

What Should Sixth Form A Level History be?

Introduction to the paper

The purpose of this short paper is to act as a trigger for discussion on certain aspects of the recent Ofqual A Level Reform Consultation Paper 2012. The Ofqual consultation process has allowed us only a brief period in which to respond to proposed suggestions for reform. This is particularly pertinent because History is one of the first subjects to be reviewed. The Historical Association has already carried out teacher surveys to gather opinion about the prospective changes to the nature of, and content to be covered at, History A level. This discussion paper is also intended to be part of its response. It agrees with the assertion made by Ofqual that an improvement in the 'quality of learning' is an important component of the reform process. However, it disagrees over the manner in which Ofqual intends to bring this about. Ofqual appears to be insisting that a more rigorous form of assessment will bring about the necessary change required to improve A level standards. This paper, in contrast, suggests that the focus should be on learning first, and the manner in which it is brought about. Assessment should simply be a measuring tool rather than a vehicle for 'learning of quality.'

Background and context

Ofqual has conducted research which included a consultation process with employers, teachers and the higher education sectors to determine whether A levels were 'fit for purpose' and, separately, compared A levels with international

senior secondary forms of assessment. The research indicated that although A levels perform well against international equivalents, there are areas that could be improved (Ofqual 2012, para. 12, p. 8). The improvement, it is suggested, can be made in several areas but most notably in the content and structure of A levels. Ofqual argue that the aim of the reforms is to achieve 'equality of access for students to the full range of universities' (Ofqual, 2012, para. 34, p.12) by bringing standardisation across A levels to allow for a common grading system. This, Ofqual further suggests, will allow universities to recognise students of ability, regardless of their examination board or their examination subject (Ofqual, 2012, para, 34. p. 13). In order to bring about change that might allow 'greater discrimination between the most able candidates applying for oversubscribed undergraduate degree courses' (Ofqual, 2012, para. 38, p.14) Ofqual has focused on four areas. Firstly Ofqual suggests that the content of A levels should change, secondly there is to be a reduction in modularisation, and thirdly, a reduction in the number of re-sits, while fourthly, a focus on improved skills in researching, essay writing, problem solving, analysis and critical reflection is proposed. In this way Ofqual intends to bring about the desired rise in standards.

This paper is a response to these suggestions. I would wholeheartedly agree with Ofqual's aim of 'equality of access for students to the full range of universities' if that is what sixth form learning were solely about, and if equality of access was for all students. Realistically it is not. If A levels are going to be seen as a valuable qualification, not just for universities but for prospective employers as well, then something more radical than creating more rigorous

assessment processes needs to occur. I submit that there needs to be a change in the culture of sixth form learning. My observations are based in over fifteen years experience of teaching sixth formers and in two research projects: my MEd and my PhD, conducted with the help of sixth formers. I would argue that if Ofqual wants to 'truly influence standards... to improve the quality of learning, so that it is not just a preparation for assessment,' it needs to fundamentally change its approach to teaching and learning. Therefore, although this paper will offer a response to the areas of improvement suggested by Ofqual, it will also argue for an alternative vision of teaching and learning for 16-19 year olds.

I will argue that society is in need of individuals who are capable of innovation and forward thinking: individuals who need to be resilient and flexible to meet the demands of a complex economic environment. They also need to be social beings able to collaborate and work effectively in teams. Sixth formers need much more than good exam grades to be successful. I am not sure that an A level, certainly in its present form, or even its suggested new form, prepare students for the harsh realities of life. If we are hoping to improve students' prospects then we need to offer them something else. Learning of quality should not only deliver them the qualifications they deserve but also offer them life skills with which they can negotiate a complex existence. Learning of quality therefore becomes much more than the ability to perform well in exams. The current A level exams measure important skills of memory, analysis and evaluation but these skills are only a small part of a human being's ability: a human being is a complex entity with facets that are not easily measured and as a consequence these are ignored. But it is these unmeasured facets that

employers want – the ability to be able to negotiate, for example, or to be a good team player. Learning of quality, therefore, should incorporate the development of soft skills, like self-reliance and self-motivation; these are difficult to measure but so important to success academically as well as socially.

Even if I were not arguing for a different culture for sixth formers, I would suggest that Ofqual's proposed reforms do not offer opportunities for learning of quality, even using Ofqual's narrower interpretation of success.

Ofqual's proposed reforms – reductions to modularisation and re-sits

Ofqual asserts that 'in order to truly influence standards, we need to try to find ways to improve the quality of learning' (Ofqual, 2012, para. 15, p. 9). Reducing modules, however, in A level History is unlikely to bring about 'learning of quality'. Indeed, it could be argued that it would do the very opposite. In developing synoptic links between modules of different time periods and of different historical perspectives, students begin to engage in the more sophisticated reasoning that is necessary for success not only at A level, but also at undergraduate level. For History at A level, therefore, a reduction of modularisation will not automatically bring about the increase in standards so desired by Ofqual.

A reduction in re-sits, however, is a different matter, particularly if – as Ofqual asserts – it is generally perceived that A level students do not take their AS exams seriously (Ofqual, 2012. Para. 53, p. 18). That might be so in some cases, but to suggest it is so in all cases is to do a disservice to the many students

who are hardworking. In my experience, many pupils are stressed more than they should be by the pressures exerted by their exam load. So there should be a reduction in re-sits – not because students do not take them seriously, but because it would reduce the levels of stress these students face. It has to be recognised, however, that there is no easy solution here because often students appreciate having the opportunity to redeem a poor mark through re-sits and in that way frequent re-sits can actually reduce and alleviate stress.

However, although it is not explicitly stated, it is clear that Ofqual's motivation for reducing re-sits is not related to student stress but, instead, is intended to allow for 'greater discrimination between the most able candidates applying for oversubscribed undergraduate degree courses' (Ofqual, 2012, para. 38, p.14). Indeed, they are considering doing away with AS exams completely to focus on examinations at the end of the two-year course rather than at the end of Year 12. It is important, however, to recognise that following such a proposal would be counterproductive. Not all students want, or are able, to take subjects to A2, but would benefit from a curriculum of breadth. AS examinations, at the end of Year 12, offer an opportunity for students to experience a versatile and varied curriculum. In such a way the potential for learning of quality, which incorporates the development of soft skills, could be created and affirmed. AS exams can offer sixth formers opportunities to study subjects that interest them in the knowledge that they do not need to strive to achieve the highest grades but gain valuable experience instead. It will also offer them the opportunity to gain a more rounded education in line with their European counterparts. This can only benefit universities and employers alike.

Ofqual's proposed reforms – improved skills learning

Ofqual's suggestion that 'improved skills in researching, problem solving, analysis and critical reflection' should be an aspect of the proposed reforms is a suggestion I partially agree with. Opportunities, however, already exist in A level History courses for students to practise their skills in research, analysis and critical reflection. The Independent Study module, for example, offers students the chance to practise all these skills and, provided the correct kind of support is given to the students, they learn far more than research, analysis and critical reflection. They can become independent learners developing skills in organisation and self-motivation, which are attributes both universities and employers look for and could be an alternative way of discriminating between outstanding pupils.

Ofqual (Ofqual, 2012, para. 38, p.14) also suggests that students should be taught to write essays. I would go further: I would suggest that students, particularly at sixth form, should be taught to argue (Kuhn, 2009), although not in the form of Critical Thinking, which tends to offer a static and formal version of argumentation. My PhD research was designed to help students improve their skills in writing essays by focusing on their oral arguments. The students within the study clearly knew how to write History essays: their work was usually well organised and their responses were eloquent. Very few, however, knew how to write a convincing argument. Most students quoted PEEL to me (Point, Evidence, Explanation and Linking it back to the title) but they did not appear to know

what it was that they should put into the essays. Persuasive argumentation, on the other hand, helps students to counter others' opinions and in so doing create opportunities to become confident in what they do as well as what they know. The ability to argue well is a pre-cursor to success in History and has obvious social benefits too. My research, however, was not just confined to helping students write more effective arguments in their essays; it focused, too, on a different way of teaching and learning.

Vision for the future?

My vision for the future of learning, for the 16-19 age group, is founded on two contrasting research principles. In combination, I feel that they may offer the kind of environment that will lead to learning of quality for sixth formers. Not only will they develop crucial life skills, they will also achieve important and relevant levels of attainment in whatever exam is used to measure their 'quality of learning'. I would argue for a return to learning to learn, not just learning a subject. In addition I would argue for a dialogic education – the nature of the talk in the classroom is a vital part in the active engagement of the student in the learning process.

Learning to learn, not learning a subject

The research which forms the basis for the learning to learn curriculum is not new and has been practised in education for some time. However, the focus on what might appear to be a more rigorous form of education, as suggested by Michael Gove in recent TV broadcasts, could prevent the opportunities for students to re-engage in learning for learning's sake (Claxton, 2001). Within the

learning to learn perspective there is much less insistence on summative assessment – the so-called end product of learning – whereas formative assessment becomes far more critical. If students are to learn to become self-motivated learners, ongoing formative assessment should be initiated where students are marked on effort and attitude to learning before they are marked on attainment (Dweck, 2000). In this way, motivation to learn is encouraged rather than simply focusing on the memorising and regurgitating of extensive, irrelevant and often meaningless content. Ofqual's multiple-choice form of assessment would be entirely inappropriate within such a context and would be detrimental to the development of the individual's learning and self-development. Noddings' (1992) alternative approach to education still holds profound truths that offer valuable insight into a curriculum for learning and might be considered essential components to a curriculum offering learning of quality. Students who are self-reliant and self-motivated learners can make more realistic judgements about their future development, whether it is in a university or a work environment. They are also more resilient and will be able to face the vicissitudes of life in a more proactive way (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy and Rutter, 1996).

Dialogic education

Coupled with the different emphasis on assessment, a pedagogy based on dialogue through and for education (Wegerif, 2012 a & b) would, I argue, create opportunities for students to become more actively engaged in their own learning. A pedagogy that relies solely on the transmission model for education – which appears most prevalent at the moment – may, arguably, give students lots

of information, but will not help them learn what to do with it. It may be that with such a model little learning actually happens. During my research, I interviewed History students who said they were frequently overwhelmed by all the information and found it difficult to distinguish between opinion and evidence. Teaching relevant skills to students within a dialogic framework for education ensures that students are active partners in the teaching and learning process.

The intervention I devised as part of my PhD studies, for example, was designed to help students improve their written argumentation. The main impetus was to get the students to actively engage in discussions, collaborative work and argument. My findings suggest that if students are actively engaged in the learning process, their learning correspondingly improves. It is also clear that there are links between students' spoken and written work, particularly in argumentation. My study suggested that when assessed using AS and A2 mark schemes, students' essays showed signs of improvement: argument was now clearly evident in their essays. What was particularly interesting to me was that the students who improved the most were the students most actively engaged in the argumentative exchanges. This was a finding that was not confined to the most able students. Dialogic education helps develop the soft skills necessary for success whilst also offering success in the skills that academics prize – the skills that are already measured.

Knowledge of History is important for success at A level. Furthermore, whilst conducting my research in five schools it became quite clear that dialogic

engagement created effective strategies for knowledge acquisition. Learning was not confined to any one group of students, nor yet just to the most able – learning of quality occurred irrespective of the nature of the content they were learning. The students may have been studying different periods, and focusing on different skills, in History but the quality of engagement, interest and discussion was the same in each school. The teachers and students had become equal partners in the learning process. The animated discussions I observed between students and teachers demonstrated for me that ‘learning of quality’ was present in the classroom. This was further evidenced in their written work.

Concluding comments

Ofqual’s reforms are focused on delivering an assessment process that aids universities to discriminate between the more able students and, although it recognises that learning of quality is more than a good exam grade, its reforms geared towards more rigorous assessment do not offer the opportunities they should for an environment where quality of learning is paramount. I would argue that if we want to prepare our students properly for university and the work place then we need to offer them far more than exam success. There is no such thing as a job for life anymore and graduates are discovering just how few jobs and careers there actually are. Students need to be flexible and prepared to learn a variety of skills sets. Learning will be life long if they are going to adapt and function successfully in an ever-changing environment. Fundamentally, therefore, it is not just what the students learn that matters it is how the students learn – how they learn to learn. A dialogic education, which creates opportunities for students to take responsibility for their learning, is an essential

component of that environment. We should be doing all that we can to ensure that our students have the skills to succeed in exams, but more importantly that they have the life skills necessary to survive and flourish. I would argue that these should be at the core of Ofqual's motivations for reform.

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