Setting us free?

Building meaningful models of progression for a 'post-levels' world

Alex Ford was thrilled by the prospect of freedom offered to history departments in England by the abolition of level descriptions within the National Curriculum. After analysing the range of competing purposes that the level descriptions were previously forced to serve, Ford argues that the three distinct tasks of measuring current attainment, assessing the rate of students' progress and providing guidance to them about the next steps forward simply cannot be accomplished with reference to a single scale. Drawing on range of historical scholarship as well as on educational research and the practice of history teachers in other contexts, his department have developed their own conception of progression, inspired by the principles of serving an apprenticeship within the historian's craft. Ford shares the early stages of this development process, illustrating both the kind of assessment tasks and the tracking systems that he and his colleagues have developed. In outlining their exploratory work and the principles on which it is based, his hope is that it will inspire similar creativity and courage among others in resisting simplistic systems that fail to acknowledge either the nature of the subject or the range of purposes that any assessment and reporting system must serve.

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As part of our reforms to the national curriculum, the current system of 'levels' used to report children's attainment and progress will be removed. It will not be replaced. We believe this system is complicated and difficult to understand, especially for parents. It also encourages teachers to focus on a pupil's current level, rather than consider more broadly what the pupil can actually do. Prescribing a single detailed approach to assessment does not fit with the curriculum freedoms we are giving schools.[1]

My heart leapt when I first read this declaration by the Department for Education in England that it would abolish level descriptions within the National Curriculum (NC) – a system that had been in place, albeit subject to a range of revisions, since the first introduction of a national curriculum nearly 25 years ago.[2] My reaction was widely shared, especially by those who had invested a great deal of effort in pointing out the woeful inadequacy of NC level descriptions – both as a means of assessment and as a guide to planning for progression in history.[3] The perversion of level descriptions over the years to become the sole reporting and monitoring tool in all subjects had become increasingly problematic for history, especially as they were forced to serve as a description of student progression. In the worst cases, level descriptions became the end point of teaching itself, despite a wide body of evidence to suggest how unhelpful this was in developing students' understanding of history.[4] This trend was already in full flow when Lee and Shemilt argued that, 'Under no circumstances is it valid to report levels to parents as "measures" of individual attainment or progress, to set levels as targets for individual pupils or colleagues, or to use levels as a basis for grade predictions or value-added calculations'.[5] Despite this, and numerous other calls for reason, there had been a growing fetishisation of NC level descriptions as a means of doing everything from describing students' progress, to targeting under-performance, setting programmes of intervention, or even predicting paths to GCSE and beyond. Indeed, in some settings, teachers were being asked to assign levels or sub-levels to students' performance in individual lessons, or even parts of lessons. The absurdity went further with the subdivision of GCSE grades, in some instances, into similar sub-grades to ensure that students could visualise their 'flight path' to exam success. To borrow from Fordham, the growth and mutation of the level descriptions might be described as '…a tragedy where the ship of historical education foundered upon rocks of good intention'.[6]

What is striking, however, now that the national system of 'levels' has been formally abolished (from September 2014), is the fact that they seem almost to have taken on a life of their own. Although the NC Attainment Targets and level descriptions were revised several times in the two decades of their existence, their core remained remarkably stable, meaning that many state-school teachers trained in the last 20 years are unlikely ever to have used another means of assessment at Key Stage 3 (with students aged between 11 and 14).[7] The level descriptions are so ingrained that many teachers are unsure how assessment, or indeed progression in history, might be conceived once these 'ladders' are removed. This claim is not idle speculation: it is based on a multitude of conversations with concerned teachers, trainees and indeed heads of department. A survey last year conducted by the school-leaders' support website, 'The Key' found that over 45% of schools had little idea of how they were going to assess from 2014, while 35% were awaiting alternative models of assessment to be published by the Department for Education.[8] More recently, the annual survey of history teaching in England, conducted by the Historical Association, found a third of respondents were unsure about how they were going to respond to the removal of level descriptions, while those who could

Figure 1: The problems associated with describing progress in terms of specific points

Let's take an example: two racing cars are travelling on a track. Their speed (attainment) is measured at point A and point B. Now because they are cornering, Car 1 is measured at 60mph at point A and 60mph at point B. Has the car made no progress? Clearly that would be ridiculous; it has covered the distance between the two points. Then Car 2 is measured. It is travelling at 60mph at point A and 70mph at point B. This could be regarded as representing progress, yet it might also be true that Car 1 is ahead of Car 2 by point B. All the measures of speed show is that Car 2 is able to take one specific corner at a greater speed than Car 1. If we want to know who is winning, we need to know how long each took to get between point A and B. This is a measure of progress as it describes a change!
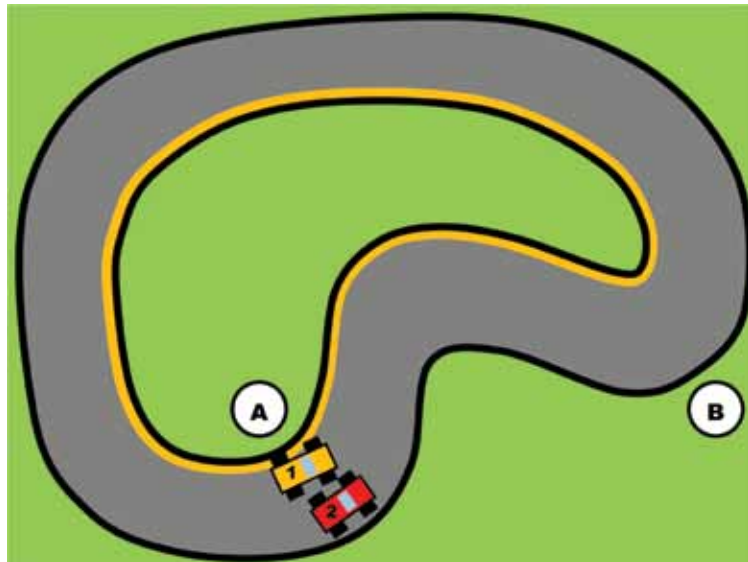
The increasing demand to show pupil progress by Ofsted has led to NC levels being used to place a linear numerical value on progress. This suggests that pupils improve in all aspects of the National Curriculum Levels at a constant rate over time. It also implies that two single point measures can describe progress, when in fact they describe attainment. The result is that teachers end up using best-fit labels to create the illusion of the progress they know has happened, by perverting the NC levels and using them as descriptions of linear progress, rather than as measures of attainment. The net result is that the progress ladders now end up floating in mid-air; they are no longer based on evidence and are giving the false impression that the work conducted at the beginning of the year is directly comparable to the work completed later. There is an impact on students as well, since they stop seeing progress as understanding accumulated over time and instead see it as a result of flashes of inspiration or some other mystical force.

explain their intentions were split fairly evenly between those who planned to keep the 2008 descriptions and those who were seeking to modify them in some way. In many cases modification involved making only small alterations to the existing descriptions or basing models on the GCSE grade system.[9] This brings to mind the old Soviet joke in which Gorbachev announces his programme of perestroika. He informs factories that they are now free to set their own goals and targets and declares an end to centralised planning controls. Two days later he begins to receive official memos from the industrial leaders reporting that 'We have implemented perestroika and await further instructions'.

Two main factors perhaps serve to explain the reasons for such conservatism. First, although many history departments would like to experiment with new ways of assessing, time and resource constraints make this very difficult, especially given other curriculum reforms competing for teachers' attention. Second, policies within particular departments are shaped by the direction taken by their whole school and many senior leaders seem unwilling to test the waters with new forms of assessment, or perhaps do not appreciate the full extent of the problems associated with NC level

descriptions in history. The main purpose of this article is to suggest that, despite the work involved, leaving behind the old system of NC levels is imperative if we are to build a meaningful system of assessment. It is also my contention that 'staying put', either as departments, or whole schools, is simply not a viable option, especially in light of the enormous upcoming changes at GCSE and A-level. Finally, I hope to offer some potential solutions to the question of how assessment and progression might look in a 'post-levels' world. In many senses such a world has the potential to be a brighter one; the real challenge, now that the door has been opened, is taking that first step out of what Lee and Shemilt describe as the 'levels-cage' and into the light.[10]

Recognising the prison – the need for change

In an extensive report into the purposes of assessment in schools, the National Association of Head Teachers suggested that good assessment should give pupils and teachers a sense of current achievement, inform them on rates of progress and suggest next steps to build understanding.[11] These three purposes might be defined more simply as assessing

In this example I have selected those parts of the most recent level descriptions which relate to students' explanation of historical causation. The differences between each level provide little to aid students in developing their historical thinking. While they are expected to move from 'describing' causes, to 'explaining' them to 'analysing' them, there is no more developed explanation of what each of these processes might actually look like. The gradations also seem to suggest that 'description' is an historical 'skill' which can essentially be forgotten once operating at the higher levels of the Attainment Target. Clearly this is madness, as anyone who has read Orlando Figes' extended descriptions in *A People's Tragedy* would confirm.

LEVEL 5
They describe events, people and changes. They describe and make links between events and changes and give reasons for, and results of, these events and changes

LEVEL 6
They examine and explain the reasons for, and results of, events and changes

LEVEL 7
They use these links to analyse relationships between features of a particular period or society, and to analyse reasons for, and results of, events and changes

attainment, describing progress and providing meaningful models of progression. For the last decade or more, NC level descriptions have been used to provide the basis for all three of these pillars of assessment. However, there are a number of fundamental problems with this conflation which explain why retaining the descriptions is not only problematic, but also potentially harmful to students' progress.
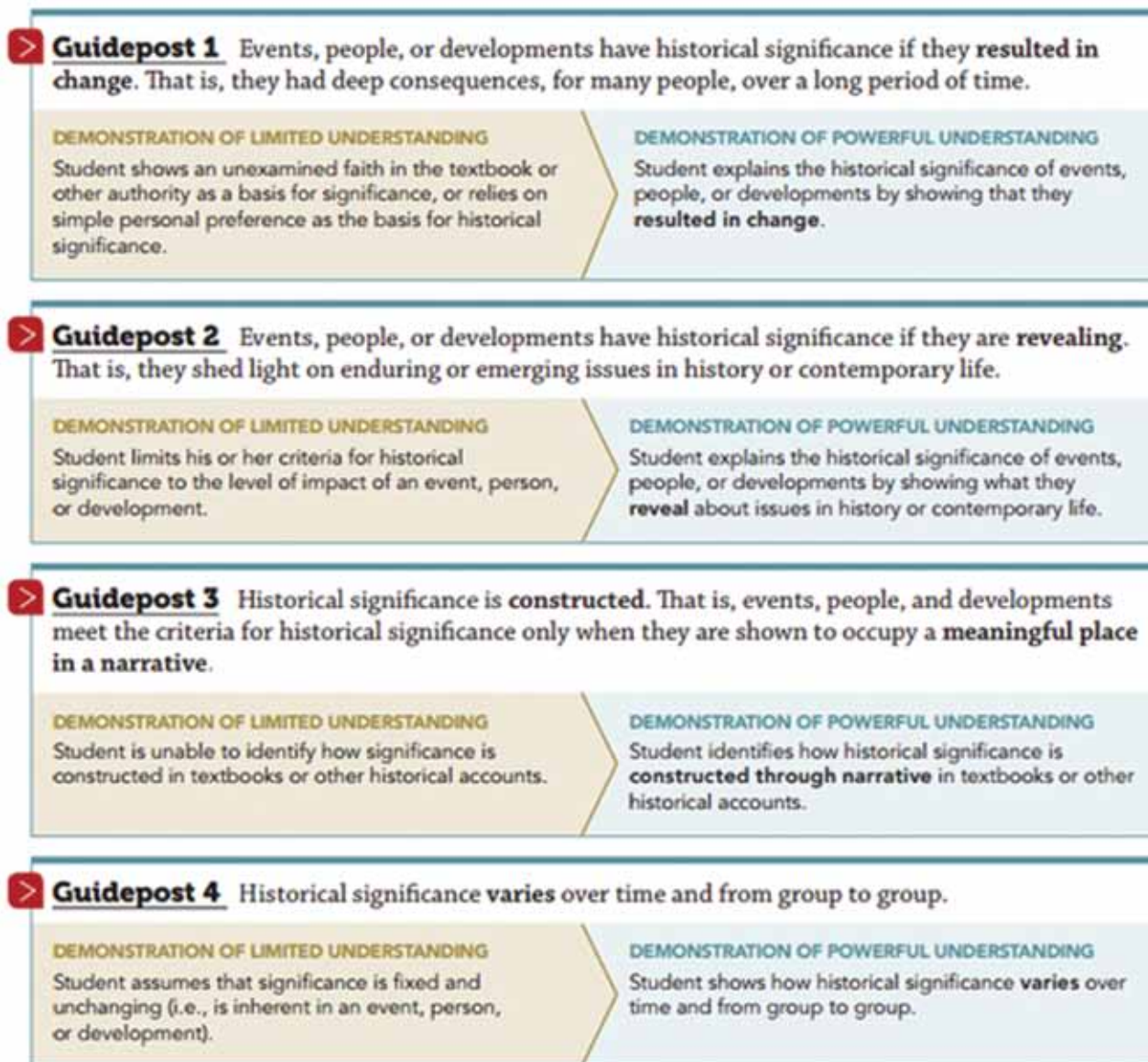
Key Problem 1: the attainment cage
Descriptions of attainment, by definition, should be measures of understanding at a particular point in time. NC level descriptions were designed as attainment measures that would encapsulate the broad abilities of students within a particular subject at the end of a key stage. They were never intended as a means of assessing individual pieces of work and, in many respects, were inadequate for this task. First, being generic descriptors, they made no mention at all of the specific substantive knowledge that students should develop within a given unit. A student's explanation of causation in accounting for William's victory at Hastings is quite different from a student's explanation of the causes of the English Reformation. Second, the level descriptions were divided into arbitrary rungs, supposed to represent approximations of what students might be expected to achieve at the end of the key stage; but again, they lacked the resolution to be applied to individual pieces of work. To assess for example whether a student had achieved the description 'show their knowledge and understanding of local, national and international

history by beginning to analyse the nature and extent of diversity, change and continuity within and across different periods…' in a piece focused entirely on ten years in and around the Norman Conquest would be difficult indeed.[12]

Yet, even when used as they were intended, at the end of a key stage, there was a niggling feeling that the level descriptions didn't quite work. They were far too broad and unspecific with a range of historical concepts being addressed at each level and little idea of the weighting for each. What if a child was judged to have achieved a 'Level 3' in their understanding of historical causation but a 'Level 7' in their appreciation of historical significance? This issue led many schools to atomise the level descriptions still further, breaking them down into constituent concepts or 'skills', each with its own attainment 'ladder'. Having mapped a student's achievement against the atomised descriptions for each constituent component, teachers were then asked to provide a 'best-fit' or overview from these separate data points to give an end-of-key stage level. Lee and Shemilt illustrate the problems of this 'best-fit' approach by applying it to a darts match:

Imagine a darts match in which three darts miss the board but hit the ceiling, the barmaid and the dog in the corner. With the aid of a tape-measure each dart can be 'best-fitted' to a particular cell in the board; the dart in the ceiling, for example, might 'best-fit' to double-twenty! In like manner, it is possible for assessment data to be

Guidepost 1 Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they **resulted in change**. That is, they had deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time.

DEMONSTRATION OF LIMITED UNDERSTANDING
Student shows an unexamined faith in the textbook or other authority as a basis for significance, or relies on simple personal preference as the basis for historical significance.

DEMONSTRATION OF POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING
Student explains the historical significance of events, people, or developments by showing that they **resulted in change**.

Guidepost 2 Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they are **revealing**. That is, they shed light on enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life.

DEMONSTRATION OF LIMITED UNDERSTANDING
Student limits his or her criteria for historical significance to the level of impact of an event, person, or development.

DEMONSTRATION OF POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING
Student explains the historical significance of events, people, or developments by showing what they **reveal** about issues in history or contemporary life.

Guidepost 3 Historical significance is **constructed**. That is, events, people, and developments meet the criteria for historical significance only when they are shown to occupy a **meaningful place in a narrative**.

DEMONSTRATION OF LIMITED UNDERSTANDING
Student is unable to identify how significance is constructed in textbooks or other historical accounts.

DEMONSTRATION OF POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING
Student identifies how historical significance is **constructed through narrative** in textbooks or other historical accounts.

Guidepost 4 Historical significance **varies** over time and from group to group.

DEMONSTRATION OF LIMITED UNDERSTANDING
Student assumes that significance is fixed and unchanging (i.e., is inherent in an event, person, or development).

DEMONSTRATION OF POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING
Student shows how historical significance **varies** over time and from group to group.

'best-fitted' to a level descriptor that they fail to match on the grounds that the mismatch with other levels is even greater. Thus it is that issues of validity are sidestepped.[14]

It is clear, therefore, that despite the NC level descriptions being designed as measures of attainment, their use and misuse as the only acceptable means for reporting attainment at any given point became a huge stumbling block to their retaining any reasonable meaning.

Key problem 2: the progress cage
Further problems emerged when NC level descriptions were used as measures of progress, something which became common in many school tracking systems. Progress might be best thought of as a description of a student's development over time in terms of their abilities, knowledge or understanding. Crucially, progress is a process – the *accumulation* of knowledge and *increasing* proficiency in modes of historical thinking. Progress might therefore be described as being 'rapid' or 'slow', but it certainly cannot be attributed to a student on the basis of a single assessment. As Counsell takes pains to point out, 'moving from National Curriculum Level 4 to Level 5 (or whatever) is not an adequate description of progress let alone a prescription for

progress.'[15] The notion that the difference between these two points can form a description of progress is frankly ludicrous, as Figure 1 (p. 29) illustrates.

Key problem 3: the scaffold that became a cage
By far the most serious issue with the NC level descriptions was the way in which they formed a pseudo-progression model for historical understanding. While the highest level offered a view of what the 'gold standard' for history might look like, the sequence of levels leading up to it did not provide an accurate or helpful description of what the *development* of students' historical understanding actually looked like. Work by Lee and Shemilt, and more recently, by Fordham highlights the crucial problem that level descriptions were split into a series of eight or nine arbitrary stages, mostly divided by linguistic distinctions, or based on the hierarchies of Bloom's Taxonomy, rather than reflecting genuine steps forward in conceptual understanding related specifically to the historical domain.[16] These distinctions are illustrated in Figure 2 (p. 30), which shows the steps involved in moving from 'Level 5' through to 'Level 7' in relation to the concept of cause and consequence. In essence, as this example illustrates, the NC level descriptions failed to provide a meaningful scaffold for students' understanding

Figure 4: An overview of the key historical concepts included in our model

1) Causation

SIGNPOST 1 Causal webs	Change happens because of MULTIPLE CAUSES and leads to many different results or consequences. These create a WEB of related causes and consequences.
SIGNPOST 2 Influence of factors	Different causes have different LEVELS OF INFLUENCE. Some causes are more important than other causes.
SIGNPOST 3 Personal and contextual factors	Historical changes happen because of two main factors: the actions of HISTORICAL ACTORS and the CONDITIONS (social, economic etc.) which have influenced those actors.
SIGNPOST 4 Unintended consequences	HISTORICAL ACTORS cannot always predict the effects of their own actions leading to UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES. These unintended consequences can also lead to changes

2) Change and continuity

SIGNPOST 1 Identifying change	Past societies are not fixed: there are changes which have occurred spanning centuries. Changes in the past can be identified by looking at DEVELOPMENTS between two periods.
SIGNPOST 2 Interweaving continuity and change	Change and continuity are INTERWOVEN and both can be present together in history. CHRONOLOGIES can be used to show change and continuity working together over time.
SIGNPOST 3 Flows of continuity and change	Change is a process which varies over time. Change can be described as a FLOW in terms of its PACE and EXTENT and can be described in terms of TRENDS and TURNING POINTS.
SIGNPOST 4 Complexity of change	Change and continuity are not a single process. There are many FLOWS of change and continuity operating at the same time. Not all FLOWS go in the same direction

3) Historical evidence

SIGNPOST 1 Inferences from sources	When we write history we need to create interpretations of the past based on evidence. INFERENCES are drawn from a variety of primary sources to create interpretations of the past.
SIGNPOST 2 Cross-referencing sources	Historical evidence must be CROSS-REFERENCED so that claims are not made based on single pieces of evidence. CROSS-REFERENCING means checking against other primary or secondary sources.
SIGNPOST 3 Source utility	Historical evidence has multiple uses. The UTILITY of a piece of historical evidence varies according to the specific enquiry or the questions being asked.
SIGNPOST 4 Evaluating sources	Working with evidence begins before the source is read by thinking about how the AUTHOR, intended AUDIENCE and PURPOSE of an historical source might affect its WEIGHT as evidence in relation to a particular question.
SIGNPOST 5 Sources in context	Historical evidence must be understood on its own terms. This means thinking about the CONTEXT in which the source was created and the conditions and views that existed at the time.

4) Historical interpretations

SIGNPOST 1 Identifying interpretations	Historical interpretations are everywhere. Every piece of historical writing is an interpretation of some sort. The past is not fixed but CONSTRUCTED through the process of interpretation.
SIGNPOST 2 Drawing inferences from interpretations	It is possible to draw INFERENCES from interpretations of the past, just as with historical sources. INFERENCES will reveal the MESSAGE of a particular interpretation.
SIGNPOST 3 Evaluating interpretations	The APPROACH of an author must always be considered. This means considering their VIEWPOINT, PURPOSE, AUDIENCE and the EVIDENCE chosen to build their interpretation and what impact this might have on the final interpretation.
SIGNPOST 4 Interpretations in context	Historical interpretations must be understood on their own terms. This means thinking about the CONTEXT in which they were created, the conditions and views that existed at the time, and what impact these factors might have on the final interpretation.

5) Significance

SIGNPOST 1 Resulting in change	Events, people and developments are seen as significant because they RESULTED IN CHANGE. They had consequences for people at and/or over time.
SIGNPOST 2 Revelation	Significance is ascribed to events, people and developments if they REVEAL something about history or contemporary life.
SIGNPOST 3 Identifying significance criteria	Significance is seen as something constructed. Therefore CRITERIA are needed to judge the significance of events, people or developments within a particular historical narrative.
SIGNPOST 4 Provisional significance	Historical significance varies over time, and in relation to the INTERPRETATIONS of those ascribing that significance. Significance is PROVISIONAL.

6) Historical perspectives

SIGNPOST 1 Appreciating world-views	There are major differences between modern WORLD-VIEWS and those of people in the past. Differences are seen in their beliefs, values and motivations. We must avoid PRESENTISM.
SIGNPOST 2 Perspectives in context	The perspectives of HISTORICAL ACTORS are best understood by thinking about the specific CONTEXT in which people lived and the WORLD-VIEWS that influenced them.
SIGNPOST 3 Perspectives through evidence	Looking at the perspective of an HISTORICAL ACTOR means drawing INFERENCES about how people thought and felt in the past. It does not mean using modern WORLD-VIEWS to imagine the past.
SIGNPOST 4 Diversity	A variety of HISTORICAL ACTORS have very different (DIVERSE) experiences of the events in which they are involved. Understanding DIVERSITY is key to understanding history.

Figure 5: The process of enquiry within our model

SIGNPOST 1 Asking questions	There is a recognition that an historical enquiry involves ASKING QUESTIONS about the past. Historical ENQUIRIES are rooted in SECOND-ORDER concepts and can be pursued INDEPENDENTLY.
SIGNPOST 2 Suggesting answers	There are a range of POSSIBLE ANSWERS to historical questions. Some of these may be less VALID than others, however.
SIGNPOST 3 Refining	Historical claims need to be refined by seeking EVIDENCE and asking FURTHER QUESTIONS.
SIGNPOST 4 Supporting with evidence	Claims made in historical enquiries need to be SUPPORTED by EVIDENCE.
SIGNPOST 5 Communicating certainty	Historical claims need to be communicated with CLARITY and PRECISION. Some historical claims have a greater degree of CERTAINTY than others.

of second-order concepts.

Connected with this concern was the fact that the level descriptions were entirely divorced from the knowledge that must underpin any claim to historical understanding. In some cases this fed into a shift towards assessing students' progress purely in terms of their grasp of key second-order concepts such as causation or continuity and change. It does not take much of a search through my own archived assessments to find examples of tests essentially designed with a series of hoops for students to jump through to prove that Level 5, 6 or 7 understanding had been achieved. I cannot count how many times I have rewarded students for 'making a link' or 'adding a judgement' rather than demonstrating a genuine understanding of the period being studied. I am fairly sure that I am not alone in this. The challenge of restoring the link between substantive knowledge and conceptual understanding is one which the whole profession needs to address.

Stepping out of the cage – building new models

The next section presents an outline of a series of experiments which we are conducting within the assessment procedures and progression models used in my own school. It is important to acknowledge that what I am presenting here is very much in an embryonic stage of development, and that I am sharing it in a spirit of collaboration. I hope that it might spark further experimentation and dialogue so that meaningful solutions might be constructed by the whole history teaching community. It is certainly not meant to represent a final and finished product.

In taking our first steps outside NC level descriptions, it is crucial that we do not lose sight of the key principles that should underpin progression within the subject. To begin, we need a clear vision of what the history curriculum is intended to achieve. As Byrom points out, the new Programmes of Study for history go some way to providing a focus and purpose for the subject.[17] It would be difficult, however, to build a whole progression model on such broad aims. We need a clear 'gold standard' for which students and teachers

can aim. This might not be a standard which all, or indeed any, students actually achieve during Key Stage 3. Rather, it should be an aspirational description of what the very best history does. What dispositions of thought underpin the best history? What attitudes do good historians adopt? These are vital questions for history teachers to address.

In building our own departmental model, we drew on a whole range of influences from personal experience, school context, academic articles and of course popular and academic history.[18] In the end, the 'gold standard' which we agreed upon rested heavily on two key works: *The Historian's Craft* by Bloch and *The Big Six* by Seixas and Morton of the Canadian *Historical Thinking Project*.[19] From Bloch we took the idea that history is a craft which students might master, through diligent practice, with the support of a mentor. Seixas and Morton's work offered a more practical solution as to how a 'craft' approach to history might be conceived. Their focus on the idea that all students tend to hold various misconceptions – derived from everyday rather than historical thinking – which can be overcome through focused and disciplined enquiry, was a guiding influence in the process of defining our historical 'gold standard'. The following extract from a conference piece by Seixas became the core of the progression model we then developed.

Competent historical thinkers understand both the vast differences that separate us from our ancestors and the ties that bind us to them; they can analyse historical artefacts and documents, which can give them some of the best understandings of times gone by; they can assess the validity and relevance of historical accounts, when they are used to support entry into a war, voting for a candidate, or any of the myriad decisions knowledgeable citizens in a democracy must make. All this requires 'knowing the facts', but 'knowing the facts' is not enough. Historical thinking does not replace historical knowledge: the two are related and interdependent.[20]

We saw it as essential to recognise that the subject exists on two separate planes. On the surface, history is an engagement with the past, a passing on of traditions from one generation to the next, the notion of sitting at the feet of

Figure 6: Materials used to make the key concepts and processes explicit to students

This sheet aims to give you an overview of the things that good historians are able to do. During Key Stage 3 you will be given opportunities to improve your skills as an historian. Your feedback this year will keep referring back to the seven things we believe good historians are able to do. It is important to remember that these seven things are not just a tick-list of things you have to do. You will keep coming back to all of them over the course of Key Stage 3, especially 'Enquiry' which will underpin all you do.

What do good historians do?

1 **Good historians explain why things happen (SP1)**
They can show how events have many causes and how these causes link together. They see that some causes are more important than others and things happen due to the actions of people as well as other causes e.g. the economy or politics.

2 **Good historians understand how things changed or stayed the same (SP2)**
They understand that things in the past developed and changed over time. They understand that sometimes things stayed the same while other things developed rapidly. They can talk about turning points in history, and judge the pace and amount of change.

3 **Good historians are skilful at using evidence (SP3)**
They can use evidence to make suggestions about what the past was like. They can compare different sources and decide on the most useful ones to find out about a topic. They are also careful to think about how reliable evidence is.

4 **Good historians think about interpretations of the past (SP4)**
They examine historians' interpretations carefully. They think hard about why people interpreting the past have made particular claims and about the kind of evidence on which they were based. They think about the context in which historical interpretations were created and how this affects them.

5 **Good historians understand historical significance (SP5)**
They can explain the significance of events by looking at the changes that resulted from them. They are able to select and justify criteria for making judgements about significance.

6 **Good historians understand historical perspectives (SP6)**
They understand that people in the past had very different ideas about the world than people today. They think about the time in which people lived and how this affected them.

7 **Good historians can conduct historical enquiries**
They know how to ask questions, suggest possible answers, refine their claims and support them with evidence. They can communicate their findings clearly and pursue enquiries with independence.

our grandparents and being connected to generations long gone. History in this mode of thinking, much like Burke's society, is a contract 'between those who are living…those who are dead, and those who are to be born'.[21] History also exists on a second, more obscure plane, however. History is a discipline, a mode of thinking, which, as Wineburg suggests, 'is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development … it actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think'.[22] Good history therefore demands that we engage with the complexities of the past, that we are rigorous in our use of sources, that we interrogate the mentalities of the people whom we struggle to understand and that we recognise the limits of our understanding. The models of progression we choose to build need to reflect this.

Research-based models of second-order conceptual thinking were especially helpful in considering what students might be expected to 'master' as part of this craft of history. Lee and Shemilt also suggest that such models may help teachers to perceive the range of ideas and misconceptions that they are likely to encounter in the classroom, allowing them to tackle the unhelpful assumptions and so helping students to move on in their historical thinking.[23] Planning for progression might therefore be better represented, not by the creation of a series of level-like steps from the most basic operations to the most complex, but by setting out clear descriptions of good-quality history and then slowly challenging the misconceptions that prevent students from producing such work. This is very much the model used by Seixas and Morton, an example of which can be found in Figure 3 (p. 31).[24] At the same time, we wanted to ensure that the conceptual maps did not become the only element seen as important in students' historical development, leaving us merely with a new set of generic criteria, however appropriate they might be in that particular respect. We therefore also sought to keep a strong focus on the substantive content which students needed to master, both at the level of each particular unit and across the whole curriculum.

From cages to scaffolds to apprenticeship

From these initial meetings, the department moved on to plan a model for historical thinking which could underpin the new schemes of work we were developing. Grounding our model in a theory of conceptual mastery and the notion of apprenticeship inspired by Bloch, we have endeavoured to encourage students to undertake disciplined enquiry into the past. Students are encouraged to see the subject as a craft which might be mastered through perseverance, involving the slow accumulation of abilities, knowledge and ways of thinking. While end-of-unit assessments will of course feature in the final departmental schemes of work, they will not be tied directly to descriptions of progress and certainly will not be utilised to provide simple numerical descriptions of students as historians.

The model we have developed is based on six second-order concepts as well as the process of enquiry (see Figures 4 and 5, pp. 32 and 33). While, there are strong similarities to the second-order concepts addressed within the NC level descriptions, we also made a number of modifications to

better reflect some of the issues that we thought were under-represented in the previous conceptual frameworks. The progression model is not however intended to be translated into 'student-speak' and atomised into levels; it is designed to be applied where relevant and to inform teacher practice and feedback.

For each second-order concept (or process), and in line with the work of Seixas and Morton, we have identified a number of key 'signposts'.[25] These indicate important steps in overcoming particular misconceptions – steps that are essential to achieving mastery in relation to the concept in question. There is, however, no necessity for students to tackle each 'signpost' in turn, and indeed students may master more difficult aspects of the concept while still struggling with more straightforward elements. We found this approach liberating, as it meant that we were now thinking about activities and lessons which could address genuine historical misconceptions, rather than aspects of a tangential taxonomy. These concepts and our awareness of the signposts became the basis for all the units we planned after this point, guiding the focus of enquiry questions and shaping our approach to the use of historical evidence. Despite the time it has taken so far, we felt that without adopting this approach, we would have been continually retro-fitting a progression model on to a curriculum which addressed different goals. So far, all our assessment tasks have been rewritten to match aspects of the progression model explicitly, and we will continue to address the key signposts through the learning sequences we go on to develop. Although we are not going down the road of presenting second-order concepts as student 'tick-lists', we have decided to share our main aims with the students in the terms set out in Figure 6.

On historical knowledge

It is worth outlining here our current thinking about the importance of historical knowledge; a view which has been strongly influenced by Kate Hammond's research, reported in her own article in this issue of *Teaching History*.[26] Clearly, students' understanding of historical events, changes, people and periods is dependent on their ability to marshal large amounts of historical knowledge. As Brown and colleagues suggest in *Make It Stick,* the more factual knowledge students command, the easier it is for them to make connections between new learning and their existing mental models of history.[27] There are, however, different qualities to students' understanding of historical knowledge which can help to distinguish between those whose understanding is fairly shallow, and those for whom the knowledge goes deeper and is understood in a broader context. Hammond's work on historical knowledge was significant in helping us to think about how we should knit together historical concepts and substantive knowledge.

We began by asking ourselves the question: 'If good knowledge is fundamental to good history, then how should such knowledge be defined?' The response to that question led us into some very important debates about the nature and role of knowledge within the history curriculum and about how it should be appropriately assessed. As a result of debating this issue, we brought into our departmental rationale a number of key statements that deal specifically

Figure 7: A sample unit of work

Key question 1	Why did the French overthrow their king in 1789? (five lessons)
Target Concepts	LO1 – Causation (1.1, 1.2, 1.3); LO6 – Historical Perspectives (6.4)
Aim for the end of the enquiry	This unit will tie into the Civil War unit which was studied at the end of Year 7. Students will now be looking to explain why the French Revolution broke out in 1789 using some similar approaches. By the end, students should be able to construct a plausible explanation for why the French overthrew their king, which takes into account both long- and short-term factors and the motives of different groups. The best students will be able to draw links between these factors.

Core content	Assessment

• A link between the events of the English Civil War and the French Revolution should form a starting point for this unit.
• The nature of the *Ancien Régime* including:
  o The Estates system; the role and experiences of the bourgeoisie, city workers (*sans-culottes*) and peasants in the Third Estate; Louis' personal rule
• Long-term causes of the Revolution including:
  o Growing bourgeois class; declining living standards; Louis' indecisive nature; the Enlightenment; Marie Antoinette;
• Short-term causes of the Revolution including:
  o Poor harvests 1787-88; American War of Independence; taxation & the Estates General; the Tennis Court Oath
• The Revolution and the removal of the king – briefly cover the events of the storming of the Bastille and the removal of the monarchy
• Key concepts: Divine Rights, inequality, political representation, revolution
	INFORMAL ASSESSMENT
	In-class/homework assessment – reasons for the overthrow of the king. Suggestions for tasks include:
	• A 'messy time-line' of all the events leading up to Revolution
	• A news report explaining why the king was overthrown
	• A textbook double-page spread covering political, social, economic and intellectual reasons for the overthrow of Louis
	• A simple essay on the subject with feedback
	
	FEEDBACK
	Comment marking and effort grade as part of normal marking cycle i.e.
	☹☹ = unacceptable; ☹ = poor; ☺ = below par;
	☺ = good; ☺☺ = very good.
	Progress mark i.e.
	(+) Making Progress (=) Staying put
	(-) Going backwards!

with historical knowledge. First, that a command of relevant substantive knowledge is vital to students' understanding of any historical period. Testing such knowledge is therefore an important diagnostic tool in measuring students' development as historians. In addition, broader contextual knowledge is crucial if students are to make sense of any particular topic or period.[28] Our schemes of work have therefore put an increased focus on the specific historical knowledge required for students to access the history, as illustrated in the example shown in Figure 7. Second, students' knowledge needs to extend beyond a very narrow time-frame, which means that they should be encouraged to learn and recount history on different scales. For example an exploration of the causes of the Holocaust would be incomplete without a broader focus on the development of antisemitism at least through the nineteenth century, if not earlier. By planning for this at a curriculum level, we can help to develop students' contextual understanding and therefore their command of more complex historical narratives.[29] Finally, teachers need to be aware of the subtle ways in which historical knowledge might be displayed in students' work. We have to make a real effort to go beyond

rewarding factual regurgitation and place greater emphasis on how well students' contextualise such knowledge. As Hammond suggests, the ways in which different students present the same historical 'facts' can reveal a great deal about their contextual understanding of the period.[30]

As a department, we identified a number of obstacles which needed to be overcome in order to help students marshal historical knowledge confidently. The first was the problem of retaining knowledge in the long term. We noted that many students tend to forget much of the substantive content they have studied as they progress through school. This means that they are less able to use knowledge of those prior topics to inform their understanding of subsequent ones. As teachers we need to tackle misconceptions in students' substantive knowledge in the same way as we would those in their conceptual understanding. This creates an expectation that teachers too will develop and refine their own historical knowledge through reading and further study – a process we intend to support through reading and discussing a range of current historical works as a core part of departmental professional development.

Figure 8: A 'levels of response' mark scheme to an assessment task entitled 'How far did the French Revolution change the lives of the Third Estate?'

Low Pass *

400-700pts – A minority of students

Students at this level will tend to produce work which contains limited knowledge of changes brought by the French Revolution. Knowledge will be asserted where available and there may be inaccuracies in the knowledge given. In other cases, the knowledge used may be generic rather than specific e.g. lots of people were killed during the Revolution, this was a big change. Students may also repeat planning notes with limited links or explanation. At this level, students are unlikely to grasp the nature of change over time, and may well refer to change in a very generic way, discussing some of the big differences between France before and after the Revolution. At the top of the level, students may be able to make some valid, if general comparisons between pre- and post-revolutionary France. e.g. Before the Revolution, France had a king, but he was killed which was a big change. If specific details are given in a number of cases, this might be rewarded at the bottom of the next level.

The structure will tend to be narrative. Command of language will be weak.

Pass

800-1100pts – Some students

Students at this level will have at least some knowledge of the changes over the course of the Revolution. They will include some detail on how lives changed at different points, although this may be stronger for some groups than others. The evidence at this level may be drawn more from planning materials than contextual knowledge. For example they may refer to the fact that the peasants gained very little from the French Revolution in the end as they did not achieve many of their aims. They will provide some details to support this, but the support may be fairly limited. The accuracy of evidence will be satisfactory, although errors may appear. Students at this level will show some understanding that things changed over time, but they may not express this clearly. For some groups they may focus almost exclusively on one period rather than describing the flow of change. Alternatively they may cover different periods but with limited explanation for why fortunes changed, or limited links between the aspects. Some contextual knowledge should be shown and students should have a reasonable idea that France changed significantly between 1789 and 1804.

The structure will tend towards narrative, although some paragraphing may be evident thanks to the planning frame. Links back to the question will be implicit at best. There will be some evidence that the student understands at least the main changes brought by the French Revolution i.e. the deaths of thousands during the Terror, the removal of the king and the power of the people. A conclusion, if offered, will be unlikely to deal with the impact for groups, but may assess change as a whole.

Merit

1200-1500pts – The vast majority of students

Students at this level will have a good understanding of the changes over the course of the Revolution for different groups. They will include some specific detail on how lives changed at different points, although this may be stronger for some groups than others. For example they may refer to the fact that the peasants suffered most under the period of the Terror, giving relevant details to support this. The accuracy of evidence will be generally good, demonstrating a good understanding of the fact that different groups were affected at different points during the Revolution. There may be some minor inaccuracies. Students will go beyond simply restating work from their planning and there should be reference made to other parts of the unit, for example, providing contextual detail of the Terror, or Napoleon's ascent to power. Students will implicitly or explicitly cover issues of the pace, nature and extent of change for different groups.

There will be a logical structure to the work, with paragraphs being formed logically, most likely around different groups' experiences, although a chronological approach may also be acceptable. Some conclusion, even if only short, should be reached. The explanations given in paragraphs may still be implicit in their links to the question; however the conclusion will make an attempt to provide a direct answer to the question. Command of language will be adequate.

Distinction

1600-1800pts – A minority of students

Students at this level will have a very good understanding of the changes over the course of the Revolution for different groups. They will include specific detail on how lives changed at different points in a coherent way for at least two of the three groups. For example they may refer to the fact that the bourgeoise initially gained much power through the National Assembly, but then lost this during the Terror; giving relevant details to support this. Evidence will be used to support most points made. There will be a reasonable sense that the student understands the changing patterns over time and can explain this in a valid way. Language will reflect this to some extent, with reference being made to the pace and extent of change (though not necessarily in these words) and some attempt might be made to describe turning points. The accuracy of evidence will be good and students will bring in contextual detail from the rest of the unit to support their answer: for example explaining how the *sans culottes* had achieved their aims by 1793, or noting that the experience of women was different from that of men.
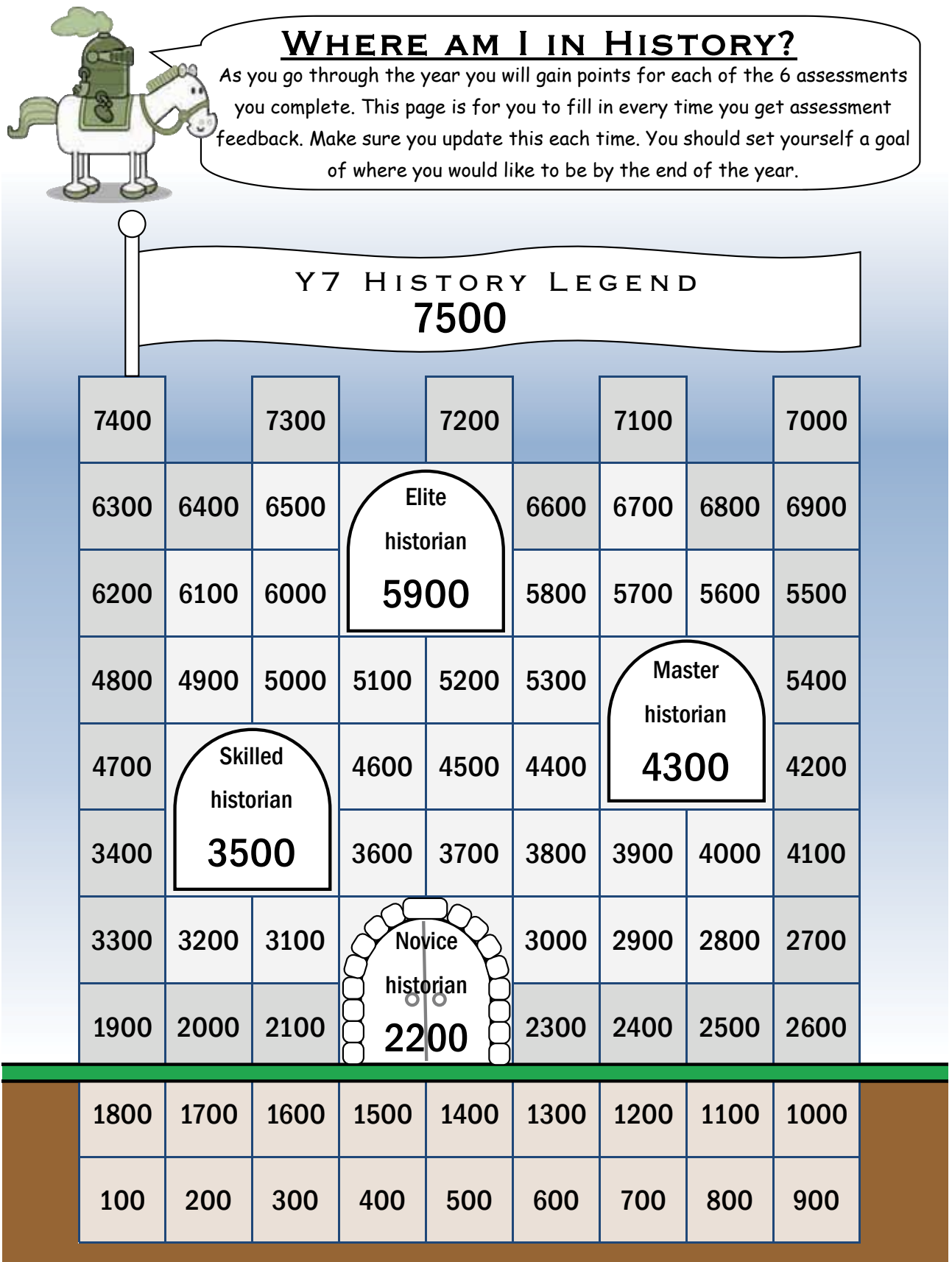
The structure of the essay will be largely analytical with a focus on the question which is sustained for the majority of the time. The account will show a deliberate engagement with the question and the conclusion will show an independent reflection on the question itself. At this level students should structure their work around each group. Command of language will be good.

Starred Distinction

1900-2000pts – Exceptionally rare

As above but also, students at this level should produce a sustained and well-focused answer which is analytical. The answer will use a range of specific and accurate evidence to explore the nature of change for different groups during the Revolution. All three groups should be considered in some degree of depth. There may still be some limitations to the analysis but the conclusions will demonstrate clear, justifiable and independent thinking and a good command of language. There will be clear evidence that contextual knowledge and not just specific planning has influenced the answer and students will consider the evidence they give in context. Students will have a strong grasp of the idea that changes happened at different rates and to a different extent for each group. They will provide a convincing analysis of this over time, reaching a substantiated conclusion.

* If a student's work does not meet the requirements of the 'low pass' it is given a fail grade (with a small number of points awarded for specific positive features within it). Failing the assignment would prompt an appropriate intervention and the student would be required to undertake another similar task after a programme of work intended to help him or her to bridge the gap.

Figure 9: Student materials for tracking progress

Where am I in History?

As you go through the year you will gain points for each of the 6 assessments you complete. This page is for you to fill in every time you get assessment feedback. Make sure you update this each time. You should set yourself a goal of where you would like to be by the end of the year.

Y7 History Legend
7500

7400 7300 7200 7100 7000

6300 6400 6500 | Elite historian 5900 | 6600 6700 6800 6900

6200 6100 6000 | 5800 5700 5600 5500

4800 4900 5000 5100 5200 5300 | Master historian 4300 | 5400

4700 | Skilled historian 3500 | 4600 4500 4400 | 4200

3400 | 3600 3700 3800 3900 4000 4100

3300 3200 3100 | Novice historian 2200 | 3000 2900 2800 2700

1900 2000 2100 | 2300 2400 2500 2600

1800 1700 1600 1500 1400 1300 1200 1100 1000

100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900

From models to assessment

From the development of the model and outline curriculum, the next step was to build meaningful forms of assessment for students. To promote students' grasp of the substantive content, we decided to use a range of informal assessment techniques including quizzes, time-lines, and synoptic essays to promote and monitor its development and retention throughout the year. These factual quizzes fit in with Fordham's notion of regular 'health checks' to identify those students who are getting 'lost in the chronology'.[31] Such testing can form an important part of securing and retaining learning, while synoptic essays can encourage deeper learning through generative memory processing.[32] Such 'health checks' also offer teachers a valuable set of data that they can use to assess students' understanding (reinforcing more holistic judgements), and they can be used as part of the informal reporting arrangements in school.

We have also endeavoured to place emphasis on the development of second-order concepts alongside substantive knowledge, through meaningful enquiries and 'formal assessments'. To make these more in-depth, conceptually-focused assessments meaningful it became necessary to split notions of reporting on *progress* from the assessment of students' *attainment*. We have therefore opted to mark students' assessments on a simple, five-stage scale. This allows teachers to make a judgement about the quality of the history being written, as illustrated in the sample mark-scheme shown in Figure 8 (p. 37). The stages have been established through reference to the specific content being covered, the relevant second-order concepts and, where appropriate, the process of enquiry. For example, in our assessment on the Battle of Hastings, students are assessed on their knowledge of the context and on specific causes of the outcome, as well as on their conceptual understanding of causation in history.

Students are given a grade for their assessment using the five-stage scale shown in Figure 8. It is made clear that the grade they receive is for the specific task rather than representing a measure of their overall progress. We explain that it is possible to produce a high-level answer in one assessment and a moderate level answer in the next, and still be making progress overall, as the students gain greater experience and tackle increased demands within each assessment tasks. This idea is strengthened by the fact that each level of the specific mark-schemes corresponds to a particular number of 'experience points' which they are awarded. This system is designed to give students a sense of their development over time, without resorting to sticking copies in their books either of the mark-schemes or of atomised level descriptions which are to be ticked off. As students record their 'experience points' over the year, we hope that they will get a more vivid sense of their rate of progress over time. The power of the 'experience point' approach is that it helps to create a sense of motivation and progress and unifies the assessment experience by means of a common thread which runs throughout the year. Figure 9 illustrates the kind of cumulative tracker that students will be using to record their progress.

Students are also given formative feedback on relevant parts of their assessments. Such feedback is grounded in an understanding of the misconceptions identified in the progression model, as well as in the substantive knowledge students are expected to develop in each unit. Comments are intended to help students to address specific weaknesses in relation to the task being tackled, rather than referring to the concepts generically. They therefore need to be specific to the task. For example, in a piece on why William won the Battle of Hastings, teachers may encourage students to find links between factors leading to William's victory. The teacher might want the student to connect the knowledge that William had prepared and drilled his troops with the fact that Harold's army was exhausted. In this instance, a comment which says 'You need to explain the link' is less useful to a student that a specific comment such as 'Why do you think Harold's men fared less well that William's once they actually met in battle? Is there a link here?'

Responding to formative feedback is also an important part of the learning process. We will therefore be dedicating time

in lessons for students to respond to comments and correct or improve their work. This corrective feedback should ensure that new understanding becomes more securely embedded. Drawing on all these sources – the health checks, work in lessons and formal assessments, it should be possible for teachers both to construct a comprehensive picture of students' abilities, conceptual understanding and historical knowledge, and to determine the nature and speed of the progress that they are making within the subject.

Tracking and reporting

In order to satisfy the need for tracking and reporting – an issue which has become a key focus for school accountability – we have sought to develop a system which is simple for parents and students to understand. One part of the process of simplification is to agree across departments to use a standardised approach to reporting achievement in formal assessment tasks (a common grading scheme or use of a percentage mark, for example). More importantly it involves drawing a fundamental distinction between attainment and progress – with separate grades used to report on each. Formal reporting is also supported by many informal approaches to sharing information about students' learning, and here departments may enjoy a degree of freedom.

In history we have therefore agreed to reporting the following information to parents, either formally or as part of an ongoing dialogue on students' work and in their books:

1   Formative feedback within students' exercise books which students are given time to act upon within their lessons.

2   Measures of attainment:
    a   The results from the 'health checks', which are given to students at regular intervals, and recorded in their exercise books.
    b   Students' grades for specific assessment tasks, graded either as 'fail', 'low pass', 'pass', 'merit', 'distinction' or 'starred distinction', and reported formally, along with the number of experience points that the student has accumulated so far.

3   Measures of progress:
    a   The formal report also includes a qualitative judgement specifically focused on the student's progress, which might be described as 'little or none', 'slow', 'good' or 'rapid'. Such descriptions are deliberately similar to the kinds of measures or judgements that Ofsted has applied in lesson observations. One possible model for this process of making judgements and reporting on progress can be seen in Figure 10 (p. 41).

Concluding thoughts

The experience of researching and designing a system of assessment and monitoring for Key Stage 3 over the last 12 months has led me to draw a number of tentative conclusions about the direction in which history departments, and indeed schools, might now need to travel. First, a more robust system of assessment and reporting for use in schools

is needed to fill the enormous gap which has been left by the withdrawal of NC levels. However well they were used, levels were perverted from their original purpose and only partially fulfilled their role as measures of educational attainment or progress. Second, NC levels and other linear models used to assess progress are not well aligned with the recommendations and findings of research in history education. My own exploration of assessment practices confirms that we should avoid conflating measures of attainment and descriptions of progress in the quest to develop a more meaningful understanding of progression in our subject. The third point is that history departments have a wonderful, if slightly daunting, opportunity to embrace the challenge of creating viable progression models based on professional and pedagogical understanding. Such models should weave together aspects of conceptual mastery, with the development of students' historical knowledge. Finally, there is an urgent need for collaboration. As a profession we have a wealth of experience with which to create credible alternatives to linear progression models. It is important that these models are shared to prevent a *de facto* return to the systems which have been removed. It is my hope that the next few years will see history departments up and down the country engaging with, and collaborating in the creation of, new and improved progression models, assessments and reporting systems based on the principles outlined above. The history community was amazingly strong in providing ways of conceptualising student understanding when NC levels still existed. This creativity can now serve to generate something even more exciting. The cage we have been in is now fully open; we just need to walk out.

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2   The final version of level descriptions within the previous NC can be found in the 2010 handbook published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority: QCA (2010) *National Curriculum Level Descriptors for Subjects, London: QCA. Available online at http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/10747/1/1849623848.pdf*
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5   Lee and Shemilt, *op. cit.,* p. 23.
6   Fordham, *op. cit.,* p.18.
7   Successive versions of the National Curriculum include: DES (1991) *History in the National Curriculum* (England) London: HMSO; DfEE/QCA (1999) *History: The National Curriculum for England*, London: Department for Education and Employment/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority; DfES (1995) History in the National Curriculum: England, London: HMSO; QCA (2007) *History Programme of Study Key Stage 3*. Available online at http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130802151252/https://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199545/history
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11 NAHT (2014) *Report of the NAHT Commission on Assessment*, London: National Association of Head Teachers. Available online at www.naht.org.uk/assets/assessment-commission-report.pdf
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13 This figure is taken from Seixas, P. and Morton, T. (2012) *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts,* Toronto: Nelson Education, p. 12. A free sample of this work, including this overview is available online at www.nelson.com/thebigsix/documents/The%20Big%20Six%20Chapter%20with%20BLM_Aug%2030.pdf
14 Lee and Shemilt, *op.cit.* p. 19.
15 Counsell, C. (2000) 'Didn't we do that in Year 7? Planning for progress in evidential understanding' in *Teaching History, 99, Curriculum Planning Edition,* p. 41.
16 While there is not space within the scope of this article for a fuller critique of Bloom's Taxonomy, it suffices to say at this point that the taxonomy does not always provide the most useful basis on which to consider students' progression in historical thinking. Bloom's taxonomy itself can be found in Bloom B.S. (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain,* New York: David McKay.
17 Bryom, J. (2013) 'Alive…and kicking? Some personal reflections on the revised National Curriculum (2014) and what we might do with it' in *Teaching History, Curriculum Evolution Supplement*, pp. 6-14. Note that 'Programme of Study' is a technical term used in England since 1990 in all government national curriculum documents. Programme of Study is the title given to the section setting out what is to be taught (the compulsory content). It should not be confused with the programmes or schemes of work created by a school, department or teacher.
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30 Hammond (2014a) *op. cit.*
31 Fordham, *op cit.*
32 Brown *et al., op. cit.*

Figure 10: Reporting on progress

PROGRESS DESCRIPTOR	INDICATIVE EVIDENCE
Little or none	**Students are a cause for concern because they:** • fail to grasp new ideas and concepts introduced in lessons and regularly fail to demonstrate acquisition of specific historical knowledge in health checks and other knowledge-recall situations; • do not deploy new ideas or concepts in their written, or other work. They struggle or fail to elaborate on historical knowledge and make limited or no connections to their existing historical knowledge. • fail to communicate their ideas effectively; • do not respond to feedback in a meaningful way, or ignore feedback altogether; • repeatedly make the same mistakes, and do not move beyond misconceptions they have developed about the subject, despite being given feedback and assistance; • show little or no understanding in assessments, either failing them or achieving only a low pass level.
Slow	**Students need further support because they:** • grasp new ideas and concepts more slowly than their peers, and seem less confident in their understanding. Students at this level may struggle to recall key information about topics or have a below average command of specific historical knowledge. • struggle to deploy new ideas and concepts in their work, or may need prompting in order to do so effectively. They do not elaborate on historical knowledge to any great extent and struggle to make meaningful connections between existing knowledge and new knowledge. • struggle with some aspects of communicating their ideas effectively; • respond to feedback to some extent, but do not always address the issues being identified; • overcome some of their misconceptions about the subject but continue to make similar mistakes. This improves with support. • show some understanding in assessments, although this may vary over time. Students may for example achieve pass grades on most assessments.
Good	**Students are making good progress because they:** • grasp new ideas and concepts in line with their peers for the most part, although they may not always be fully confident in their understanding. Students at this level will show a sound grasp of knowledge in health checks or other knowledge recall situations. • deploy new ideas and concepts in their work with limited prompting. Students will be able to elaborate ideas in their own words and make connections between new and existing knowledge with a fair degree of confidence. • have an awareness of the links between ideas and concepts previously studied and newer ones being introduced; • communicate their ideas effectively most of the time; • respond to feedback in the majority of tasks, modifying and refining their ideas and work with reasonable effectiveness; • work on overcoming misconceptions about the subject, meaning that repeated mistakes about ideas or concepts are uncommon; • show sound understanding in assessments, with some variation over time. For the most part students should achieve merit grades in assessments.
Rapid	**Students are making rapid progress because they:** • grasp the vast majority of new ideas and concepts quickly and confidently, showing excellent recall in health checks and other knowledge tests; • deploy new ideas and concepts in their work confidently. Students will be able to elaborate historical knowledge and ideas in their own words and make connections between new and existing knowledge confidently. • show good awareness of the links between ideas and concepts previously studied and newer ones being introduced; • communicate their ideas effectively for the vast majority of the time; • respond well to feedback and refine ideas and work effectively; • work to overcome misconceptions about the subject, seldom continuing to make the same mistakes in work; • show good understanding in assessments with little variation over time. Assessments will generally be of merit standard or higher, with no evidence of dipping below this standard.