

Enabling Effective Transition in History:

Developing Guidance for Schools and HE.

Workshop Report – July 2010.

Introduction to the day

This workshop was planned following the development of discussions at the ‘History in Schools – Present and Future’ conference in 2009: the value of closer collaboration between schools and universities in advancing the study of history, and preparing prospective students. As noted in the welcome from Rebecca Sullivan (CEO of the Historical Association), the disconnect between schools and HE then led the HA and History Subject Centre to produce a guide on these subjects earlier in 2010 which has been widely well received and can be found online at: <http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/publications/briefingreports/historyinschoolsandhe> , or supplied in hard copy by the Subject Centre. An important aim of the workshop was to bring together equal numbers of school and university professionals from a range of institutions, to obtain a broad picture of the issues at hand and follow on from the guide to provide further guidance for students and staff, to ensure the interest and numbers in history remain high.

Sarah Richardson (Director of the History Subject Centre) highlighted the fact that attention on transition issues has increased in recent years but students still feel unprepared. Understanding of the term ‘independent learning’, expectations of contact hours, course difficulty and topic coverage are all factors that remain concerns for first years at university. The Subject Centre’s 2009-10 survey of first years will give greater detail on the issues raised, and will be published in autumn 2010.

We would like to thank all the delegates for their participation in the workshop discussions – a long day, but one which provided a great deal of information and suggestions for good practice and future opportunities of support. The guide noted above will be revised in the autumn of 2010 to take account of the changing picture in our sector, and include the key outputs of the workshop.

The discussions during the day were framed by talks on three important considerations for transition:


- What does a good A Level student look like?
- Knowledge transition at A Level and HE level
- University admissions

This report will highlight each of these talks before summarising the collated group discussion material.

What does a good A Level student look like?

Diana Laffin (Farnborough Sixth Form College) introduced the workshop to what makes a good A Level student by recounting the stories of two real students. The first had achieved a series of A* grades at GCSE, loved a range of history topics, ran the history society and was articulate and nuanced in their writing: destined for Cambridge. The other also wanted to do a History degree after A Levels but had achieved only Cs and Ds in some GCSEs and was refused a place on the A Level programme. Not willing to give up, the student re-sat key GCSEs as instructed, raised their attendance levels and achieved the grades to study History at university. Both were determined and committed to independent study in History, both were good A Level students in very different ways.

What makes an A* historian?



A student who shows all or some of these attributes:

- realises that history is ever changing and is affected by the present;
- is intellectually curious, pursuing their interest with reading and learning outside the classroom and beyond the syllabus;
- engages critically with reading and other historical material ;
- is able to make and understand links between historical developments in different contexts of time and place ;
- understands differing interpretations yet also has the confidence to put forward their own original view.

The curriculum changes in 2008 introduced compulsory coursework and independent study. However, the constant concerns about maintaining and raising grades can lead to an erosion of true independent study, and does this help students who go on to further study in History?

Sarah Richardson went on to describe how it is HE's job to create good History graduates, but for a 'good' first year coming in to university, a background of independent learning is crucial. Much school work is understandably structured and tutor-led, but this isn't readily transferable to research and writing at HE level. The ability to write and express themselves fluently is a key assessment criteria for undergraduate students, but this does not come easily to all. Some also find active participation in the learning process difficult if they have been more used to passive teaching methods. Those who perform best are the ones who are open to different learning styles and topics, which true independent learning at A Level can provide.

Considerations from the group discussions:

- It should be remembered that out of a group of 20+ A Level students, possibly only 5 may want to go on to do a History degree. The priority for the teacher is to help all 20 candidates

obtain good grades, NOT to be good historians. Post-16 study should not mirror degree approaches but prepare students for them. The key to successful transition from A Level is enabling self-motivation. Good, focused teaching can achieve grades, but good teaching should allow independent learning to flourish.

- Whilst there is scope to include some historiography in the IB programme, the modular pattern of the AS/A Level allows little or no room for this. It provides a content base, but no real underlying appreciation of concepts and critical engagement.
- There has been a reduction in the opportunity to take A Level students to subject conferences, to gain an appreciation of some aspects of further study.
- A Level students have enthusiasm but know that risk-taking and creativity is not the best way to achieve high grades. Knowing how to get a good grade in assessed work at A Level is clear but not so easy to define in HE. The openness and emphasis on independent thought and expression of degree study can then be a shock.
- First years want to learn bibliographical skills but believe they know how to construct an essay: lecturers disagree.
- The facility to re-sit modules at A Level can be a difficult mindset for new undergraduates to get out of, but the fact that this does not occur in the same way in university study is something that should be made VERY clear to them.
- Mature students may not begin HE study with the best grades but often have huge motivation and an independent mindset. Equally, the student with the best A Level grades will not necessarily attain the same success at degree level.

Possible recommendations and actions:

- Will the proposed return/enhancement of a 2-year A Level programme allow for some grounding in theory and critical engagement?
- Encourage more academics to go in to schools to work with students and for the 16+ age group to have access to HE in taster days and open days, to aid their understanding of what they will face.

Knowledge transition at A Level and HE level

Arthur Chapman (Institute of Education, London) discussed the 'explicit' and 'hidden' curricula in teaching, and the need to distinguish between the two to aid study. The explicit curriculum implies breadth in what is taught at A Level, but the hidden curriculum can in reality lead to studying small, narrow-focused books for specific courses. The reliance on packaged summary notes at A Level is very different to the value placed on broad reading to enable the understanding and formation of contested arguments which are key to HE research. Arthur also raised the issue of standards by noting that he did not believe that A Level study is worse than in the past: a point debated in the group discussions.

Jackie Eales (Canterbury Christ Church University) spoke of the importance of involvement with schools, particularly local schools, from a HE perspective. In an ambassador scheme, students are sent back to their old schools and are able to share their sense of enthusiasm for study, but also get across the reality of the 'big leap' to university learning. Jackie has also been involved in a transition

conference for three years, which similarly makes A Level students aware of the issues and significant changes they will face. The concerns over reading and texts were further highlighted as Jackie noted the importance of analysing documents at university. Investigation of primary sources is actively done in schools, but is understandably simplistic, and can lead some to believe that they are fully equipped with analytical skills for HE. Digital literacy can also be over-estimated in the young generation of digital natives, as there can be a struggle to encourage first years to concentrate on 'good' academic material: possibly something that can be raised and taught more in schools.

Considerations from the group discussions:

- There was general concern that A Level assessment objectives can work against enthusiasm and not reward the best historians. There is no necessity to read widely or in depth to achieve good A Level results, therefore dealing with a high number of secondary texts can be a significant transition challenge. Reliance on a single textbook for a course is not a good approach to preparation for further study, or indeed for learning how to synthesise information in a discipline so inherently interdisciplinary. This is also where collaboration between schools and HE should be encouraged.
- It was strongly felt that we need to seize the opportunity to protect and advance independent study in A Level project work, to overcome some of the curriculum and assessment restrictions.
- The modular approach to study at AS and A Level means that 'sections' of history are learned, examined and then set aside: more fragmentary than evolving knowledge of a broad topic base over two years. Whilst we may worry too much about the perceived reduction in the knowledge base, the style of teaching and assessment in schools has changed and diversified dramatically since 2000, but HE study has not changed to the same extent. Many felt that this has led to the gap closing between GCSE and A Level styles, resulting in the leap to HE seeming greater. It is difficult to assess the effect of the 2008 curriculum changes yet.
- HE survey courses are almost universal and long-standing, but, as noted above, this broad base of knowledge is not in place in the school curriculum. This is another area where school and HE collaboration would be beneficial: academics providing training/lectures/resources for teachers on different subjects, to equip schools to teach a wider range of topics ... more frequently avoiding popular topics such as 'Nazi Germany'.

Possible recommendations and actions:

- The pressure on schools and teachers to achieve high grades can weaken the emphasis on independent learning at A Level. Could this be encouraged in the pre-16 curriculum to embed the principles more thoroughly and allow pupils to experiment, even fail, but learn from project work that is not assessed in crucial, later examinations?
- Avoid relying on a 'set text' during the teaching of an A Level module, but introduce it for revision to ensure students know what they are 'expected' to cover in examinations.

- Could we encourage the government to fund access to JStor in schools, to facilitate wider reading and the instigation of some important study skills before university? The HA and History Subject Centre should continue to distribute information about effective online resources and increase awareness of open educational resources in history (OERs) including lecture recordings by academics.
- Encourage the involvement of undergraduates in outreach to schools – offering support and peer perspective. HA and Subject Centre to consider making a DVD/online video presentation of undergraduate ‘talking heads’ for use in schools.
- Increased liaison between schools and universities. For example, university admissions tutors visiting more local schools and A Level visits to university libraries.
- The advantages of the compulsory personal study element in the A Level should continue to be highlighted in advance of the next curriculum review, to avoid it being made only optional. The HA and Subject Centre could work together on a paper to highlight the benefits, and reflecting this to policy-makers.

University admissions

John Watts revealed the admissions process and considerations at the University of Oxford, which includes an aptitude test and interview. The importance in the UCAS personal statement, test and interview is in revealing if the student is ready to be an independent learner:

- Precision and clarity in the answer
- The ability to reveal and exchange ideas, which can be difficult to conceptualise and develop
- Synthesising knowledge to reveal the ‘big picture’. Essay writing is often crudely constructed despite the obvious ability of a student
- To be interested in the subject.

The caveat is recognising that achieving these four things is not easy.

John provided advice for prospective candidates at Oxford, but which could also be true of the application process more widely:

- Do your research – there is much online information about the Oxford aptitude test
- For the interview – read (more), think (about the reading) and talk (practise your answers in advance)
- Use the interview as a way of questioning the university, not just allowing the university to question you.
- In your personal statement don’t say you have a ‘passion’ for history, show it through evidence not rhetoric.

Helen Johnson expanded on the admissions process from the viewpoint of head of admissions at the University of Birmingham, beginning with some thoughtful comments on application numbers. Whilst we are experiencing a difficult time in the applicant process, there is a level of scare-mongering about competitiveness in the media and young people shouldn’t be discouraged from applying. Applications in our field have risen by 23% but the number of places is also 15% higher: 86% of applicants were placed in 2009. There are a huge range of single and joint honours courses

available: students should research them intelligently. Apply for the degree you want to do: don't try to get into another course via the back-door, you could be doubly disappointed.

Students should target their application intelligently by looking at the entrance criteria carefully. Many universities offer based entirely on the UCAS form, and having the prospective grades that match the ticket offer doesn't guarantee success, so the personal statement should be completed carefully. Be quirky but not 'clever' or too 'funny', reflect on your reading - don't just provide a book list. Writing skills are also important and can be revealed plainly in the statement. Please note that further advice on completing the personal statement can be found on page 19 in the 'History in Schools and Higher Education' guide detailed at the beginning of this report.

Considerations from the group discussions:

- Teachers and schools need accessible advice to help their students decide on which university is right for them.
- Schools and parents would like more university open day options on Saturdays, rather than Wednesday, although it was recognised that this would have significant staffing implications, and not allow prospective students to experience a real taster day of activities.
- There was much discussion on the value that admissions tutors place on the reference from schools. Delegates from HEIs noted that contextual, specific, verification information about the student is helpful, but appreciate that this can be difficult to produce by schools at the time of application, so early in the A Level programme.
- Other pressures on HE staff can mean that they are reactive in dealing with first years, rather than preparing for potential issues. The Subject Centre could provide further guidance as a resource to aiding transition.
- From the school perspective, the HA's 'Teaching History' publication could include more material on supporting A Levels and transition issues.

Possible recommendations and actions:

- A Level is a 'taught package', but direct teaching at university is only part of the study programme: this fact needs to be stressed to aid transition. Students find the reduced contact time in HE difficult, compounded by negative reporting of the practise, rather than being viewed as a positive element of increased independent study in history. Schools and admissions tutors could impress this fact more clearly.
- HA and Subject Centre to consider producing a flowchart to help narrow the suggested choice of universities, depending on individual student requirements. In addition, it could be helpful if departments in schools had more of an input into the UCAS advice given out to A Level students to help inform specific choices.
- Schools to advise students to use the personal statement as a piece of reflective work.

Overall conclusions and big themes from the days' discussions :

The key to enabling independent learning as students' progress through education is to begin at an earlier age: project work built into the 16+ curriculum should be one of the final steps in this process, not the beginning. This could off-set some of the fears of reducing potential A Level grades, and aid the transition to HE by starting to redress the balance between teacher dependency and independence at university.

There is a need for greater awareness of what is happening in schools and universities by their counterparts to further ease transition. Perhaps the HA and History Subject Centre are best placed to provide this.

More attention could be paid to developing reading and study skills in schools in preparation for HE. Improving note-taking skills, for example, and a requirement to read 'well', and more broadly, not simply focusing on a set textbook, are elements that could be fed into the next curriculum review process.

Summary of proposed outputs:

- **This workshop report to be made publicly available in the summer of 2010 via the History Subject Centre website.**
- **Revise and reissue the History in Schools and HE guide, incorporating key points raised from the workshop.**
- **HA and History Subject Centre to continue to distribute information about effective online resources with further collaboration.**
 - **An immediate resource of interest was suggested by Chris Fuller, University of Southampton. The 'Learn With Us – Aiding Transition to HE' website at Southampton, is a multidisciplinary program of research and resources. Please take a look at: www.learnwithus.southampton.ac.uk**
- **HA and History Subject Centre to investigate the production of a DVD/online presentation of undergraduate 'talking heads' for use in schools, concerning transition issues.**
- **HA and History Subject Centre to work together on producing information for stakeholders and policy makers on:**
 - **The advantages of the compulsory personal study element in the A Level**
 - **The advantages of including some grounding in theory and critical engagement in future A Level curriculum design**
 - **Embedding aspects of independent learning in pre-16 curriculum design.**

HA and History Subject Centre to investigate producing a flowchart to help teachers advise on how to narrow the search of universities, depending on individual student requirements.

Delegate Feedback on the event:

Useful comments and issues were raised by the 33% of delegates who provided feedback on the event. This additional contribution is greatly appreciated, following a day of extensive discussions, which admittedly involved lengthy feedback sessions from groups, but were widely recognised as necessary for achieving the goals of the day. 100% of the feedback considered the overall event, venue and administration as good or excellent, and 100% noted that they would be interested in attending more teaching and learning events. Such comments do help us plan future events, and it is also recognised that a Saturday workshop could be particularly helpful in encouraging participation from school teachers.

The strong emphasis that had been placed (in advance by the organisers) on involving professionals from schools and HE equally was shared by delegates, with 66% of the feedback citing the direct sharing of ideas and good practice across the sector as the most useful aspect of the day.

Collectively, delegates expressed their desire to enhance/reinforce their teaching practices, visits and advice to benefit year 12 students. Whether helping delegates to expand on guidance relating to transition, or reassure them in the work they already do, we hope that some of the future objectives (noted above) planned by the HA and History Subject Centre as a result of the workshop will aid delegates and the wider sector further.