

## Thinking about ....Transition from sixth form to university

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The beginning of the A2 year is the time to focus students' minds on the next stage of their lives, be it higher education or employment. Students need to consider how they can best prepare themselves for this, at the same time as reaching the entry level qualifications they will need. They need to take responsibility for their own learning and rely less on the teacher. Students can, however, prove very reluctant to engage with independence. Teachers too need the confidence to 'let go' and allow their students room to develop independence as they are under pressure from the results-driven culture increasingly found in schools and colleges.

By the sixth form, students should be aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners and be ready to address them. All the skills which have been developed and scaffolded through their secondary career should now be coming to fruition and the teacher's role should be less one of direct intervention and more one of guide and mentor, teaching students how to learn, rather than simply imparting facts. These sorts of skills are of use to all students, whether or not they will go on to study history or another subject in higher education, or go into employment. Not all students, however, will recognise the value of developing skills which do not seem directly related to the achievement of a high grade at A-level. Many have come to rely on handouts from teachers and/or the 'badged books' produced by A-level examiners and which students believe

contain all that is needed to get a top grade.

The conscientious A-level teacher has to cope with the varying needs within most groups. In any A-level group only a minority of students will wish to study history in higher education. How do we help and advise those students, while not neglecting the needs of others, for whom history is, at best, a poor third or fourth choice of subject?

It can be difficult to persuade students to take control of their own learning. The retake culture does not prepare students for the fact that deadlines in higher education will not be infinitely flexible. A late hand-in can result in a score of zero for an essay; an employer may not be happy to wait until Monday for the report which they had asked to be on their desk by Friday.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the current criticism of the public examination system in the media, the recent Ofqual report found that current A-levels, particularly in the humanities are generally regarded as 'fit for purpose'.<sup>1</sup> There were issues arising from some of the general skills essential for undergraduate learning, including specific academic skills such as researching, finding sources, essay-writing and referencing. But many would see it as 'ever thus'. Higher education institutions (HEIs) recognise that students will not arrive as the 'complete package' and they don't want them to – there needs to be something left for them to do.

But they would like more intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness. This is something that A-level teachers are able to address.

### Applications to higher education

Subject teachers can offer a great deal of help to students applying to study history in higher education, but they must beware of some of the pitfalls of offering advice too. HEIs want to recruit the best students they can, but are subject to various pressures, not least the sheer number of applicants, and the requirement to improve access and reduce social exclusivity in some institutions. Teachers need to be aware of the limitations of their own knowledge and prejudices and that the requirements of institutions can change.

A good place for students to start researching higher education is the government website: <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>

Both teachers and HEIs are the subjects of various myths. Teachers in maintained schools are sometimes accused of lacking ambition for their students and failing to encourage application to Oxbridge colleges and Russell group universities. 'Selecting' universities (those with more applicants than places), are accused on the one hand of being socially divisive and on the other of being agents of social engineering – rejecting straight A applicants because of a bias against independent schools.

Teachers are unlikely to have detailed knowledge about history courses in all HEIs, but they can at least give students some guidelines to consider, and they can encourage them to be properly ambitious, while not wasting applications on institutions where they will not meet the entry criteria.

Students need to be aware, when considering applications, that HEIs can be split into three tiers:

High tier – those which require 360+ UCAS points

Middle tier – those which require 273-359 UCAS points

Low tier – those which ask for 272 or fewer UCAS points.

These tiers may not relate to the quality of the history courses offered, but rather to the number of applications received. Offers for higher education tend to be on a supply-and-demand basis, and courses in some high-tier institutions may be of lower quality than those in lower tiers. Nevertheless, some institutions have more currency in the employment market and students need to be aware of this.

There are some straightforward questions which will help to stop students 'wasting' applications:

- 1 What is the standard offer for the course?
- 2 Am I going to meet it?
- 3 If not, are there any similar courses which have lower offers? (American Studies, for example, might ask for lower grades than straight history, but it might be possible to include a lot of history modules.)

If students think they are going to meet the standard offer, they should do some additional checking:

- 1 Ask about the average grade of students starting the course. (Sometimes apparently low offers are made, but to students who are predicted much higher grades.)
- 2 Might the standard offer be raised even higher if there are a lot of applicants? There is no

# Resources

Teachers may want their students to engage in wider reading but often meet with resistance, or the resources are not available within the department or in the school library or resource centre. One of the things most commented on by new university students is the size of the university libraries and resource centres and the amount of reading and research they are expected to do independently. There is help available, however. There are a large number of free or reasonably priced resources available on the internet. Among the best are:

## **[www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk)**

The Historical Association's own website. The Student Zone has a growing library of interesting and accessible podcasts, articles from HA publications and short pamphlets plus lots of helpful advice. The resources available here are growing all the time and teachers should visit regularly to see what has been added.

## **[www.thehistoryfaculty.org/](http://www.thehistoryfaculty.org/)**

This excellent resource contains podcasts on A-level topics by academic historians which students find accessible and interesting.

## **[www.ehistory.org.uk/](http://www.ehistory.org.uk/)**

Although this is a (reasonably priced) subscription website there are also a

number of free resources, including articles by historians and advice on history in higher education.

## **[www.historytoday.com/student](http://www.historytoday.com/student)**

This includes access to back issues of *History Review*, now sadly no more. Students find articles much more accessible and focused than whole books and this prepares them for the use of journals at university.

## **[www.history.ac.uk/reviews/](http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/)**

This is particularly useful for students looking for resources for personal studies. It includes detailed reviews of recent academic history books.

merit in getting an offer you are not going to make – it just leads to a disappointing results day.

- 3 Are there any 'hidden' requirements? Do applicants have to have a certain number of A\*s at GCCSE or an A\* in a particular subject? Are the subjects taken at AS 'acceptable' to the institution concerned or are they considered 'less desirable'? Will this affect any potential offer?

Students also need to know that choosing history is not just about choosing the 'right' university, but also selecting the right course to meet their interests, skills and aims.

- 1 Would they like a broad survey course?
- 2 Do they want to specialise in a particular historical period or theme?
- 3 Do they have a particular language ability that they would like to utilise?

- 4 Would they like their chosen course to include the possibility of study abroad?

They need to look beyond the course title: even courses with the same name differ greatly. If a student's interest lies in modern history they should not assume that they will be able to select only modern history modules on a general history course. What are the compulsory core modules?

Even courses listed as 'Modern History', can mean very different things. Queens University, Belfast says this: 'Modern History at Queen's is "modern" only in the sense that it does not cover the Ancient World. In fact, it spans the period from the early middle ages to the twentieth century.'

Students should also be aware that not every module in every option will be available every year, due to staff research commitments etc. It is wise to select a course which offers a wide enough range of modules to interest them.

## The application process

Students should think about what universities are looking for, and how they meet the requirements. The main way to display their skills is through the personal statement, but this must be well written and clearly focused as it will probably be read very quickly.

The main focus should be on the subject applied for. Students need to sound committed and interested and should clearly have done their research. For example to profess a commitment to medieval history when the course applied for has nothing before 1700 would not impress.

Things to include:

- Evidence of genuine enthusiasm – What have you read? Where have you visited? Have you attended summer schools or study days? Be specific.
- Evidence of wider reading beyond the confines of the A-level course. This could be linked to course choice. A detailed discussion of one author's approach would mean more than a long list of books.
- Any reasons why a candidate's qualifications do not reflect their academic performance.
- Personal rather than generalised statements and details.

What not to include:

- Gimmicks
- Things cut and pasted from the internet
- Things you have made up or books you intend to read but haven't got round to yet!

Increasingly selector universities are using additional admissions tests and questionnaires, which may take students and teachers by surprise.

An example:

Please tell us why you would like to study history at this institution. (200 words)

In what ways is your understanding of history enhanced by the study of



another academic discipline? Answer with examples. (no more than 500 words)

We would like you to select a history book that you have read in the last two years, and analyse the author's approach and methodology. (no more than 500 words)

Such questionnaires are produced with the best of intentions – but do they discriminate against students with less 'cultural capital'? Does the current A-level course prepare students to answer questions like this?

Oxford and Cambridge history faculties have both invested heavily in the development of admissions tests and criteria of various kinds and their websites include considerable help for students.

Oxford has a series of podcasts on admissions:  
[www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate\\_courses/about\\_oxford/podcasts/index.html](http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate_courses/about_oxford/podcasts/index.html)

Information on their History Aptitude Test can be found at:  
[www.history.ox.ac.uk/prospective/undergraduate/applying/the-history-aptitude-test.html](http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/prospective/undergraduate/applying/the-history-aptitude-test.html)

Cambridge provides a 'virtual classroom' to help students with the sort of skills they will need:  
[www.historycambridge.com/default.asp?contentID=604](http://www.historycambridge.com/default.asp?contentID=604)

Most university websites include some guidance for applicants which potential students should use.

## Preparation for independent study

There are a number of ways in which to introduce students to broader study skills and experiences which will prepare them better for the independence they will need in higher education. There are opportunities for less advantaged students, particularly those who are the first in their family to go to university, through organisations such as the Sutton Trust and Villiers Park, both of which run residential courses.

[www.suttontrust.com/home/](http://www.suttontrust.com/home/)  
[www.villierspark.org.uk/](http://www.villierspark.org.uk/)

There are also organisations which will come into schools as well as running courses, such as Debate Chamber and Speakers4Schools.

[www.debatechamber.com/](http://www.debatechamber.com/)  
[www.speakers4schools.org/](http://www.speakers4schools.org/)

Students can be encouraged to enter the large number of speaking, debating and essay competitions which are available, including the Historical Association's own 'Great Debate'. These all introduce and help to hone the skills needed in higher education. Essay competitions include the Vellacott Prize offered by Peterhouse, Cambridge and the Robson History Prize offered by Trinity College, Cambridge.  
[www.trin.cam.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=680](http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/index.php?pageid=680)

Those who have the time and the inclination may find that their local university history departments are interested in working with them to prepare their students either by sending speakers on A-level topics or by inviting your students to visit the department for an afternoon. They could also be asked to allow your

students to access their departmental websites and use any relevant resources.

The Ofqual report mentioned above gave the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) a favourable mention as a discriminator and something which prepared students

for university. This is something else to consider and encourage students to undertake.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> [www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-A-levels.pdf](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-04-03-fit-for-purpose-A-levels.pdf)

# Online CPD opportunities during 2012-2013



The  
Historical Association  
The voice for history

Having trouble getting out of school for CPD? School not got the funds to pay for a Face to Face Course? Want to take time to explore issues affecting your teaching? Online CPD might be just the thing for you.

HA online CPD courses run over a month, requiring a notional 20-25 hours' involvement on your part. Each week two or three issues will be raised and activities suggested, with the opportunity to engage fully with both the course leader and other participants using our online platform. No special ICT skills are required – if you can use email then you can fully engage in the process. Each course is developed and led by a carefully chosen expert in the field, in order to help you get the most out of the experience.

Following the success of our first online CPD course **Teaching History Using Historical Fiction in the Classroom** we are offering several more during 2012-2013.

## What people have said about our online CPD courses:

*'It was a fantastic opportunity to work with other teachers far and wide. It can be difficult to make these important connections during term time. It also allowed us time to engage in conversation with each other. It was also good to be able to pick and choose when we wanted to work and how much time we would spend which can be more difficult in more traditional CPD courses.'*

*'It was enjoyable to take time to think about these different skills and ways of teaching alongside like-minded teachers....'*

*'It has really raised my awareness of what could actually be done.'*

*'Would you recommend this course to a colleague? Definitely!!!! Why? The format allows engagement and learning. More quality online courses like this please!'*

- In September **Ben Walsh** will be leading a course on **'Effectively using interpretations in the history classroom'** You can find out more details here: [www.history.org.uk/shop/product\\_5584\\_43.html](http://www.history.org.uk/shop/product_5584_43.html)
- In November **Richard McFahn** will lead a course for **'New or recently-appointed Heads of History.'** Details are here: [www.history.org.uk/shop/product\\_5583\\_43.html](http://www.history.org.uk/shop/product_5583_43.html)
- Also in November **Dave Martin's** course will explore **'Bringing the historian into your classroom.'** Details are here: [www.history.org.uk/shop/product\\_5585\\_43.html](http://www.history.org.uk/shop/product_5585_43.html)
- **'Teaching history using historical fiction in the classroom'** will run again in February 2013, simultaneously with a *Primary History* special edition on 'Creativity in the History Classroom'. [www.history.org.uk/shop/product\\_5444\\_43.html](http://www.history.org.uk/shop/product_5444_43.html)

Courses cost £99 for members, and £145 for non-members. Some of these courses will be re-run in the Spring Term, if demand exists. Sign up now at: [www.history.org.uk/shop/shop\\_products\\_43.html](http://www.history.org.uk/shop/shop_products_43.html)