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Talking about history in British education

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As you have heard already today, and probably were already aware, one of the problems about history in education is the number of misconceptions that there are about it. I do not mean complete misunderstandings or complete lack of knowledge but misconceptions, in other words incorrect ideas based on partly accurate and partly inaccurate reports. Some of them come from press reports, and usually from the mainstream rather than the educational press; some from impressions derived from student howlers or from interview candidates at universities, from which there is a tendency to generalise. Sometimes, indeed, there is a willingness, even an eagerness, to believe absolutely the worst.

So let me state very, very clearly that all the evidence points to the strength of the teaching of history in our schools. And the evidence comes in different forms. I suppose the most measurable comes in reports from the [Office for Standards in Education](#) (Ofsted) and from Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). History is regularly placed right at the top, vying with art, I think, for first and second position. I know that this is not a perfect exercise, and there are problems associated with measuring things in such a calibrated way, but in terms of the actual classroom experience, the sort of thing that [David Starkey](#) was describing from his own school days is rare, quite the opposite in fact.

There is some excellent, innovative and imaginative work going on. Pupils, even very young pupils, can achieve tremendous results by working directly with archival holdings and historical materials. Of course, you cannot learn everything about Tudor life from looking at a probate, but you can learn an awful lot, and you can certainly make a very good start. Incidentally, if primary schools are using probates to find out about Tudor life they are doing considerably better than I did at university.

In terms of student take up, there has been a slight upturn in the numbers. Towards the end of the 1990s we were extremely worried about student numbers at GCSE and at A level; they seemed to be heading downwards with nothing to stop them. (1) There has now been a slight upturn at GCSE and at A level and a particularly pleasing take up at AS level.

In other words, there is a lot of good news to report. To see the evidence for this one should first look at the pages of [Teaching History](#), where issue after issue reveals the quality of work going on in classrooms. If you can arrange it, you should also go into a history lesson in your local school. Time and time again, at gatherings like the [Prince of Wales's summer schools](#), commentators from higher education, who have not had direct contact with history teachers or with history in schools, come away saying 'this is so much better, I am so impressed, I had not realised quite how good the teaching is'.

I do want to stress this at the outset because, and let us be realistic here, we cannot claim that everything is good, we cannot claim that everything is always going well. There will be variations from school to school; there will be variations from teacher to teacher. And although it is fine for someone like me to get up and say that all is well with history in schools, I am very aware that if all is not well in your particular school, or indeed in your particular class, then those words will ring rather hollow.

There are limits to what is possible - there always will be - and a significant limit is timetabled time. At Key Stage 3, that is, the first three years of secondary school, two hours a week is the norm (two hours a week outside of examination classes has in fact always been about the norm in this country). But that is not always available and some schools and departments have to make do on much less. The time available can be a lot less than two hours a week, particularly by Year 9; and, indeed, there is considerable pressure in some schools to cram all of the Key Stage 3 history curriculum into the first two years. Sometimes that pressure comes from an individual head teacher or deputy head, but there is also a [Department for Education and Skills](#) (DfES) initiative which is trying to fast track various national curriculum subjects, including history, into two years of teaching. This will inevitably have a distorting effect, not just upon what you cram into those two years but upon continuity of historical education.

But the main constraining factor remains, as it always has been, the possibility of dropping history at 14. And it is absolutely true, as [David Starkey](#) says, that we are almost alone in Europe in this. Apart from the Netherlands and Iceland and, I think, one of the Baltic states, all of the major states in Europe stress the importance of history, at least up to 16 and in some cases up to 18. We are very unusual for a major European state in not recognising this and in persisting in not recognising it. I am very aware that here I am preaching to the converted; but those who do need to be persuaded are the head teachers, deputy heads and the people who actually make the decisions about the school timetable within any particular institution.

However, it is not enough simply to call for history to be made compulsory up to 16, although I would, of course, rejoice if that were the case. As you know, the Conservative party has actually done just this and said that if it were to form the next government it would implement the policy. (2) It sounds good, and it would be churlish for the [Historical Association](#) (HA) not to be gratified at recognition of the importance of our subject, but it is not, in fact, realistic. No government in practice is likely to take history and make it compulsory after 16 at the expense of other subjects. The point is that this has to be part of a thorough review of the whole nature of the curriculum at least up to 16, because the reason we allow pupils to drop not just history, but geography, music, the creative arts, religious studies - the list goes on - is because of our systems and because of the retention of the GCSE. It is the demands of the GCSE which underlie the problems besetting history.

Now the Tomlinson group have proposed a diploma from 14 to 19, and the logic of that would be to drop the GCSE and simply to go through from 14 to 19. (3) If desirable, there could be some sort of assessment point at 16, but one would certainly not continue with the current system of single subject examinations at 16. However, politics - Westminster party politics - dictates that something called the GCSE must be retained, because politicians are scared of the consequences of being seen to be the party that dropped it. If that is the case, if we have to keep something called the GCSE, then let us do so, but at least let us review it in absolute and fine detail, let us do a thorough root and branch reform of it.

The most obvious example of the damaging impact of students being able to drop history at 14 - please forgive me for bringing it up again - is the endless repetition of coverage of the Nazi period. In a sense, this has happened for a good reason: given that most pupils, and we are talking about 60 per cent or so, will end all their history studies at 14 it is obvious that no-one should be allowed to leave school without at some point having studied Nazi Germany. The way in which it is currently repeated is scandalous, but so too would be its disappearance from school history. However, when it was introduced at 14, there was already a lot of coverage of the Nazis at GCSE. That did not go away, so you end up with students doing it at 14 and then again at 16, a development compounded by its gradual increase in popularity at A level. So you have the bizarre phenomenon of people studying it at 14, at 16, at AS 17 and at A Level 18, and then, of course, if they go onto university, very frequently doing it again. Not only is that bad, but think it through one stage further: where does the new generation of teachers come from? This has not happened overnight; it has been going on for some years, with the result that you now have a younger

generation of teachers in school who have been so thoroughly steeped in that period that there is an understandable reluctance to move outside it in their own teaching. And so the system perpetuates itself.

Consequently, we have to consider the issue of making the GCSE into some form of genuine Baccalaureate examination. Now you might just say 'Well hang on a minute before you start knocking the GCSE? Isn't the GCSE good? Isn't it worth keeping? Isn't there some very good work at GCSE?' There was a time when this was true. Like any new examination it had its teething problems, and it had its difficulties in its early years, but it developed into an extremely good examination. Those days, however, have gone.

The [Historical Association](#) Curriculum Project was set up with funding from the [DFES](#) and the HA to look into the situation of history at 14-19 and to make recommendations to the then secretary of state for education, Charles Clarke (we have, in fact, submitted our draft report to Derek Twigg, the under-secretary of state for schools). We consulted with history education specialists; we consulted with academic historians; we consulted with the secretary of state for culture, media and sport; we consulted with teachers; and we consulted with pupils and students. We also undertook an analysis of examination specifications and examination papers. Very broadly, and broadly is an ironic word in this context, we found that the content of history courses has got narrower and narrower and narrower. It is in easy to detect this reduction in GCSE coverage. In some cases the topics which used to be taught are taught no longer. A good example here, from the modern world history courses, is Mussolini and fascist Italy, which is hardly taught at all. The same is true of the Spanish Civil War. So, there has been a narrowing from the early days of the GCSE, and certainly a narrowing from what was available pre-GCSE.

But it is also possible to identify a narrow core of topics, and a further narrowness within them. When you actually look through the options in the specification booklet, or at the examination papers, it is apparent that coverage within exam topics can be very narrow and bitty indeed. At A level the coverage has constricted enormously. Again, if I may very briefly go back to the Hitler issue, it is possible to do five out of six units with [Edexcel](#) on Germany. The other two boards are better, but it is still true that at [OCR](#) it is possible to do three out of six units on twentieth-century Germany, with a heavy emphasis again on the Nazi period. (4) This is not just about 20th-century Germany. Where once you might have covered 100 years Tudor English history alongside 100 years of European history, under one of the major boards it is no longer possible to do this. The option system operates against you, and effectively you have to choose either to have coherent coverage of English history and the Tudors, with no European history at all, or you have to pick holes in your English history coverage in order to include a European history element. Some boards are better at this, but it illustrates the sort of narrowing that has occurred: it is actually measurable; it is visible to the eye.

What do pupils actually want? Well, we asked the pupils in our questionnaire and the sort of things that they wanted are perhaps surprising. Yes, they are interested in twentieth-century history, but they are not just interested in twentieth-century history. A substantial number of those questioned expressed a wish to know more about the ancient and medieval worlds, but above all they were interested in the relevance of history to the modern world; they wanted to know about the history behind events in the news. And that, of course, often takes you far away from the twentieth century. If you are looking, for example, at the modern Middle East then it is important and relevant to look at medieval history and relations between Europe and the East, right through to relations with the Turks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Similarly, it is very difficult to understand modern America without some understanding of, for example, the revolutionary period. Any American history before 1917 has disappeared from one of the major boards, and none covers the colonial period.

This narrowing of content is compounded by evidence of very poor historical practice in questions and in question setting, not just encouraging but rewarding speculation and unhistorical thinking. Let me give you one or two examples. The first comes from a GCSE paper from [OCR](#) and shows a *Punch* cartoon published in the late 1850s, depicting polluted London water as seen through a microscope. As adults and as historians we can do quite a bit of interpreting immediately because we understand that this is a cartoon and this is through a microscope. Anyone who has worked with young people, however, will know that many of them tend to take things like this literally; it is much harder to see the analogy and to identify the allegorical meanings. One can always guarantee that many young people looking at this will see animals and people within a circle - there is no water visible - and will not clearly comprehend what this has got to do with the title of the cartoon. Even if you can grasp the context, the message of that cartoon is not entirely clear. Is this actually criticising the state of London water or, given that the creatures are rather exaggerated and presented in a humorous way, is this in fact some sort of skit on scaremongering about the state of London water? It would bear either interpretation and certainly opens up some questions. But I wonder what you would make of the actual question that was set on this, from memory 'What would the Romans have made of the message of this cartoon?'. The only proper historical answer to that question is to say that the question cannot be answered, but it would be a brave sixteen year old who could say that in an examination. In effect, you are forcing the pupils to answer an entirely unhistorical question in an entirely unhistorical way. What they have learnt is how to answer GCSE questions. It may be an overstatement, but they seem not to have learnt any history.

Second, since we often say how good source work can be, let us look at a source question from another GCSE paper. There is a longer piece of writing from an unidentified British textbook published in 1993. (This is increasingly common: historical sources are not historical sources, they are extracts from school text books.) The shorter text is one line from a speech made by Lloyd George during the 1918 election campaign: 'We propose to demand the whole cost of the war from Germany'. That is all the historical source analysis you get after two years of studying British national history from 1900 to 1949. The question asks how accurate this is as a statement of Lloyd George's views on reparations. It is rather difficult to answer that without more of the source, to gain some idea of why he was saying it and who he was saying it to. In their English examinations these students are presented with whole sections of Shakespeare, but this is what historical source analysis has been reduced to.

Let us take another example, from an [Edexcel](#) GCSE paper (I should perhaps state that, although again you get an extract from a school history text book, on the whole the sources at Edexcel were better; there were more of them and they were slightly longer). The question here is about how far examiners necessarily understand their own sources. The paper presents a picture from the *Illustrated London News*, showing British troops kicking a football as they launch an attack. This is a famous image, based on a real event. The East Surrey Regiment did have at least two footballs on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916 - Captain Neville used them as a psychological aid, calming the men's nerves as they went over the top. Notice, however, that there is not a word up there to indicate that this is in fact based on a real historical event.

Now in any analysis of the source, the fact that it is based on something which actually happened is really quite important. Not only does the gloss not say this, but the question does not say it and neither does the mark scheme. In fact, in the mark scheme, a real answer is published with this particular question, and the pupil who claimed that the image was misleading because it showed something that did not happen was rewarded. Some of the analysis in the mark scheme simply said that this was an example of British propaganda in order to build up the war effort. In fact, it is a much more interesting source than that because not only was it based on a real event, it was also used as propaganda by the Germans, illustrative of the absurdity of the English in kicking footballs across the front line. It is a very, very good source to use, but so much of this was missing that you end up with a situation where anachronistic answers are certainly rewarded and accurate answers may even be penalised.

Finally, let us consider an [Edexcel](#) AS paper. As in the first GCSE example, the historical source is illustrated by an extract from an A level text book, with the latter again being longer. The use of A level text books is increasingly common in A level papers.

All of this shows clearly that source analysis and question setting have become formulaic, even dull and dreary, as indeed the teachers and pupils who replied to our questionnaires commented. One could go on, we could go through other examples. The point is, and here I differ sharply from [David Starkey](#), that school history has lost touch with history as an academic discipline, and it needs to reconnect. This division has occurred partly because, in the past, people on both

sides have overemphasised the differences and overlooked the fact that it is fundamentally the same discipline, it operates to the same rules. This is why you can work with primary school children on probate, just as you can work with postgraduates.

I know that some will object that we are not in the business of raising little historians. I think that this makes the mistake of equating historians with academic historians, and after all most university history graduates are not going to pursue postgraduate historical research, so you could say exactly the same of university courses. The basic point remains that it is the same subject, and the same rules apply at whichever level you are learning. The reason that questions of the sort outlined above do not work is because they disobey the rules of the discipline, and by so doing they make it harder, not easier, for pupils. And they make it harder for pupils of all ability levels; if you ask an unfair question it is difficult to see how it can be of benefit to anyone.

So what can be done? The full recommendations of [Historical Association's](#) report were published on 1 March 2005, and can be summarised as follows:

1. A complete overhaul of history 14-19, including planning all the way through from 14-19 to remove endless repetition and to ensure greater diversity: diversity of topic; diversity of country and geographical area; and diversity of period.
2. An overhaul of the assessment objectives and the assessment pattern. Two areas, in particular, need to be worked upon. First, we need to end the practice of assessing source work through examinations. Source work should and must continue, but it needs to be done in the context of a proper historical enquiry of the sort that students at both GCSE and A level have shown themselves more than capable of undertaking. Students can use sources, but they use them best when they are used in the way that historians use them, and that does not mean through examination papers.

Second, we should work to bring the construction of narrative into the assessment pattern and to re-emphasise the importance of the process of constructing historical narrative. There needs to be a genuine move to build cross-curricular links into the history curriculum, bringing in other subjects, not just for the sake of it, but because that is how you instil a sense of period in students and guard against anachronism.

To do this requires a major programme of training for teachers, planned for and financed from the start to broaden and deepen teachers' knowledge and experience of the past. Without this we will achieve nothing. Universities can play a major part here, alongside IT, museums, heritage and the media. (I might add incidentally that universities might take a very long, hard look at some of their BA courses in this connection). The [Historical Association](#), in conjunction with other bodies such as the [Royal Historical Society](#) and the [Schools History Project](#), will need to play the central role, researching the criteria, drawing up models for programmes of study, co-ordinating the training programme and acting, in the spirit of its founders, as the mouthpiece for the subject. The subject at the moment sorely needs it.

Notes

1. This concern prompted the Historical Association's Campaign for History. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. 'Tories want history lessons until at least 16', *The Guardian*, 28 Jan. 2005 [<http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,1400717,00.html>, accessed 14 July 2005]. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. For information about the 14-19 curriculum, see <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/> [accessed 14 July 2005]. [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. The third board is [AQA](#). [Back to \(4\)](#).

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