A student's perspective

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I have always been a keen history student, which is why I decided to pursue the subject post-A level, and am currently in my first year at Roehampton University. My main area of interest is world history between 1914 and 1945, a relatively short period of time that saw the rise and fall of nations, world wars and the deaths of millions of people. Having studied history for many years, at school and at university, I have personal experience, from the student's perspective, of the way in which history teaching has changed over this time, and how it has altered during the different stages of my educational life.

Instead of simply learning the syllabus I needed to know to pass my exams, I wanted to explore other ways of approaching history, so I decided to join the The Historical Association. Becoming a member of the HA was very useful as it gave me further opportunities to get more involved with my studies. Last year at the Institute of Historical Research I had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with Sir Ian Kershaw, whose work has helped me to develop my ability to construct and analyse historical arguments. His discussion with me concerning the preparation of the Final Solution proved very useful for my individual assignment; and, of course, it is always exciting to exchange words with an historian whose work has been influential on a personal level.

There is significant difference in the way in which history is studied in the sixth form and at university. To a large extent, the style of teaching at A level gives little preparation for the study skills required to get the most out of lectures. In my experience, A level students are spoon-fed the information they require; they need only revise the information and learn exam techniques. However, it could be said that A level students have a closer relationship with their teachers: if help is needed, teachers are constantly present and can always be asked. Nonetheless, I am very happy with the relationships that I have developed with my lecturers at university. They too are concerned with our well-being, helping us to plan our workloads, and giving advice for reading, preparation and research. Lecturers also take a different attitude towards work that is handed in a little late, as they have more understanding of external pressures, and do not always have to work to the restrictive deadlines that teachers face.

Lectures function in a similar way to many lessons at school: information is passed directly from teacher to student. Students take notes and learn background information. However, there is little opportunity to ask questions or discuss matters which may have caused confusion. Seminar groups, held after lectures, are a chance for debate and discussion. Our lectures give us the information we need on a specific subject, but the real magic happens in seminars. Here, we examine texts, and then use the skills we have learnt to analyse them ourselves. Working in smaller seminar groups creates a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, securing a more positive relationship between students and lecturer; questions are asked with more confidence, and answers take the form of discussions in which everyone can participate.

Other significant changes are the function of the work we are expected to do at home, and, of course, the workload. At school, homework is assigned by the teacher to see how we are progressing in our studies and to complete classwork; now, we are given essays which are graded and contribute to our final mark. The research we do is of a much higher standard and in greater depth, drawing on more resources and requiring a great deal more reading. From my current perspective, the coursework that I did in the sixth form, at the time a seemingly enormous workload, pales into insignificance beside our weekly essays, seminar preparation and further reading.

Having the freedom and opportunity to select which module I want to study marks a big difference between school and university. I chose to take a module focusing on Karl Marx and his theories which was a new area for me, and I relished the chance to look at his work in a depth that would be impossible in an A level curriculum. There is little opportunity to express or investigate topics of personal interest when at school, as all students follow the same curriculum and sit the same exams. It is certainly impracticable on an organisational level. But, on going to university, how wonderfully liberating it is to realise just how much history is out there, how many different themes, people and ideas there are to be studied, and to be given the flexibility to choose. Overall, the change that happens between school and university is within the individual. I feel that I am still maturing and have a lot to learn, developing as an historian and an adult, and taking responsibility for my own studies.

Many people believe that history is a subject in which we learn about the past; clearly this is a part of the discipline, but by no means the whole. History helps us to understand where we are today and, more importantly, why we are there. But do we ever learn from what we have seen and experienced? On meeting the political activist James Mawdsley, who was arrested and tortured in Burma, I asked him why we still allow dictators to wreak their havoc on the world. He replied simply: 'I don't know; maybe because we will just never learn'. It takes strong and brave individuals to make an impact, to fight for what they believe in, and to inspire others to do likewise. Half a century ago, six million Jews were systematically exterminated. Yet genocide and torture are still going on today; for some reason we cannot – or choose not – to stop them. I think this point needs to be more strongly articulated at school level, otherwise we risk reducing the subject to a list of dates, people, acts, treaties, invasions and so on, which must be learnt to pass an exam, but which fail to teach us anything about how we can change future societies for the better.

I feel strongly that history is not just about reading books. Instead of learning 'facts', school and university students need to live the facts. I have had the opportunity to go to the trenches in Ypres, to walk through a train carriage that carried hundreds of Jews to death camps, and I have touched items which were incinerated in the aftermath of an atom bomb. These are experiences that truly inspire a student, and inspire a student to become an historian. I am convinced that these types of experience should be more widely available to students of history as they are invaluable in furthering our understanding of the relevance of the past to the present.

I was lucky enough to have two excellent teachers, Miss Rainey and Mr Staten, who together fed my appetite for history and believed in my capability – they are the reason I am here talking to you today. Sadly, Mr Staten passed away last year, but I hope very much to show my gratitude to such an inspiring teacher by becoming one myself, and passing on my knowledge and passion to others.

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