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Piloting a new approach to post-14 history in England, Northern Ireland and Wales by Jerome Freeman and Jane Weake

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We are going to speak about piloting a new approach to post-14 history. Specifically we are going to look at the pilot GCSE project devised by [QCA](#) and now being run by [Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations](#) (OCR).

You may already have seen some of the comments in the press about the pilot GCSE and 'dumbing down'. We would like to think that this is actually not what the pilot GCSE is all about; far from 'dumbing down', we feel that it is going to engage a much wider range of students and show them the relevance of history, in a local, national and international context. The pilot GCSE is going to give students a much more meaningful insight into what historians can and do do, notably by making sure that source work is integrated into an enquiry which is meaningful for them, particularly in their local context. Finally, it will also allow students to begin to understand and to evaluate interpretations presented through the media, which, of course, is such an important part of most people's lives now.

So what is the new GCSE history pilot? [OCR](#), on behalf of [QCA](#), are being funded to develop and trial the new GCSE history qualification. They are using a wide range of consultants from across the subject community to advise them in drawing up the specification, and it is going to be piloted in around 50 schools. The aim is to provide a qualification that offers genuine links between history and related vocational areas. The pilot will begin in September 2006, and after a full round of GCSE teaching, followed by a review and consultation, decisions will be taken about how to proceed with beyond 2008. It will not replace existing qualifications, but will run alongside existing history GCSEs, although it may, of course, depending on how it goes, influence future developments. It will certainly offer more choice to students at 14.

A new qualification has to build on best practice and meet the needs of a full range of students at 14. It can do this by allowing those students who have a particular vocational interest to study history alongside that interest, while also being academically rigorous and laying the foundation for further study of history at A Level. Incidentally, of course, it can open up to students areas that they might never previously have considered for A Level study, like archaeology, law or something like travel and tourism.

So why do we need the GCSE history qualification? There have been concerns in the press for a very long time now, expressed through subject associations, about the current GCSE specifications, particularly about a perceived narrowness of focus, about the options being studied and about the failure to progress some of the excellent practices now increasingly prevalent at Key Stage 3. The new pilot will build on that existing good practice and on current thinking in secondary schools to provide a lively and innovative course. It will also provide a sensible and measured way to incorporate those new approaches to teaching in the core curriculum post-14.

The GCSE pilot will develop independent learning skills, which are so important for students who are going on to study history beyond the age of 16. A number of the speakers at this conference have recounted their experiences at school, and I think it is really inspiring when we hear about students of nine in primary schools who are not only looking at inventories, but are getting a lot out of it. I think that most of us will agree that we were not often introduced to those sort of exciting achievements when we were at school, or even at university. Independent learning is becoming increasingly important for students post-16. They need to be able to ask questions, to learn how to find the answers and then to pose additional questions; and that is exactly the type of enquiry that will be piloted here.

The GCSE pilot also offers a really exciting opportunity for teachers to structure some components of the course to take into account the diversity of their learners. Many schools have a large proportion of pupils for whom the history curriculum at the moment is not entirely relevant. As part of the GCSE pilot, it would be quite possible for teachers to gear the local history element of their unit towards the needs of their learners; and local means not just necessarily in that locality, but local in the sense of being relevant to the learners in that particular area. Ideally, this would lead to considerable dialogue between learners in history within the school and learners and others outside, within the community.

Why do we need this? First, there is a strong case for increasing the range of existing GCSE qualifications. At the moment there is an entitlement to study a humanities subject at post-14, but the range of qualifications to which this applies is actually quite limited: geography, history and humanities. The pilot, along with that for geography, which is already underway, will greatly increase this range. Second, through a formal qualification, it will be possible to identify the skills, concepts and areas of understanding that are common to both history and to vocational courses, and the pilot GCSE will provide a meaningful, engaging context for many areas of vocational study.

Third, we do need to reach out to a much wider range of students. Research has shown that pupils studying history say that it is one of the subjects that they enjoy the most, but they (and often their parents as well) do not necessarily see the relevance to their everyday, working lives subsequently. Through looking at the vocational context, and incidentally, of course, in learning how many jobs that there in the burgeoning heritage industry, many students may find that they have the ammunition, if you like, to defend a decision to study history. And, of course, it motivates the students themselves to study the subject.

The number of students currently taking history at GCSE is around 230,000, which means that, although the numbers are growing steadily, two-thirds of students are not studying history after the age of 14. It is hoped that the pilot GCSE will show that history can be relevant, giving students the tools to encourage them to go on asking questions and to progress, and that, as a result, it will be possible to increase those numbers.

Who have we involved in the GCSE history pilot? Well we hope that we have got some of the leading practitioners from across the subject community. There has been huge enthusiasm for this from many of the subject associations, from museums and galleries, from the [Council for British Archaeology](#), the [Historical Association](#) and from many others who are keen to give [OCR](#) their expertise and contribute to the development of a very effective and rigorous GCSE. And of course the [Department for Education and Skills](#) (DfES) and the [Office for Standards in Education](#) (Ofsted) have been invaluable in helping us to pinpoint the sort of areas that the GCSE needs to address.

I will explain briefly the structure of this GCSE. In the pilot, it is going to be offered as a single award. It is divided into two sections: a core which all students will have to take and that will be worth 50 per cent of the GCSE, the equivalent if you want to half a GCSE or a short-course GCSE; and two additional optional units which students, together with their teachers, will select from a menu of units offered during the pilot. Students will be able to take two units which are

more vocational in nature, thereby building on the vocational element of the core; or they can take two general academic units, so that, although they are encountering some vocational elements of the core, overall it is mainly an academic qualification. Alternatively, they could choose to take one vocational and one general unit. Students' choices may depend on a particular interest that they gain from studying the core, because all the units will link back to it in some way.

OCR are still doing some detailed work on the core of the GCSE, so we will know more later on, but essentially the core that all students will take is made up of three elements: a local history enquiry, a national history enquiry and an international history enquiry. The development group envisaged the core almost as a history entitlement. We were aware that some of the students that took this might not then take history beyond 16, so for some learners it would be, together with the optional units, the last history that they studied. The three elements are different, I think, to what is on offer at GCSE at the moment. The important thing for this course is that it does break new ground, that it does offer a genuine alternative to what is available. That is not to criticise what is on offer at the moment; in order to get the funding for the pilot, we had to develop a qualification that was offering something quite different.

Let us take the local history enquiry first. You can do already local history at GCSE, but local history as envisaged in the pilot is linked very strongly to citizenship; it is about getting the students to engage in a very active way with aspects of their local community and their local heritage. Students might, for example, focus on the question 'Why does local history matter to me and what can I do to conserve it?' If you think of that applied to a particular local event building, or a particular historic site in the locality, the students might ask 'Why does this site matter to me?', 'Why is it significant?'. They might look at the site's significance in the past; examine why it is still important to the contemporary local community; and ask why conserving it, preserving it, interpreting it and giving access to it might make it significant to people in the future. Students will also be encouraged to work with people from the local heritage sector in formulating their answers to these questions.

With regard to the national history enquiry, there is a deliberate focus on the medieval period. This is in direct contrast to what is on offer at GCSE at the moment and is a counterpoint, I think, to the criticisms made earlier on today about the 'Nazification' of some aspects of history in some schools. We have also tried to take a broad approach to the study of the middle ages, which similarly tackles some of the criticisms about the narrowing of history. The vocational element here is in seeing what students can learn about change and diversity in the medieval period through the work of museums, galleries and organisations maintaining historic sites.

Finally, there is the international history enquiry. The students will look at an event in recent global history and examine the way in which it has been portrayed in the media and why that should matter - again there is a link to citizenship. They might, for example, look at how particular websites are used to portray recent modern conflicts and how we can really find out what happened.

There are three common threads in all of these enquiries. First, there is the connection with citizenship. Second, there is the vocational element to the study: the work of archaeologists and the heritage sector in the local history enquiry; the work of archives, museums, galleries and historic sites in the national enquiry; and the work of the media in the international enquiry. Finally, there is the question of historical interpretation, something that is not always handled effectively at Key Stage 3, and particularly not at GCSE level. In the pilot GCSE there is a focus on historical interpretation throughout: how has the past been presented in different ways, in museums and galleries; how is it presented in the locality; and how is it presented, for example, by a website?

Once they have completed the core, the students go on to do some optional units, which allow them to extend particular areas of interest. They might, for example, decide to extend the academic element of their learning. If students have particularly enjoyed and gained a good overview of the middle ages, they might then want to look at some aspects of the period in more depth. Or equally, having done the core, they might have developed an interest in some of the vocational areas, and choose to find out more about the work of archaeologists, journalists, or museums and the heritage sector. They can do that by adding on optional units.

OCR have got the contract to do the work, and the first teaching starts in 2006. We will be evaluating the progress of the pilot all the way through to 2008, and we hope then to make something very similar to the qualification that I have outlined here more widely available to all schools. OCR will, however, face some real challenges. This is a unique opportunity, in the sense that it is a pilot and it is funded, and we can afford, to a certain extent, to experiment. Nevertheless there will be obstacles to overcome - my colleague mentioned some of the 'dumbing down' headlines that we have already generated, even before the pilot has started. It is important to stress that this is not going to be a 'dumbing down' of history; it is something new and different and we should be pleased that we have got opportunity.

OCR will have to face the challenge of providing something lively and innovative, of creating something that is different from what is currently available, but still academically rigorous. We owe it to the students to ensure that it is not seen as an easy option. I have had one or two phone calls from schools who have expressed interest in offering it to their bottom sets. That is not the purpose of the new qualification; it is aimed at the whole range of students.

The real challenge is to extend history into the related areas of vocational learning without compromising the integrity of the subject. It is about maintaining the balance. We have to ensure that some parts of the qualification are distinctly vocational in nature, because it is supposed to be a hybrid; they should not just be a sort of watered down history. It is equally important to ensure, from the point of view of the students, that the whole thing holds together. The three sections of the core have to make collective sense, and the option units genuinely have to build on the learning of the core. We also have to achieve parity of demand from the different pathways. Teachers and students will quickly realise if one pathway feels easier than another, and if that happens we will have failed.

We are not only piloting links between history and vocational areas, but also new approaches to teaching and learning, including assessment. That is one of the key things that the new GCSE is going to have to do, and the lessons we learn will be used to influence assessment in other subjects too. There is a very important role for us to play.

Finally, we have to face the challenge of locating and creating new resources. I suspect that this will not be a problem, as we have been delighted with the enthusiastic response that we have already had from many publishers and from people working in the heritage sector. They really want to become involved in this and to work with pilot schools. Pilot schools will, of course, know and understand that there will not be a ready made textbook available, but in some ways that may not be a bad thing.