewed interest in taking the module outside those who have to, while the follow up on several possible new projects that came out of it demonstrated just as clearly the difficulty of delivering a rapid response to public suggestions for collaboration, or sometimes any response at all within the existing degree structure. I have been discussing these with colleagues and intend to try to address this in the next few weeks. The Head of Department has just received a report with some recommendations as a first step.

The RWE manager, Billy Frank, and myself have been engaged in discussions as to how to put our time to best use, individually and collectively, and agree that the solution is not new modules for the sake of it. They would soak up all his time very quickly; they would compete for what is already a relatively small number of FTEs; and

only students who opted for them would get any benefit from the work that went into creating them.

Instead we propose a mixture of making the most of the modules that exist, and the development of pedagogical elements that could be incorporated into many modules, including ones not related to history. The most obvious example of this last is work on improving the ability to communicate which all academic staff identify as a chronic problem, and which employers always place great stress on. Staff quite legitimately find it hard to provide remedial teaching in the use of English, especially as many of the least capable are also the most resistant to correction. Methods of identifying such students, giving them guidance on what they are doing wrong, and offering help in putting it right are clearly needed, and they must not depend on individual action by module tutors or everyone will be swamped. Information sheets, standard codes for use during marking, and better links to existing skills courses, plus the possible development of remedial self-help systems delivered via WebCT could all make a real difference here.

We hope that together we can revitalise many aspects of the career-related modules within history:

1) Work placement module – we can become more proactive and seek out placements with key institutions rather than making students find their own in every case (though many may still do so). I would also like to explore the possibility of medium and long-term relationships with organisations that would effectively offer standing placements over several years, and where the university's contribution could be recognised as an important part of projects, rather than a make-work exercise as it can so easily be. This should increase both the number of students who wish to take up this opportunity, and the quality of their experience on it.
2) Restart a second-level half-module to be retitled *Insight into Museums and Heritage*, which was dropped when the History, Museums and Heritage degree began operating. It was hoped that more advanced students would join the new first-level core course to see what museums and heritage had to offer, but this has not worked, and experience suggests that the half-module format was probably ideal for its purpose. As such, it can be combined with an equivalent half-module on teaching and the National Curriculum by those unsure of where to go, or intending to try to become educators within museums.
3) Finish developing a stalled initiative to allow students from the half-modules just mentioned to follow them up by identifying a practical issue arising from the teaching, and investigating it in the real world. In schools this would

probably mean a classroom-based project, while for museums it is envisaged as being based upon observation, which could involve contact with museum staff but does not depend on it. This has been trialled via SIMs with great success, both in educational terms and in student response. Neither is a placement.

4) Develop the *Community History Project* into a vehicle capable of more flexible running, and designed to encourage a wider view of involvement with communities. Find ways to engage students with it.

I would also expect to be involved in developing the concept of the display space for the RWE, and have made initial suggestions about how we might simulate a museum staff experience in a fairly rounded way while preparing and putting on show exhibitions of a better technical standard than was possible with Friargate. This will presumably require the creation of a separate module to allow students to take part, but as yet there is no need for this.

In general terms, my aim is to link performance directly, visibly and inherently (ie, not only via assessment by academics) to rewards and to reinforcement of the sense that studies do matter outside the university. My rather peripheral involvement with PDP-type approaches over more than a decade has convinced me that however much we believe in their value (and in the abstract I do), students only engage with them in situations where there is a clear benefit to them and where the completion of records over a long period fits with their mode of study. This also has the possibilities of reaching those who are initially very sceptical, whereas relying on optional modules only reaches those motivated enough to choose them. Given that many students perceive such modules as a distraction and as a waste of an option within their home subjects, they are unlikely to make a major impact in a subject like ours.

Thus, in the *CHP* module, the Friargate team all deserved and duly got exceptional marks – high enough to affect their degree classification – but also received external praise that had nothing whatever to do with academic standards. The benefits to their CVs was absolutely obvious, and the boost to their self-esteem as historians was just as clear. We were not telling them that people appreciated history: people were visibly appreciating it, and outside professionals held the display over for two weeks after it was due to close. The leaflet had to be reprinted several times. Perhaps we will struggle to replicate this impact, but it shows it can be done.

Equally, if we can start students off on a road to improved communication, this should be reflected in their marks and in their ability to undertake tasks like the *CHP*. An effective display

requires an effective text, and that means knowing how to write grammatically, how to edit ruthlessly, and how to shape an argument. Building such improvement on real examples and practical steps rather than on sweeping statements and theoretical approaches is far more likely to pay off.

This also applies to the RWE. If it is perceived to be doing something that reaches other students at least, and hopefully the wider world as well, then those involved will have a different attitude to the norm. This is why I want to begin by perpetuating the Friargate display through spending more money on it and locating it in a central area of the university. Keeping the website readily available also matters, though it made less impact due to problems in getting it working. Its implicit links to a council-run regeneration scheme and the concept of a history trail down the street, plus the possibility of other initiatives dealing with the same area give it a reality most of our modules cannot compete with. It could become a role model for later *CHP*s, and an incentive not to let the department down. If the website's structure can be improved, it would provide a functional framework for other efforts.

It also shows that there is the possibility of creating several long-running projects that could act as the focus for a significant part of the work associated with the CETH. If most projects are free-standing and isolated, they absorb far too much energy and effort at the start-up stage, whereas established equivalents show students what can be done and offer obvious opportunities at little continuing cost. This is not only true of the *CHP* module: I am discussing a regeneration initiative taking place in Avenham which is intended to run for at least two years and could go on for longer. Apparently it is struggling and the team would welcome at least one placement as well as team projects. There is also potential for summer playschemes with children, and dissertation work. Whereas Friargate paralleled a council scheme, this would explicitly link up with one. It also offers opportunities for staff to undertake serious research, and to involve staff from other disciplines, all in a real world setting.

A major support that the CETH could offer to this strand which would have a major, general impact would be to support a resource and work area, combining what the Fylde Resource Centre does now with a place where students can meet and talk and do the practical work for projects. Teams need interaction, and work best within a generally collaborative atmosphere, so quite apart from the vital practical role that such a space could play, it would increase the sense of being part of a cohort, a subject, and a wider field of humanities.

CONCLUSION

From the preceding, the importance of action along these lines for recruitment should be obvious, but also retention would be improved if employability could reinforce the motivation of our students, especially the weaker ones who drop out too easily in the first year. I also think it would improve our image locally and regionally in ways that might lead to increased research funding since we would be perceived to be capable of delivering advice and action plans that are relevant to practical issues and projects.

It should also have a direct impact on teaching since the more motivated students are, the more they wish to learn, and the more they wish to participate actively rather than to endure their programme of study as some do now. If practical elements and support structures are available, then we avoid requiring individual teachers to endlessly reinvent the wheel, something which I believe is far too prevalent in British HE.

Obviously, the more this plan is discussed and worked upon, the more robust it is likely to become. There may be career options we have overlooked. There may well be existing structures that I can tap into that I am not aware of, or examples that can be studied in other subjects that have relevance. This is especially true if my ideas are taken up outside the history group, since many of them are relevant throughout humanities teaching. Moreover, if it led to an increase in interdisciplinarity among students, it would lead to a sense that subjects are not free-standing entities, but aspects of something much bigger. This in turn stops students perceiving their studies as so artificial, a prime factor in divorcing them from employability.

We must also beware of the dangers of group thinking, which were outlined in a previous awayday for CETH. If we stress the value of critical thinking and working from evidence in a generic to our students, we must practice this ourselves with regard to employability. Taking it on rather than leaving it to others allows us to stress to students that seeing their careers in passive terms, that is that they must simply conform to a stereotype, is not something to be taken for granted, and which does not promote innovation and a healthy society generally. Many current, rather glib definitions of employability assume that individual success validates all actions that produce that success, and that is very dangerous. In contrast to this, at a deeper level, history encourages people be aware of the wider results of their actions, and that individuals are always embedded in a society. As we move ever further into a system that encourages individualism in many practical ways, but also increasingly celebrates it in a crude ideological way that denies the possibility of any harm stemming

from it, this also matters. Corporations readily create a morality- and ethics-free zone for their managerial employees, and recent corporate scandals show this is not a beneficial trend, but one to be tamed.