

Historical Association Teacher Fellowship programme: Teaching the economic history of colonialism in Africa and Asia

Impact Evaluation Report

Mary Woolley, January 2026

Key conclusions

- The sheer variety of resources created by participants in this niche and under-taught area of economic history of the British Empire shows the broad, but bespoke impact of the programme, creating innovative approaches to teaching economic history across the secondary age range.
- Every teacher interviewed reported a growth in confidence to teach economic history and deal with concepts they had previously found challenging.
- Many teachers reported a significant and positive impact on their students, whether that was sixth-formers applying to study economic history at university, Year 9 students enjoying the challenges, SEND students linking economic concepts such as the gig economy to their daily lives or boys realising the connections between their local Mersey and global trade.

Introduction

This Teacher Fellowship programme, a partnership between the Historical Association and the Department of Economic History at LSE, explored the economic history of colonialism and empire in South and South-east Asia, Africa and the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The programme was supported by the LSE Knowledge Exchange and Impact fund. 10 teachers took part across the academic year 2024-25, with 2 facilitators from UCL IoE, Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud. Resources were created and published in Autumn/ winter 2025. Each participant was approached for an online interview in November 2025. 7 replied. Microsoft Teams interviews of around 30 minutes were carried out with each participant in late November/ early December 2025. A joint interview took place with Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud, the project facilitators. Transcripts were produced and analysed in response to three research questions. Findings beyond these research questions, relating to the impact on students, are also reported below.

The resources created by participants vary geographically, from China to India to Africa, academically, from A-level to Key Stage 3 students and across commodities and economic concepts, from palm oil to opium and supply chains to labour. This report is structured around three key questions identified in previous impact evaluations of HA teacher fellowship programmes (Burn, 2021).

What kinds of knowledge do the participants claim to have acquired through participation in an extended subject-rich CPD programme?

Participants reported joining the programme to learn new knowledge related to economic history, become familiar with recent historical scholarship and use that new knowledge to develop their teaching. This was particularly true for those teaching the British Empire at A-level where participants identified a previous gap in their knowledge and a lack of good quality resources.

There's always a difficulty, the specific difficulties of teaching economic history. So, it was ticking all my boxes in terms of learning more about the actual history and then thinking about how to teach it. [P1]

Participants were interested in the programme due to its specific focus on economic history. Many reported that they had existing knowledge of the history of the British Empire, with several participants already teaching this at A level. They felt less confident, however, in their knowledge of economic history. As one participant said,

One of the themes in our A level course is the economic incentives impacts of imperialism so, and I would argue it was definitely my weakest area of teaching of the course...I was also aware that it wasn't my most dynamic teaching when I was teaching that. [P5]

Participants were positive about the opportunities to learn about economic history through the teacher fellowship programme.

I learned about economic history. I didn't even know what it was and how it was done and what was different about it. But now I think I know. [P4]

The readings on the programme were useful for getting a sense of the different issues, like economic nationalism, this sense of wanting ownership over economic resources as a form of anti-colonial nationalism and how that links to a sort of power balance over economic resources [P3]

A small minority of participants reported being daunted by the quantitative aspects of economic history, or expecting to see more people in the histories being told. This was mediated, however, by both the facilitators and the creation of a community of fellow history teachers.

having a group of teachers talking about how to teach a particular topic which sometimes has the reputation of being difficult to teach... having the opportunity of engaging with other practitioners and thinking about how, how to teach that and how to break down the concept was very valuable [P1]

The specific intentions and methods behind the creation of a community of teachers interested in this area are considered further later in this report.

There were specific elements of economic history which several of the participants commented on, bringing levels of nuance and complexity to previous understandings. For several of the participants, this came as not just new knowledge, but a completely different

perspective on the history of the British Empire, which took some flexibility of mind. As one participant summarised:

It's actually really made me think about the British Empire, colonialism, in a completely different way in a more sophisticated way, and more historically rigorous way. [P5]

One participant gave more detail about this rather uncomfortable shift in mindset, describing their initial reaction to the history presented at the residential:

We came to the first session at LSE and all three of the academics... were talking about how people experience this, and here's all the, you know, the bad things or the negative aspects. But within that there were some people who were able to create opportunities for themselves from the British presence... To start with that sat quite uncomfortably with us. And we were all having these conversations with them. I don't feel comfortable teaching that to students and we needed a bit more support in the kind of language that we were going to use to communicate that. [P5]

Other participants supported this, speaking of new perspectives that they learnt to appreciate or accommodate:

The involvement of the colonial elite is not something that I had really engaged with meaningfully before [P1]

I think we're all trying to get beyond the balance sheet when we teach the empire and it was really interesting to see that they just weren't really interested in that at all, the sort of ethical, moral aspect. They were more just interested in the mechanics of the economics and how it works and who was buying what and who owned what property and, you know, digging down into it all. [P2]

This challenge to previous perspectives was also raised by one of the facilitators:

I certainly gave some thought to interpretations that I wouldn't have considered beforehand and I saw merit in their approach and it shifted my understanding of imperial history, particularly how to discuss... the indigenous beneficiaries of empire [F2]

One participant described this shift in her thinking in terms of the agency of individuals within colonised lands:

I think the key theme of the agency was a really important one and I think it really helped shift mindsets, my perspective on how I view this history. I think because I've got that very personal connection, right, to empire history that I kind of can't help but think of that human side and that social side and that injustice. I think these professors really made me stop and consider the agency and the sort of active role. And the sort of the, the, the benefits perhaps that were that were reaped by these colonial characters, right? These colonial individuals. And I think that that's something that I struggled with initially getting into it. But I think I have a greater appreciation for now.... [P7]

She went on to describe how, though finding it personally difficult, she went on to represent this agency among certain colonised peoples in her resources.

Some lessons towards the end where I have a look at like the number of Asiatic seamen who were involved in merchant trading. And I have a look at what they got paid and things like that and follow stories of them coming to you know, sort of the East, East End of London and the lives that they then had and the benefits that they that, that they sort of got out of it. And I think it's it's really hard because it is within sort of this this system of power and this system of, you know, racism involved. [P7]

The knowledge described here shows not only new, substantive scholarship, with detailed histories of particular countries and experiences, but the cumulative effect of those details in developing an understanding of more complex perspectives, enabling the participants to navigate or broker a connection between their curriculum interests and the very rigorous approach to economic history presented to them.

Several participants talked positively about the geographical extent of the history covered.

There was definitely a sense of, there's no way I'm going to be able to use all of this. They kind of divided it into three geographical areas. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and north Africa and then sort of the Indian subcontinent. [P2?]

my understanding of like the Middle East region has improved massively as a result of this and that's pretty important for teaching it well, but it's also quite useful for everyday life [P3]

I learned a lot in terms of the economic implications of the British Empire and in other areas apart from the Opium Wars – in west Africa and east Africa [P1]

One participant described joining the programme, intent on focussing on one area, but was surprised to find how interesting it all was, extending their historical knowledge across geographical regions they knew little about. "It was really nice to get the chance to have 3 days... to just sit there and have interesting people tell you interesting things about history. So I really enjoyed that."

The facilitators of the programme described the principles that underpinned the construction of the programme, focusing on 'how you should go about learning history, principles about the pedagogy, dialogic teaching, working with sources.' [F1] Although participants did not speak explicitly about gaining pedagogical content knowledge through the programme, it was clear that discussions in the group and with Robin and Abdul were linked to history pedagogy, specifically in the sense of how the complex concepts of economic history might be taught in a meaningful way, or how economic concepts might be integrated into planning and teaching.

Reading some of it, quite a lot of discussion was, how do you actually use this in school? How do you take the conclusion or some aspects of the paper and integrate them into your enquiry. [P3]

For some, this clearly raised pedagogical questions in which economic concepts should be selected and how they might be made accessible and relevant to students in the classroom:

I guess it's about selecting which aspects of it are most useful for students to know. So something like GDP could be more accessible in the sense that they would study GDP in geography as well, but there are obviously some problems with GDP in the sense that it's sort of a simplistic measure. [P3]

It was a bit frustrating at times that academics explained it to us, these are the debates, but our job is to translate this so that it fits into a sixth form specification... we have a very difficult job to sort of shape this within these constraints that the exam board has. [P4]

It was noticeable, however, that the programme wasn't simply about listening to historians and then repeating the new knowledge to students in school. Rather, the experience with the historians seems to have provided a context and language, a fertile ground, which empowered the teachers to complete their own research and produce resources suitable for the learners in their classroom. There was no simple knowledge exchange or transaction. Rather, the substantive historical knowledge provided confidence, context, language and inspiration.

One participant described this process as he visited a local museum with his family.

There was a pamphlet on Lord Leverhulme, Port Sunlight and the Belgian Congo. This was probably four or five weeks after I did the residential. It was absolutely fascinating. [P2]

The participant then described the resources he created linking his local school in the north-west of England to the Belgian Congo.

I think having that context made it a bit easier for me to read this leaflet and think, oh, right. I know what's going on here a little bit more. Probably, before, I would have read it but just filed it away as interesting. [P2]

Another participant described her initial interest in teaching about opium, but showed how the programme had contributed detail, example and quantitative evidence which she could then adapt to support the creation of her resource. Others described being inspired by the course to further develop their interests in the East India Company, the Lascars or the history of oil in the Middle East.

For busy teachers, it is clear that the structure of the course was set up to enable them and motivate them to learn more from experts and their writings. Participants described the motivation to read weekly:

I've got to share my thoughts on the reading on the forum, and we're going to have a chat on zoom about it, so I've got to have something meaningful to say at the end of the week. [P2]

It's given me motivation to actually read all this stuff, which I was interested in before, but being part of the course forces you to do it within a timeframe. [P3]

I would never have touched a paper like that before and now I had no choice. I was made to do it and I really actually learned from it and I enjoyed it.” [P4]

While these quotes do not describe a ‘kind of knowledge,’ it seems important to recognise how the structure of the course, and no doubt the leaders, provided the sustained motivation and incentive for participants to want to gain and further develop that knowledge.

What claims do the participants make about how that knowledge changes them or what it enables them to do?

Participants were unanimous in commenting on how much their confidence had developed, both in teaching the economics of empire, but also in researching history, reading academic papers and planning resources. One participant commented on a change in her teaching:

[I’m now] really, really confident about this economic chapter. I was always dreading if that came up... so for me it was really an eye opener and I feel much more confident now, conceptually I mean. And that rubs off on the students, that they see me confident and I know what I’m talking about rather than pretending [P4]

One area where several built confidence was in doing their own historical research in local or national archives to support the learning of students in their schools. One participant described local opportunities:

Locally, there are really extensive archives. So they have all of the old internal publications and so on. So I emailed them and said, look, can I just come in and see what you’ve got? And they were brilliant. [P2]

The participant had never previously engaged in independent research in archives, but now has close links with the local group and is creating another project between the history and the science department. Another participant reported exploring local museums and archives to create her teaching resource:

I went to the National Maritime Museum and I went to the archives and I explored and I really loved doing that honestly. [P7]

Other participants described developing new confidence to engage with papers on economic history:

For me it was quite interesting to understand that I don’t really need to know the numbers in order to understand the argument... I can have an opinion and I can say, like, this doesn’t make sense even if your numbers add up. I think this. So that was pretty cool. [P4]

One participant described how, as a part of the programme, she developed a relationship with a British Library representative who had presented on the residential weekend. This led to a collaboration over the sharing of some sources with teachers.

She created a padlet that I shared at the HA conference and that uses the sources that are embedded within my inquiry. [P5]

This helped both with the participant's confidence in working with outside agencies, but also in sharing her resources with more teachers through the padlet.

Beyond confidence in tackling economic history through research or in the classroom, participants reported an impact on their students, suggesting that the new knowledge led to more impactful teaching. Interviews with the participants were full of descriptions of positive students. In this example, the enthusiasm of the teacher for her newly developed resource is clearly picked up by her students:

They really, really, sometimes, you know, when you are so enthusiastic about something yourself they end up loving it. So it's a little bit tricky to know if that's part of it, but I love teaching it and they really, really engage with it positively. I've taught it through twice.... We start with a story, but then they work through the document from the inquiry and they find out themselves. They really enjoyed that. [P1]

Beyond shared enthusiasm, the same participant described a new quality in the essays of her students. While previously they may have oversimplified issues of empire, with the new materials they now had a complex argument to put forward involving the benefits of trade for some of the colonial elite. This could then be compared to the experiences of millions of peasants, and the students now had the numbers and the evidence to support their arguments. Similarly, another participant, asked if her students now had a better understanding of economic history, replied:

Absolutely. And they've got a lot more to say about it as well and they can really analyse those impacts more. Certainly, they could at the time, but what has happened is, when I bring out some of the terminology, if I said to them, what about forced labour or coerced labour, where have we seen that before? Straight away, I get an answer. Before that would have been, 'well I don't know, have we?', Now they can give me three or four different examples from across the empire. [P5]

These examples show that the way historical details have passed from the historians, through the programme, to the teachers and then to the A level students, supporting the quality of their writing and the accuracy of their historical evidence. A third participant, also teaching the British Empire at A level, described a different impact the programme had on her students future plans:

I have 40 students and half of them want to study history at university and lots of them have applied to study economic history at LSE. [P4]

This participant also described enabling a direct introduction between one of the historians on the programme and a sixth form student interested in the economic history of Africa. One of the facilitators spoke of visiting the school of one of the participants after the fellowship and being particularly impressed by the work of her A level students and how they had been given a language and a confidence to work out their own positionality on issues of empire.

The impact of the programme on students who were not sixth-formers was probably not so direct or significant, but was still commented upon by participants. From 'They were all really positive' [P6] to 'I think it was a real eye-opener for them' [P2].

I think it's had a positive impact. I think they've got an understanding now of the basics of economics. And you know we certainly looked at what companies are and how companies work... a lot of the kids here have got Indian backgrounds as well. So I think it maybe helped to dispel some myths. [P6]

Those participants planning resources for Key Stage 3 all commented on how little economic history was taught to this age group, and how difficult it was to break down complex concepts in a way that could be understood, so the positive impact recorded here is impressive and innovative.

Participants made several claims about how the programme changed their teaching, not just the new knowledge but also the structure and demands of the programme. Several commented on having the time to plan something well, but the teacher educators on the programme also clearly had high expectations for the quality of the planning in the final resources:

we produce so many lessons, don't we? So quickly... this has really it forced me to produce 8 lessons and eight lesson inquiry and really have the time to refine it. [P5]

It really made me think actually about how I put lessons together for other people to teach, and we're all doing that in, you know, a lot more because we're all sharing resources across our departments and teaching common resources and it's helped me to refine that process.[P4]

I didn't come to the programme with all of this knowledge of being a great history teacher. I did not. That was something I was working and developing right and I think that it was great to have those conversations with Robert and Abdul, who have been in the game for such a long time because their perspective is so important on things. [P7]

What effects does engagement in the programme seem to have had upon the participants' sense of professional agency?

Teachers came to the programme with differing initial views about their professional agency, what they had the power to change and how they might go about achieving that change. While all seemed to be members of the Historical Association, reading *Teaching History*, some did not feel active members of the wider history education community before joining the programme. One participant described being daunted by some of the names in the group, known by the quality of their resources for teaching history, but he was soon part of the group:

I remember turning up and feeling reasonably daunted at the prospect of meeting these people. But they were lovely. And actually it was brilliant... we were all messaging about different things and popping in little bits of research we've been doing... we still chat about things and there's load of exhibitions that we say, oh, are you coming along to this one? [P2]

Several of the participants described sharing their schemes of work with other history teachers. This could be in a department at school:

I'm now creating other lessons to share with my department, those lessons that I've learned, I can apply there as well. [P5]

Others presented at one or even two national conferences, sharing not only their resources, but they're new knowledge and the process of planning:

It was a workshop. So we actually worked through the resources... I had lots and lots of participants who had joined because they are also teaching the same AQA course and three or four have then said that they started their course this year with my resource. [P1]

The programme also clearly had an impact on the participants themselves, developing a sense of their potential to play an active role within that community:

Off the back of it I did a presentation at the HA conference as well. I really enjoyed that. It was a great opportunity and I'd never have been able to do that before... It feels like I've broadened my horizons. [P2]

The sense of community, carefully instilled by the programme facilitators, added to the confidence and professional agency of the participants. Creation of this community of learners was one of the core aims of the teacher fellowship programme at its outset, but it didn't happen by chance. The facilitators talked of their planning for this community:

we planned the residential meticulously down to almost the last letter. We decorated the premises at LSE. We had resources, we had displays up about textbooks. We had a range of textbooks in the room. We had photographs from colonial history. We have a sense of place to this experience of residential and then we spent a lot of time ensuring that they were talking to each other, that it was dialogic in its approach. Within 24 hours we had started to create this community. [F1]

The later, online parts of the Teacher Fellowship Programme were also planned carefully to sustain this community as they further developed their knowledge.

We wanted to sustain the energy created on the residential, so chose that every Sunday evening they would give participants the option of attending a 60-90 minute online meeting, connecting the themes ideas and purpose of the history that they had been reading. [F1]

I think that was probably the most successful element of the course. That's really where we embedded everything that we'd sort of hoped to do. [F2]

Both facilitators, and many of the participants, commented on the success of this community, and how they were brought together through the desire to learn and teach about this aspect of history:

I was just struck by how much immersion in this kind of history and pedagogy could actually bind these folk together and get them working in a connected way and working with each other as well as with us. [F1]

Agency for the participants was therefore not so much given, as carefully crafted and sustained through the instigation and support of this community under their wise and experienced facilitators.

Points for development

Most participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience on the course and reluctant to offer any criticisms, so these points need to be read within that context. A few participants thought a few elements of the programme could be made clearer to future participants at the outset of the programme. It is clear, however, that some participants came to the course with a particular personal interest in environment and history and the agency of nature which some found difficult to follow through in their resources in the way they initially intended.

I'm also very, very interested in environment and history, and because of my interest in environment and history I had already been interested in ... the kind of agency of nature, in the history classroom. [P1]

I started off wanting to have a focus on the connection between the economy, colonialism and the environment. [P3]

There was a sense that some of participants struggled a little at first to match their ideas for a resource with the framework set out by the programme:

It was about finding something that's kind of doing justice to the goals of the fellowship in terms of what the LSE wanted, which was, you know, meaningful engagement with authentic and rigorous economic history, which doesn't necessarily inspire year 8 and year 9 boys in my experience. [P2]

There were also some low-level comments over the timing for putting the resource together. A couple of participants spoke about clarity of expectation, especially those who tried to complete by the deadline and then found that others completed later.

The only really hard part for me was when it came to just putting the resources together. I mean I we had a deadline of sort of May, June and obviously that's a pretty busy time you know with GCSE and A levels and then. The HA said, just get them in when you can [P2]

When you get to developing the resources it is quite a lot of work in the sense that obviously developing any set of lessons takes quite a lot of time. If you want it to be of high standard, and then the fact that you want it to meet the brief of the programme itself. Then there's a good amount of reading so... maybe more explicit guidance on the focus of the resource would have been good. [P3]

Towards the end, I was unsure, you know, if I had made the deadline or if I hadn't made the deadline. [P7]

Most of these comments can be read within a context of high expectations from the teacher facilitators. Indeed, they suggested it was one of the benefits of the programme:

The value of the length of the fellowship, the kind of more drawn out process was that there were so many iterations of the material.... Three or four times they submitted their lessons to us and we responded several different times. [F2]

It is possible, however, that questions of timing and focus could, in future, be further exemplified at the outset of the programme.

Two other points for development were raised by participants. One related to access to readings. Two participants described asking teacher facilitators for access to readings, one asked for access to JSTOR, another commented that:

It could have been so much easier if we could have had more access to the library. [P4]

A final point for development was raised by two of the seven participants who commented that, while excited to become Teacher Fellows of the Historical Association, they were disappointed to find out that they could only hold the title for one year. I have been assured by the HA that this is not, in fact, the case, but perhaps something that needs to be clarified with the participants.

Final words

The final words of this evaluation should go to the teacher participants.

It was such a great, great, happy experience. I really got inspired. I met really interesting people with a good sense of humour. [P4]

It's the best CPD. The best thing I've done since training to teach. I would highly recommend it. [P5]

I don't believe that everybody isn't chomping at the bit to do one of these. Honestly, I just think it was, it was so beneficial. I would do another one in a flash, yeah. [P5]

If you have the time, the resources, do it. Sign up. [P7]

References

Burn, K. (2021) 'The power of knowledge: the impact on history teachers of sustained subject-rich professional development,' in Chapman, A. (ed) *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful knowledge and the powers of knowledge*, London: UCL Press.