

Findings from the Historical Association survey of secondary history teachers

Spring 2009

Summary of key concerns about history teaching at Key Stage 3 (11-14)

1. The changing format in which history is taught

In a number of schools history is disappearing as a discrete subject within the curriculum. This is particularly true in the first year of secondary school (Year 7) and seems to be much more prevalent in academies and comprehensive schools than in either grammar or independent schools.

2. Children giving up history after only two years of secondary school

When the National Curriculum was first introduced, history was made a 'foundation' subject, which meant it was a compulsory subject for all young people for the first **three** years of secondary school (up to the age of 14). In recent years, with no change in the legislation, many schools have experimented with trying to complete the programme of study set out in the National Curriculum in only **two** years. In these schools students are therefore allowed to 'drop' history at the age of 13, ending their compulsory study of history as a 'foundation' subject a year early. Again this trend seems to be more prevalent in academies and comprehensive schools.

3. Reduced time allocations even where history continues to be taught

Even where history continues to be taught up to the age of 14, the time allocated to its study is limited in many schools, particularly the academies and state comprehensive schools. These are also the types of schools most likely to report a recent reduction in the time allocated to history

4. The impact of limited time allocation on students' later decisions about GCSE history

Those schools that allocate more than an hour a week to history for 13-14 year olds, or which are increasing the time they allocate to history, are significantly more likely to see an increase rather than a decrease in GCSE uptake. If we are concerned to raise the proportion of pupils opting to study history at GCSE (above the current 30%), then increasing and safeguarding the amount of time allocated to history lower down the school is likely to have a positive impact.

5. Other restrictions on GCSE history uptake

Where schools had seen recent falls in the proportion of students taking history at GCSE, many teachers drew attention to 'options' systems that actively prevent students from pursuing the study of history. Vocational diplomas and other courses offered by the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) were not merely promoted as being of more 'value' (both to the students and the schools); they had become the only 'pathway' open to certain students.

The data on which these claims are based

This data comes from an online survey sent by the Historical Association to all schools and colleges teaching students in the 11-18 age range. Just over 700 teachers from a range of different contexts (including middle schools and sixth form colleges) responded to the survey. Responses to the survey's questions about teaching 11-14 year olds were received from 644 schools, although the numbers responding to each specific question about practices in different year groups vary slightly. The 644 schools included 503 state maintained comprehensive schools, 36 state-maintained grammar schools, 23 academies and 82 independent schools. Although the numbers of schools of each type obviously varies considerably, the pattern of responses provides a similar sample for each, in terms of the proportion of schools responding. Responses were received from approximately 18% of comprehensive schools, 22% of grammar schools, 29% of academies and 19% of independent schools.

1. The changing format in which history is taught

1.1 The spread of 'alternative' curricula

In a small, but rapidly increasing number of schools, history is disappearing as a discrete subject within the curriculum. This is particularly true in the first year of secondary school (Year 7). Although most schools (about 75% of those responding to the survey) reported that they still teach history as a discrete subject in Year 7, 6.6% teach it as part of an 'integrated' humanities programme while a further 7.1% offer it within an 'alternative' curriculum. An 'alternative' curriculum is often based around the development of specific skills or competences, rather than around subjects. It is now perfectly possible for a curriculum to be constructed without subjects or subject coherence in mind, so that subject specific knowledge or ways of thinking are valued less.

Proportion of schools offering Yr 7 history	All schools (589 in total)	Comprehensive schools (465)	Grammar schools (34)	Academies (22)	Independent schools (68)
As a discrete subject	75.9% (=447 schools)	72.3%	94.1%	59.1%	97.1%
As a discrete subject within humanities	10.5% (=61 schools)	11.8%	2.9%	13.7%	2.9%
As part of an integrated programme	6.6% (=39 schools)	7.7%	2.9%	9.1%	
Within an 'alternative' curriculum	7.1% (=42 schools)	8.2%		18.2%	

There is considerable variation between different types of schools in terms of the format in which they teach history. Over 90% of the independent and grammar schools represented teach history as an entirely separate subject, but only 72.3% of the comprehensives and 59.1% of the academies that responded do so.

There is much less experimentation, so far, in the way that history is taught in the second year of secondary schools (Year 8), although this may obviously change as the revised version of National Curriculum (introduced in 2008) is implemented further up the school. Currently among those who responded, only five state maintained comprehensive schools are teaching history in Year 8 within some kind of 'alternative' curriculum programme.

1.2 Why the 'alternative' is often unacceptable

The alternatives on offer are described in a variety of ways and seem valuable in many respects. Nine of the 42 schools that teach history within an 'alternative curriculum'

specifically named the 'Opening Minds' curriculum initiative developed by the Royal Society of Arts. Others referred to 'enquiry', 'skills' and 'competency' or to various kinds of integrated provision ('clusters', 'themes' or 'projects'). In two cases the programme was presented explicitly as a transitional programme bridging the move from primary school, and four others saw its focus as 'learning to learn'.

However, when invited to indicate whether they thought the programme had impacted positively or negatively on pupils' learning, only four of the 42 history teachers indicated that its effects had been positive. While most suggested that it was still too soon to tell, 18 teachers gave very negative assessments. They highlighted the pupils' lack of historical knowledge and specific vocabulary and their inability to use historical evidence, which they claimed led to a fall in standards as they embarked on GCSE courses. Other specific concerns included pupils' inability to grasp the period being studied, and the incoherence of their experience:

Pupils are learning a great deal less in terms of Medieval History. The course lacks coherence for the pupils as the topics taught do not necessarily follow one another in terms of chronology or even within a thematic approach.

Our findings here closely parallel those reported recently by OFSTED, who note that there is 'widespread interest in such skills-based courses'. Their subject-based surveys of geography, history and religious education in 2009 found 24 schools of the 84 that they sampled had integrated courses in place or planned for. Although some of the courses had undoubted strengths (including good levels of pupil interest and appropriate thematic and conceptual links as well as shared approaches to the development of general learning skills), the inspectors also identified emerging problems:

These included the loss of subject content and subject skills development; lack of continuity from primary school experience; lack of rigour and challenge; uneven quality of teaching and artificial 'links' or themes. These problems were especially manifested where courses had been given insufficient planning time and where the component subject departments were not fully involved in planning.

OFSTED (2009) 'Planning for change: the impact of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum'. Reference no: 080262

We also found that the integration of history within more generic programmes could lead pupils to the assumption that history was unimportant for their education:

Students are no longer aware of when they are learning history or geography. They have become disrespectful of a subject that they don't perceive as 'real' or 'important'.

2. Children giving up history after only two years of secondary school

2.1 The widespread adoption of a two-year Key Stage 3 curriculum.

While alternative curricula arrangements mean that history is losing its identity in Year 7, the rapidly increasing number of schools claiming to cover the National Curriculum programmes of study in only two years (a two-year 'Key Stage 3') also means that the subject simply does not feature *at all* on the timetables of many 14 year olds.

Over 5% of the schools that responded to the survey now have a two-year Key Stage 3 programme, allowing students to drop particular subjects and pursue their own options after only two years of secondary school. Several more schools commented that they were planning to introduce this approach next year.

Although the numbers are relatively small, our data again seem to suggest that this trend varies according to the type of school. Twenty-eight of the 32 schools with a reduced Key Stage 3 programme were comprehensive schools (which represents nearly 6% of the comprehensive schools that responded); two were academies (representing 9% of the 22 that responded). Only one grammar school and one independent school had chosen this route.

Most of the 32 schools offer an early start to standard GCSE courses with history as one of the options, either from the beginning, or part-way through Year 9. The rest offer either alternative GCSEs (some at a lower 'entry' level, or a different range from their Year 10 options, including Leisure and Tourism or Humanities), or practice GCSE-style courses or an 'enrichment' year. While history obviously features in some form among the options, the fact remains that those who do not choose history are being allowed to abandon any study of the subject at the age of 13, a year before the statutory age stipulated in the National Curriculum. This means that all the material currently set out within the 'range and content' requirements as well as the 'key concepts and processes' has to be studied by the end of Year 8.

2.2 *The impact of losing a whole year of compulsory history*

In such circumstances, teachers report that it is *'impossible to deliver any KS3 programme of study that is not without huge gaps'*. *'Key concepts in the 'story' of Britain's history are inevitably missing'*. Any hopes of building a secure chronological framework are thwarted when students arrive in Year 8 (their last year of compulsory history), having followed a skills-based course in Year 7 with no specialist history teaching, unable even to explain basic dating conventions such as the meaning of 'century'. In one extreme example the entire Key Stage 3 history programme of study (intended to be taught across three years to students aged 11-14) has *'been reduced to just 38 hours of teaching in Year 8 for the whole course'*.

Teachers are concerned not merely about the lack of time. They are equally alarmed that much of the sensitive content that contributes immeasurably to effective citizenship education now has to be taught to younger pupils who *'lack the emotional and intellectual maturity to handle it'*. This includes both the theme concerned with the 'development of trade, colonisation, industrialisation and technology' (with explicit reference to the British Empire and its impact, and to the nature and effects of the slave trade, and resistance and decolonisation) and the theme focused on the 'changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and its lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues' (with explicit reference to the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust). Since issues must be addressed within Key Stage 3, both the slave trade and its legacy and the Holocaust are usually therefore squeezed into Year 8, when the scope for sensitive discussion of controversial issues, directly related to issues of identity and diversity, is significantly lower than it would be with older pupils.

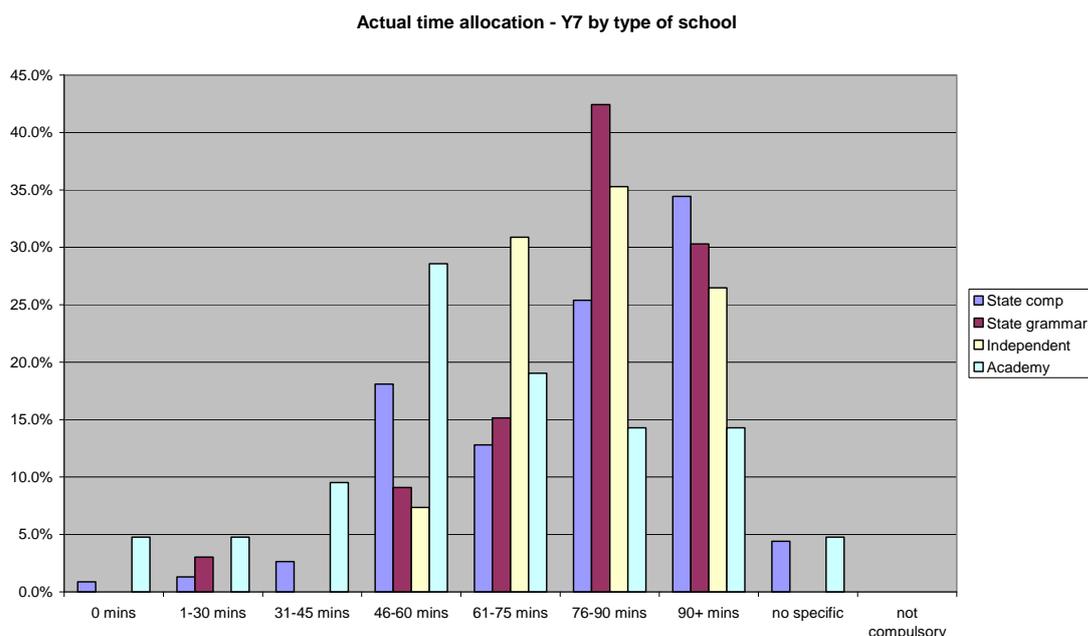
3. Reduced time allocations even where history continues to be taught

3.1 Variation in the time allocated to history

Even where history officially features on the curriculum, there is considerable variation in the amount of time allocated to its study. While some schools clearly believe that it is important to give time to the subject, many schools provide less than an hour a week. Nearly 48% of the academies that responded to the survey reported that Year 7 pupils spend an hour a week or less on history, as did 30% of the comprehensive schools. Far fewer grammar or independent schools (only 12% and 7% respectively) gave so little time to the subject.

The picture is not universally gloomy across the state maintained secondary sector: indeed over 38% of comprehensive schools give more than 90 minutes to history each week, a higher proportion than either the grammar or the independent schools. But the academies remain the least likely to give such generous allocations. Less than 20% of them thought it worth investing more than 90 minutes a week in the subject.

The high points of the different distribution curves sketched out below illustrate the different priorities of different types of school. While the mode for the academies is 46-60 minutes, that for the independent schools and the grammar schools is 76-90 minutes. There is a much less regular pattern for the comprehensive schools, reflecting the very wide variation between them.

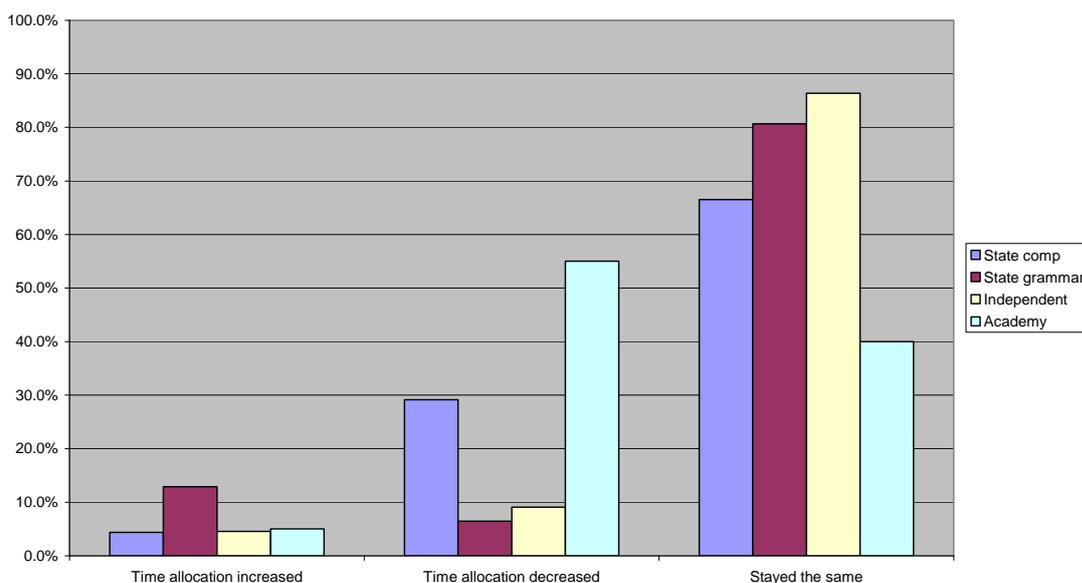


3.2 Cuts in the time allocated to history

A significant minority of schools reported a recent reduction in the amount of time allocated to history teaching in Year 7. Almost one third of the comprehensive schools and over half of the academies among the respondents reported that the amount of time allocated to history had dropped since the previous year.

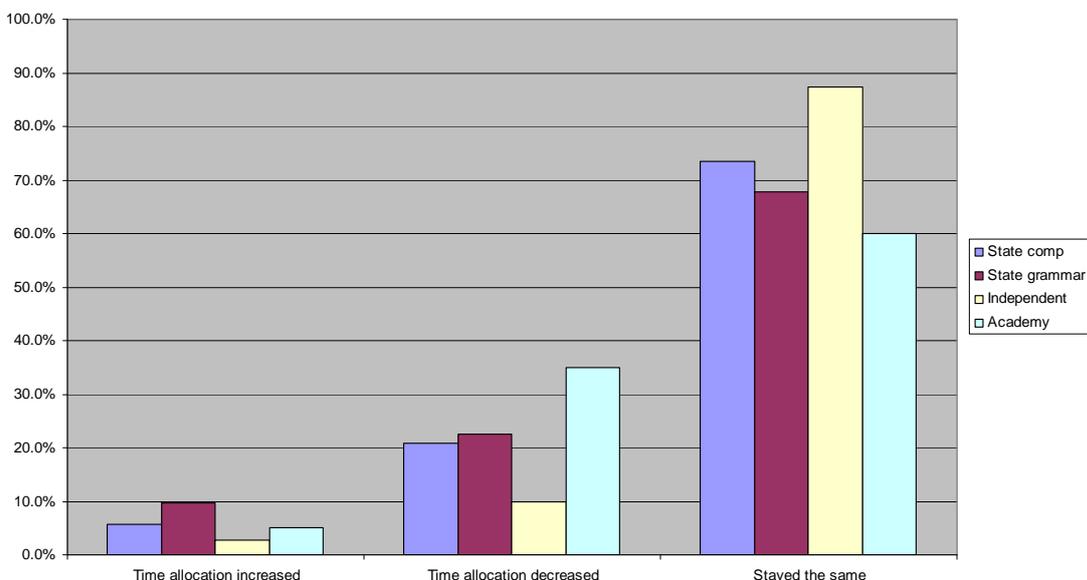
A much smaller number of schools actually reported an increased time allocation for history. Such positive developments were essentially found in the grammar schools, 12.9% of which reported an increase. Less than 5% of any other type of school reported such an increase.

Time allocation - Y7



Reductions in the amount of time allocated to history were also reported in Year 8 and in Year 9. Overall 117 schools reported a decrease in time allocated to history in Year 9, and as the chart below shows, the number of schools reporting decreases was at least twice as high for all types of school as the number reporting increases. It was among the academies that the proportion reporting a decrease (35%) was highest, although approximately 20% of the comprehensive and grammar schools had also seen cuts.

Time allocation - Y9



4. The impact of limited time allocation on students' later decisions about GCSE history

By comparing teachers' reports about time allocations in Year 9 and trends in uptake at GCSE we were able to track the relationship between reduced time allocations and students' decisions about whether or not to continue with the study of history. Comparison of schools where the proportion of students opting for GCSE was declining with those where the proportion was actually increasing, revealed a statistically significant relationship between trends in Year 9 time allocations and GCSE uptake. The proportion opting for GCSE was more likely to decrease as time for history was cut in Year 9, and to increase (in those very few cases – only 18 in total) where time for history in Year 9 was increasing.

Statistical analysis of GCSE trends in relation to actual Year 9 time allocations

GCSE trend	Time allocation per week for history		Totals
	60 mins or less	More than 60 mins	
Increasing GCSE uptake	25	129	154
Decreasing GCSE uptake	32	61	93
Total	57	190	247

χ^2 statistic 10.71 is significant at 0.5% with 1 degree of freedom.

A statistically significant relationship was also found between the actual amount of time allocated to history in Year 9 and trends in GCSE uptake. Where the time allocated to history was an hour or less each, schools were more likely to see a decline in the proportion of students opting for GCSE; while those in which more than an hour of history was taught each week were more likely to see an increase in the proportion deciding to continue their study of the subject.

Statistical analysis of GCSE trends in relation to trends in time allocations in Year 9

GCSE trend	Trends in time allocation in Year 9			Totals
	Decrease	Stable	Increase	
Increasing GCSE uptake	26	117	14	157
Decreasing GCSE uptake	34	53	4	91
Total	60	170	18	248

χ^2 statistic 14.19 is significant at 0.1% with 2 degrees of freedom.

If national concerns about the limited proportion of students that are choosing to take history at GCSE are to be addressed, increasing the time allocated to history at Key Stage 3 would certainly appear to be an effective strategy.

5. Other restrictions on GCSE history uptake

The overall data collected in relation to GCSE suggests that history is actually faring better overall within the schools that responded to our survey than is the case nationally. While the proportion of students taking history is declining nationallyⁱ, more of these schools claimed that their GCSE numbers were increasing than that they were falling. However, there is again a worrying difference between different types of school. Among the

academies a fall in number was much more likely than an increase, while the biggest net increase was to be found among the grammar schools.

Changing patterns of GCSE uptake	All schools (585 in total)	Comprehensive schools	Grammar schools	Academies	Independent schools
Had seen GCSE uptake increase	27.2% (=159 schools)	27.2%	21.9%	19.0%	32.4%
Had seen GCSE uptake decrease	15.9% (= 93 schools)	17.0%	3.1%	33.3%	8.8%
Claimed that GCSE numbers fluctuate from year to year	35.2% (= 206 schools)	36.9%	31.2%	38.1%	25.0%
Had seen GCSE uptake remain relatively stable	21.7% (=127 schools)	19.0%	43.8%	9.5%	33.8%

Eighty-five of the 93 schools that had seen a fall in numbers opting for history gave some kind of explanation for this decline. Almost a third attributed the decline to the fact that history was now in competition with a greater range of subjects, some of which were regarded as being easier, or as offering more ‘value’ – where particular courses of study were awarded the equivalent of 4 GCSE qualifications:

History faces more competition from other subjects, especially those worth 3 or 4 GCSEs which the students perceive as easier to pass and more ‘value for money’ such as PE courses, ICT and Media.

While many of the comments related to the senior leadership team’s perceptions of the value of history, there were also strong indications of an element of coercion. A quarter of respondents pointed specifically to the introduction of vocational/diploma courses (including BTECs – qualifications offered by the Business and Technology Education Council), which in many cases, lower-attaining students were being compelled to take – effectively barring them from continuing with the study of history.

Students have been deliberately denied an opportunity to study history by forcing them down vocational or academic pathways. GCSE students have also been taken off courses against their wishes to do BTEC qualifications in 6 months so that the school can boost its position in the league tables. This has happened to students who were otherwise on target for a C/B in history but who were doing badly on their other optional subject.

History is seen to be too academic! Entrance to the course is based on Fischer Family Trust predictions, and students who are predicted lower than a B are not allowed to study the course... We are also not allowed to run ‘entry level’ GCSE courses for students with specific needs, as that is not thought to be meeting the attainment targets for the academy.

In some cases the system of academic pathways established for 14-19 students imposed arbitrary limits on the number of students who could actually opt to study GCSE courses of any kind, thus ruling out history:

Y10 numbers are low, and will continue to be so, since the introduction of a Pathways system that limits how many students can choose to do GCSE as opposed to BTECs.

When the National Curriculum itself identifies the critical contribution that history makes to 'vocational' education it is surely unacceptable for 'options' systems to be implemented that deliberately prevent students from pursuing a subject that *'prepares pupils for the future, equipping them with knowledge and skills that are prized in adult life, enhancing employability and developing an ability to take part in a democratic society'* (QCA, History National Curriculum 2008). It is similarly unacceptable to preserve only for the higher attainers a subject that *'encourages mutual understanding of the historic origins of our ethnic and cultural diversity, and helps pupils become confident and questioning individuals'*.

ⁱ While the **number** of students opting to take history seems relatively stable, the **proportion** of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 taking GCSE history seems to have declined over the past few years. (Figures based on DCSF statistical releases: GCSE and Equivalent Results in England)

Year	Number of pupils in cohort (in 100s)	Number taking GCSE history (in 100s)	Percentage of cohort taking history
2004/5	633.4	204.2	32.2%
2005/6	645.9	208.1	32.2%
2006/7	649.2	204.2	31.5%
2007/8	653.6	204.0	31.2%