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Changes in A level history and re-establishing greater support for history in schools by university history departments

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History teachers in the UK do a superb job, but they could always do with additional support, and regular encouragement is welcome too. One reason we are here today is because of [Curriculum 2000](#), which was introduced in September 2000 and created a range of new and revised qualifications at advanced level. Between 1999 and 2001, history underwent more significant changes than many other subjects because only one old A level history syllabus was modular. The shift from a linear course to modular course was painful for some. Not everyone has yet adjusted to modularity even now; and, in any case, experience from legacy A levels shows that it takes about three years for any new syllabus to become well established and to work its way through to teachers' fingertips.

Already, however, change is approaching A levels once more, in all subjects. Whatever is in the pipeline, I suggest that the community of historians needs to make a concerted effort to work far more closely together than it has of late.

Curriculum 2000 has been rather good for history's market share, but teachers remain hard-pressed. I am a history teacher, but after 21 years I now find myself away from the classroom running A level history for one of the UK's six exam boards. We are finding that we are asked to offer ever more support to teachers because the old networks have dwindled or collapsed. For example, there are now few county advisors. [Historical Association](#) branches were once famed for working with their local teachers. Some excellent work still takes place in some localities, but on nothing like the scale of old.

In response to this growing need, my exam board's history section now offers very detailed guidance for teachers, both written and in face-to-face annual meetings. We have also started to run some teacher study days that combine developing subject knowledge alongside developing assessment knowledge. We invite university academics to talk about specific historical subjects, and we collaborate with the education departments of national institutions to exploit their resources. So far we have worked with [Victoria and Albert Museum](#), [The British Museum](#), the [National Trust](#), the [National Army Museum](#) and [Peterborough Cathedral](#).

But the professional development of teachers is not the responsibility of the exam boards. The [Historical Association](#) (HA) is already working afresh to support continuing professional development for history teachers. However, it is the case that the scale of training needs is widely underestimated. There is a great opportunity for history and PGCE departments in higher education institutions to run, for example, regular lectures and workshops, to produce materials (probably on-line) and to make themselves available to colleagues. Monies from the HE Innovation Fund now mean that such initiatives really could be implemented.

Working with exam boards is another way in which HE history departments can help secondary level history. Public examinations lie at the heart of British secondary education. External exams for secondary school pupils began with the universities: the University of Oxford's Delegacy for Local Examinations established in 1857, followed in 1858 by the University of Cambridge's Local Examinations Syndicate. Not long ago there were nine university exam boards, but because of mergers over the past 25 years, the university exam board has all but disappeared. There is now only one: my own, the [University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate](#) (UCLES). This collapse is indicative of a massive withdrawal of the universities from involvement in secondary education.

When Curriculum 2000's History was being devised, discussions between historians at secondary and tertiary level were conspicuous by their absence. I would suggest that this is a major reason why university historians are unhappy with parts of AS/A2 History. On the other hand, from what school teachers tell me, many university historians are still too ignorant about what AS/A2 History actually involves. Exam boards are already good at listening to school teachers and working with them. In the coming round of changes to 16-19 history in 2006/08, I believe that the circle needs to be drawn wider, and that university history teachers should be actively involved in the discourse.

Today's symposium, following the [conference in February 2005](#), shows that some key players are already alert to these issues and are anxious for action. I have recently been working with the [Royal Historical Society](#) to set up one mechanism through which such action might take place. The first fruit of those discussions is a round table meeting to be held on 26 October 2005. As host, the Society will provide a forum within which exam board history examiners can meet with the Society's council and the HA (as well as with each other) to consider not just what should be done and how it could best be done, but how an on-going dialogue can shape:

1. The subject criteria set by the [Qualifications and Curriculum Authority](#) (QCA) within which we will all have to work. For every subject, these are to be reviewed, starting in autumn 2005. Exam boards are far from free agents and find themselves regulated ever more closely by the QCA. Subject criteria provide the foundations upon which every specification must be built (colleagues from HE should note that GCSE and AS/A2 subject criteria are far more prescriptive than the subject benchmark statements laid down by the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](#) (QAA).
2. The emerging revised specifications that are raised on the foundations of those criteria - i.e. the history itself and the exam papers that follow.

There will be big issues on the table as well, for example:

- The place of narrative
- Progression from KS4 to AS/A2 to HE
- 'Hitlerisation'

With some notable exceptions, such as the highly valued and long-term contributions of Barry Coward, Eric Evans, Ken Fincham and John France, HE history has disengaged from working with the exam boards. So much more used to be done, and, I believe, should be again. Living memory tells of the days when dons worked regularly with school teachers on exam boards, to help set or develop exam papers and to mark exam scripts (one non-history case is very well known: an Oxford professor in the 1930s, weary from marking yet another School Certificate English script, began to scribble on one candidate's paper: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit..."). Roy Porter was once chairman of examiners for UCLES A level history. David Eastwood (now Vice Chancellor of UEA) was chairman of examiners for the Oxford Delegacy and played there a key role in the design of the UK's first modular A level history syllabus in the early 1990s.

; however, RAE and other HE pressures have reduced such involvement drastically (equally, we might note, the RAE has stopped academics from writing A level text books - because they don't count).

Rightly or wrongly, external assessment has lain at the hart of English education for 150 years. The attitude of the universities to public exams is critical. There is vital work to be done to protect and develop our subject. A level history's decline during the early 1990s has been reversed, but we have not yet regained our old position. There is strong competition out there from other subjects, old as well as 'new'. A level history feeds university level history, and HE needs to be alert - recent financial and demographic analysis has suggested that about 30 of this country's 100 or so university history departments are likely to close over the next ten years. The councils of History UK and of the Royal Historical Society both agree that getting involved in the changes and developments to A level history must be among their top priorities.

We need to think and work together - and from my end, let me make clear that the invitation has been issued and the door is already fully open.

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