



# ‘Be agile!’ Collaborative working between Higher Education Institutions and Schools

David Ingledew

## Introduction

The following paper outlines the value, the variety of ways, and the challenges of collaborative working between higher education historians and schoolteachers and their pupils. These are drawn from series of recorded interviews conducted in 2022 with HEI historians, working at a diverse range of UK institutions, discussing their collaborations with local school history teachers and pupils. The paper is not designed to provide a template or a fixed set of rules on how such collaborations should be pursued, but instead aims to highlight the wide range of possibilities and common features of effective collaborative working.

## The value of collaborative working

The recorded interviews highlight the value of collaborative working between academic historians and schools in numerous, overlapping, and interconnected ways. First, it is an opportunity for academics to share their latest scholarship and research with a much wider audience by working with schools. Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen discuss how they wanted to share their work on secondary schools and social change since 1945 to provide opportunities for pupils to think about this in familiar surroundings. Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward’s collaboration arose out of their work on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s visit to the North-East of England and how could this be meaningfully shared with local schools teachers and embedded in the longer term. The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 brought a sense of urgency to Dr Sarah Longair, and colleagues, work on decolonising the history curriculum and how this could be used to support teachers in local schools. Second, collaborative working between academics and schools can be integral to the research project or lead to further research outputs. Professor Corinne Fowler’s project involved working with 10 primary schools with the aim of Year 5 pupils contributing to the development ‘Colonial Countryside’ exhibitions at National Trust properties. Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward discuss how their project highlighted the gap between current historical scholarship and how King was taught in secondary history lessons, which led to further academic output that had a REF impact. Third, a strong feature of all the recorded interviews is the reciprocal learning between academics, teachers, and pupils. Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen state that it was their collaborative working with teachers that made their project a real success. Teachers valued their scholarly expertise and research and they in turn valued the pedagogical and curricular expertise of the teachers. Dr Sarah Longair perceives collaboration between history

teachers and academics as a continuum, in which all are educators, interested in history, and where much can be learned through open discussion. Professor Corinne Fowler emphasises the importance in collaborative working of academics appreciating the perspective of teachers and to be open and willing to learn from them about working with pupils and how to follow up their ideas and creativity. Another value of collaborative working linked to this is providing opportunities for pupils to see how historians work, for example using archival resources, whether directly as highlighted in Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward's project, or indirectly through collaboration between PhD students and student teachers as highlighted by Charlie Crouch and Will Bailey-Watson. A fifth value of collaborative working between academics and schools is to provide opportunities for outreach, to promote the work of history departments and support the recruitment to undergraduate programmes. Dr Simon Sleight and Dr Ed Zychowicz-Coghill network of schools in and around London aims to address the gap between school and university history, and to support transition by working with history teachers and their pupils to develop historical skills and different types of assessment. Similarly, Dr David Clampin's North-West network aims to break down fears and barriers by demystifying for pupils what going to university and studying history at university looks like by offering outreach opportunities. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, as indicated in all the recorded interviews, collaborative working with schools and young people is fulfilling in its own right, an opportunity to revisit what interested you in history in the first place and share your passion and enthusiasm for the subject.

## Effective collaborative working

The recorded interviews also highlight a number of factors that enables higher education and school collaborative working to be more effective and have a greater impact. First, the support of your colleagues and higher education institution, including funding, outreach, and administration support. Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen project on schools and social change in post-war Britain, secured funding which not only paid for a dedicated funded engagement coordinator to manage the work between academics and teachers but also paid for the teachers' time so that they became regular members of the project team. Dr Simon Sleight and Dr Ed Zychowicz-Coghill London network does not have specific project funding, but with the support of their institution, were able to secure dedicated administrative time to coordinate a range of activities. Second, to identify, nurture and utilise contacts that you have with local schools and existing networks of local history teachers, for example, Dr David Clampin discusses in his interview how he and his admissions officer act as point of contact for local schools, but encourages colleagues to use whatever contacts they have, including personal links, to build and expand their network of schools. This is supplemented by a regular audit of links and contacts with local schools in order to identify gaps, avoid duplication of effort as well note when a teacher contact leaves a school and moves on. Dr Sarah Longair discusses how she tapped into existing networks of local history teachers in Lincolnshire, using its contacts and connections, to identify a few key people to work with in the first instance in order to widen the collaborative working further at a later stage. Similarly, Dr David Clampin and Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen in their collaborative working with schools highlighted the value and importance of working with and utilising the expertise and contacts of colleagues working in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as well as the Historical Association (HA). A third factor, highlighted in the recorded interviews, which enhanced effectiveness and impact of work with schools was a genuine interest in collaborating with schools, to listen to history teachers and not always assume that you know what they want. Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward discuss how the initial plan for their project was to produce new resources for history teachers and pupils, but, after initial discussions, realised that there was already a lot of resources available, and what the teachers really wanted was to engage with the academic historians as experts in their field, hear about latest research, engage in academic debates, and find out which articles to read. Both Professor Corinne Fowler and Dr Sarah Longair emphasise the importance of getting to know the context the context of the school(s) you are collaborating with, for example, timetables,

curricula, key contacts, type of school and the local area that its pupils come from school. A final factor which links all of these points is the importance of being flexible in how you work with schools, what you can offer and what you expect in return from history teachers and their pupils, as well as the intended outputs of your collaborative working. Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward's collaborative project developed a range of resources suitable for the age ranges of Key Stage 1 to A-Level, ensuring that these could easily be adapted by the classroom teacher to suit their needs and those of their pupils rather than a 'one-size fits all' approach. Dr Sarah Longair discusses in her recorded interview how her project's initial intention was to develop specific resources for schools on Empire and decolonising the curriculum, but quickly changing this once it became clear that what the teachers in her local area really wanted was academic expertise and support in tackling difficult topics such as race and racism with their pupils. This underlines the point of listening to what history teachers want from you, being sensitive to their school context and genuinely collaborating together rather than making assumptions. It is also central to Professor Corinne Fowler's collaborative project where the Year 5 pupils and their teachers that she worked with were integral to the research output and involved cultivating wider links with local arts organisations and learning trusts in order to make the project more sustainable. Flexibility in the ways in which higher education institutions and schools collaborate together is also important. Dr Simon Sleight and Dr Ed Zychowicz-Coghill London network supports a wide range of activities, from annual school conferences to delivery on lectures, online and in-person, judging school debating competitions and supporting prize giving. Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen collaborative project is built around an overarching enquiry – *in what ways do schools reflect change in the UK since 1945?* – supported by a suite of resources and lessons that can be adapted to suit a particular history teacher's needs. Dr Sarah Longair's project initially planned to host in-person face-to-face meetings (with funding to pay for teachers' cover costs) but quickly switched to online after school meetings as a result of Covid restrictions that enabled academics and groups of history teachers from different schools to meet together more easily and frequently.

## Overcoming the challenges of collaborative working

A number of challenges or difficulties in the collaborative working between academic historians and schools are highlighted in the recorded interviews, but also ways in which these were addressed and overcome. Professor Peter Mandler and Dr Chris Jeppesen discussed the issue, highlighted above, of academic historians making assumptions about the type of input and resources that history teachers and schools need. They argue that a better approach is, in consultation with history teacher educators, to actually get the teachers designing the resources themselves using their expertise as academics. In doing so, it is important to recognise that school teaching is a distinct profession in its own right and working with teachers requires the academic(s) to listen and value their contributions to the collaborative project. Furthermore, in both Dr David Clampin and Dr Sarah Longair in both of their recorded interviews urge fellow academics, who are interested in collaborative working, to recognise the demands and challenges of being a school teacher which has an impact upon their availability and engagement with such projects. In order to overcome these challenges, Sarah's collaborative project secured funding to pay for teacher cover and travel costs, used online meetings – both live and pre-recorded – to work around teachers' timetables in a more flexible way; to share pre-recorded content in advance so that when they all got together the teachers had more time to discuss; to give choice through a range of topics as to what the teachers followed up on which gave the teachers more opportunities to follow up their particular interests and so more ownership of the output produced through the collaboration. David's project has faced the continuous challenge of keeping in touch with teachers in their network, impacted by changes in jobs and schools, the restrictions caused by Covid, financial and time constraints, particularly in bringing teachers and their pupils to campus. This has been addressed by a continuous commitment to maintaining links, making new contacts, reviewing, and updating the ways in which he and his colleagues work with schools. Another challenge, highlighted by Dr Megan Hunt and Professor Brian Ward and Professor

Corinne Fowler in their recorded interviews is to assess the impact of collaborative projects on schools, teachers, and pupils over a prolonged period. To address this they suggest that this should be thought through and discussed with all those involved at the planning stage but also to be responsive to any unexpected opportunities that may arise, for example, the differences in perception between academic and school history of Martin Luther King led to Megan producing an academic paper.

## And finally...

To conclude, all of the academic historians interviewed for this project highlight the value and benefits of working collaboratively with schools, teachers, and pupils. Not only from sharing their research and expertise with a wider audience, but also from having their work applied and used within a school setting, finding real value in conversations with teachers and pupils, who challenge their thinking, practice and assumptions helping to break down barriers and, and as one contributor stated, to 'keep you on your toes'. Pupils and teachers clearly benefit from the expertise of academic historians, sharing their latest research, revealing how they work in archives and construct history, and opening young minds to the possibilities of studying history at university. In turn, for academics, collaborative working can lead to further research output, new connections, collaborations, and opportunities, and of course a real joy in working with children and young people. Successful collaborations require a commitment to genuine reciprocal partnerships, thoughtfully managed and orchestrated, with clear but flexible goals, shaped by local needs and contexts, and built upon mutual respect. In short - be agile! In what you can offer and how you reach out to schools, how you speak and listen to teachers and pupils, and how you develop your contacts and build your networks.

If you have any questions or are interested in contributing to the project, please contact me at [d.ingledew@herts.ac.uk](mailto:d.ingledew@herts.ac.uk)