

Home » Publications » History in British Education » History in Schools and Higher Education: Issues of Common Concern (second conference)

[View](#) [Edit](#) [Outline](#) [Access control](#) [Export](#)

Perceptions from a student in Higher Education

Tabitha Benjamin

(University College London)

I am a BA history student at University College London and have just started my second year of study. I am going to talk about my personal experience of making the transition from school to degree level history, bearing in mind that it is often easier to look back than it is to remember what it was like to be looking forward.

My expectations about degree level history were not just slightly askew but were, I think, entirely wrong. These expectations had been cultivated by the way that I had been taught history at A level and by what I had been told to expect from studying for a history degree. It was a transition whose characteristics I had not been able to anticipate, and which revealed the differences between the subject and the discipline - between kings and queens and psychoanalysis.

At school and again at A level I was taught about kings and queens, dictators and prime ministers. We studied bits and pieces of historiography - considered at the time to be the height of difficulty, when, ironically, what we historians were about to undertake at university was in fact a degree in historiography. I felt at the time and I still feel that the complexities of degree level history should not be compromised because of the failings of history teaching in schools. My school experience of history was adequate, but characteristically narrow, traditional and at times very dull. More seriously I was positively disadvantaged in some respects; for example, I barely knew what a journal was and I had never used a footnote before. To some extent these are technicalities that are easily overcome. However, I found being hurled into the creative whirlwind that is the study of history at degree level personally disorientating, and it was, and still is, wholly debilitating for some of my fellow students.

Yet if I could take one thing from my initial experiences of studying history at university, it would be the accompanying excitement of entering a discipline so unsure of its identity - though, of course, obviously unique and autonomous in all its glory! Far more than the tired old question posed to most undergraduates 'what is history?', the question of 'why are you studying history?' has the potential to grab the imagination of A level students and first year undergraduates alike. So, based on my experiences, a positive transition from A level to university will not be found by packaging up degree level history into a tidy box ready to hand out to A level students, but by capitalising from the start - from A level - on history's more enigmatic qualities.

By this I mean real intellectual breadth, inherent creativity and the excitement and uncertainty which such elements cast on the discipline and on studying within it. However, I do acknowledge that whilst this may make the transition from school to university history more coherent, some undergraduates say that, at the very least, this is the kind of thinking that serves to accentuate the perceived vocational problem facing history graduates. Granted, if you teach school kids as well as undergraduates the 'balancing angels on a pin head' idea, it may induce some kind of uncontrollable philosophical epidemic where the last thing history graduates will learn is how to work and contribute conventionally to society. Nevertheless a mirror image of the transition from school to university history is found in the transition from university to a career: both are linked, both are equally important. Some history graduates will argue - usually of the successful barrister kind - that the vocational uncertainty which history undergraduates, and perhaps the government, believe they face does not actually exist. History graduates do 'build economic strength and social harmony', as Charles Clarke put it, precisely because they have been taught the profundity of an intellectually demanding discipline. In this case surely knowledge is enough. I think the government and, indeed, any critics of history as a credible degree subject, should think twice before university education in general forgoes creating people skilled in thinking in favour of people who are skilled in jobs.

During my first year of university I was exposed to some great teaching but I was also exposed to some really bad teaching. Crucially, I do not think I or anyone else seriously suffered as a result. There was a varied level of teaching ability and quality due to the conflict of interests which academics face in research and teaching: to some extent, students have to respect this. But we take charge of our own education when we reach university, and many students are able to take the good with the bad - or perhaps more frequently, the okay with the slightly under-whelming. Seminars were a gift for someone like me, but for others they were a greater challenge; many felt hampered by their inability to adapt in seminar or discussion situations. Is this the result of a limited and narrowly conceived idea of history forged in the school classroom? Maybe. My observation is that the majority of students - from all backgrounds - were a little inarticulate and unskilled in the art of discussion. I imagine the problem would be similar even in universities where there are less rigorous selection procedures. Having said this, seminars and lectures were and are engaging and challenging in ways that I never experienced at school. Moreover, I have always been given a 'sky's the limit' kind of encouragement where my creativity and vigour are rewarded highly. And more than anything I have had fun, fun which initially I never felt possible considering I did not know what a footnote was.

Still, I cannot help feeling that these problems of transition are more than a simple question of schools providing better preparation for university; it is more a case of positively challenging the divide between school and university history - something which almost everyone here today has agreed with. Making a success of the transition from school to university history is down to personal choices and aptitudes. However, I strongly believe that an injustice is done to all students by concealing the depth of the discipline until degree level. Although the transition is unlikely ever to be smooth and easy, if history is presented from the start as an enigma to be wrestled with, varied and uncertain, the transition is sure to be fruitful.

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR), Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU
 The IHR is a member of the School of Advanced Study which is part of the University of London

Site Has Changed: *True*

Expire In: *11 hours 3 min*

Cache Generated: *1.46 seconds*

[Flush Page](#)

imum cache lifetime:

default

Default: 7 week

Preemptive Cache:

default

Scope:

Page ID: 170

Set Configuration

Page ID

- 170

Content Type

- page

Content Container

- node

Delete Configuration