



Historical Association

The voice for history

## Historical Association summary response to the 2024 curriculum and assessment review call for evidence in England

In September 2024 the Department for Education launched a consultation on the curriculum. The Historical Association is submitting a response on behalf of you, our members. Below is a summary of the areas of the call for evidence to which we intend to respond and the key messages that, from our research and consultation, you are telling us are important. We will make our final submission to the Department for Education on 22 November.



## Key areas of the review and key messages

### National Curriculum

**History must retain its place as a mandatory and integral element of a broad and balanced curriculum.** The broad aims of the National Curriculum state that it *“promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society and prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. It provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens. It introduces pupils to the best that has been thought and said, and helps engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.”* History plays an integral role in the social, moral, spiritual and cultural education of our young people. Learning about the diversity of human experience allows them to begin to understand the world within which they live and their place within it in relation to one another. It provides vital skills to navigate the present day, equipping young people to look critically at different claims and the sources of information on which they are based.

**The National Curriculum is not broken, but some changes are necessary.** At Key Stage 3, our 2024 survey responses are indicative of broad satisfaction with the current history curriculum. Despite the fact that academies do not have to follow the National Curriculum, the vast majority do so, with only 9% of the respondents from state-funded schools indicating that their curricula did not explicitly follow it. Teachers particularly enjoy the flexibility that the current curriculum framework allows and the room for them to be creative and weave together different content choices and types of analytical focus within the structure provided by its broad chronological framework. In response to an open-ended survey question, one third of respondents identified its flexibility as a key strength.

The other features that are most valued by secondary teachers are the statements within the current ‘Purpose’ and ‘Aims’ sections that explicitly refer to second-order concepts (such as change and continuity, or cause and consequence) or to the processes of historical enquiry and the reasons why interpretations of the past differ. Teachers value the way in which these statements recognise the nature of history as a discipline and encourage them to frame their Key Stage 3 curriculum around worthwhile historical questions. Survey respondents also welcomed its chronological range and its breadth, and the way in which a focus on the history of Britain was counterbalanced by the opportunity to show the reciprocal interactions between Britain and the wider world. Another positive feature that was regularly cited was the inclusion of a local study (which was often used to highlight local-global interconnections).

Student feedback about history was also positive with the majority of respondents citing things they liked. One of the most frequent responses among students was that they enjoyed the variety of coverage possible within the flexibility offered by the history curriculum. Other frequent comments (aside from those referencing particular topics they had enjoyed) were comments supportive of the different teaching and assessment approaches used and the diversity within coverage. However, in comments about what students would like to see change, a desire for greater opportunity for the study of global

histories and cultures is notable, along with a desire for the opportunity to revisit some ancient history.

The response to the primary curriculum is less positive; according to the feedback from the 2024 primary survey, just 25% of respondents indicated that they are happy with it as it stands. The main criticisms relate to a perception that the primary history curriculum is overloaded with content, particularly at Key Stage 2; and to a strong disconnect between Key Stages 1 and 2, created in large part by the chronological constraints, which shift the focus quite abruptly to ancient history, and limit the scope to build effective connections from young children's own experience (as Key Stage 1 seeks to do). The current tight chronological structure may also serve to create a false impression that more ancient history is less challenging and complex (or that people were somehow simpler in the past) since children's enduring impressions of earlier periods are all developed at a younger age.

While some attention should be given to the disconnect between Key Stages 1 and 2 and to the chronological range and extent covered in Key Stage 2, the most important outcome from this review should be clear messages for primary teachers about what is and is not statutory within the National Curriculum, with no expectation that they should give equal weight to every element. This would reassure primary teachers that they have the flexibility to be creative within a given framework, which would allow for more local history, as well as the scope to include more diverse content and to ensure that what they teach helps children make sense of the world in which they are growing up (supporting their understanding of the different relationships that there have been between humans and the natural environment, for example, and the long history of climate change).

However, teachers can only do this effectively when they have the knowledge and skills to do so. Primary teachers are highly effective, innovative and creative curriculum planners where they have been equipped and been given the time to do so, as some of our Quality Mark schools prove. This creativity is also a key part of teacher agency, job satisfaction and well-being. The 2019 Ofsted report into teacher workload found that while 98% of teachers enjoyed teaching as a profession, teachers spent more time on marking and administrative tasks than on planning and preparation for lessons (18% vs 13% of teacher time outside of lessons). Administrative tasks were cited in the report as a significant contributory factor to teacher workload. Steps have been taken to address teacher workload, but this must be in the right places and not stifling for teacher agency and creativity.

The majority of primary teachers simply do not receive adequate training for planning and teaching history (either within the initial teacher education phase or as part of their professional development), so many struggle to plan effectively within the curriculum as it is currently framed. In the Historical Association's 2024 survey, when asked about how much history training they had undertaken over the last 2 years, the most common response from teachers (36.7%) was less than 12 hours. Some responses to questions about the curriculum suggested a continued general lack of understanding among primary teachers, which is unsurprising given that most are non-specialists. Adequate time and training is core to remedying the issues reported by primary teachers, not the erosion of teacher agency and creativity through highly detailed and prescriptive curriculum content.

Across the primary and secondary phases, survey evidence shows that most history teachers recognise the need for greater diversity in their curriculum content in order to better represent the diversity of the past. At Key Stage 3, most are already making such changes themselves (where they recognise the flexibility available to them within the existing National Curriculum). In the primary phase, successive surveys reveal a trend towards greater understanding of diversity, and an increasing desire for weaving greater diversity into curriculum topics in our 2024 survey, but change is slower.

Evidence of the ways in which teachers at Key Stage 3 have used the freedoms in the National Curriculum comes from the fact that 83% of the secondary schools that responded to the HA's 2021 survey claimed that they had made considerable/moderate changes to increase the diversity of their curriculum content in the previous 3 years. In response to the same question 3 years later, a similar proportion – 85% of respondents – claimed that they had made further changes in the period 2021-24. In the primary phase, the numbers reporting the inclusion of different and diverse voices from the past remain relatively static between the 2022 and 2024 surveys.

Secondary teachers overwhelmingly want to retain the flexibility they have within Key Stage 3. Most teachers made it clear that they would prefer explicit encouragement and practical support for teachers to make such changes, rather than an increase in mandated content (although it is the case that 25% of respondents to an open question about changes that they would like to see in the National Curriculum asked for more global history or a better integration of global history and British history, while a further 14% suggested more diversity in terms of the types of people chosen.) Academic historians who have contributed to our stakeholder meetings with examination boards have repeatedly stressed the point that British history is inherently linked with world history and this is a point that could be more strongly made within the National Curriculum. The Historical Association suggests that explicit support for more diverse approaches might be made in the curriculum preambles, training and resources provided, particularly for primary teachers as non-specialists.

**While subjects must remain at the heart of the curriculum, the review must look across subjects to ensure coherence and consistency of expectation.** Although Scotland and, more recently, Wales, have experimented with interdisciplinary approaches to the curriculum, there is little evidence of their success in improving outcomes. Distinct school subjects reflect genuine differences between different forms of knowledge. While young people will certainly need to draw those different forms of knowledge together in making sense of the world and addressing the challenges they face, such interdisciplinary learning first needs secure foundations.

Nonetheless, careful attention must be given to the ways in which the curriculum is experienced by children and young people, ensuring coherence and consistency of expectation, which cannot be addressed by considering each subject in a silo. An example of this problem can be found in the fact that within Key Stage 2 many schools teach the 'Stone Age to Iron Age' unit in Year 3. Yet the use of negative numbers, which is needed to refer to these periods, has not yet been introduced within the Mathematics curriculum, nor has the term 'ancient' been introduced within English. Ensuring greater coherence of this kind would automatically allow primary class teachers to weave a greater interdisciplinary focus into their teaching.

**Assessment and conceptions of progression need attention.** According to survey data, primary teachers still need better training to envisage an appropriate model of progression in history and so to assess pupils' work effectively. This has led to very patchy practice. At secondary level, evidence from the HA survey of 2019 (when the question was last asked) suggested that GCSE styles of questioning were being used by over 50% of schools, exerting a damaging influence on assessment practices and conceptions of progress at Key Stage 3. While National Curriculum levels were problematic, the void left by their removal has left many teachers uncertain how to define and plan effectively for progression, an issue best addressed through effective subject-specific professional training. Further work is needed on assessment structures which are fit for purpose at Key Stages 2 and 3.

## GCSE

**Content needs to be reduced.** The overwhelming view of teachers who responded to our 2024 secondary survey is that there is simply too much content to cover at GCSE. When asked specifically about different features of the current GCSE, only 13% of respondents agreed that the current level of content should be retained. Responding to an open question about the changes that they would like to see, 81% declared that content should be reduced.

In terms of how that reduction should be achieved, only 41% of respondents thought it appropriate to retain the 5 distinct elements currently required. While there was strong support (83%) to maintain mandated British and non-British units of study, less than 50% supported the notion that at least 40% of the specification must be British history. A suggested approach arising from a GCSE stakeholder meeting held in July 2024 was for a reduction in the number of separate examined units, along with pre-release materials and guidance, similar to the way in which the GCSE operated following the Covid pandemic. It was also suggested that schools might have greater flexibility within a GCSE history specification to opt for units from a wider range of choices and pathways.

Current content levels result in a gallop through the curriculum that allows little room for thought or debate, little scope to stray into related issues for greater depth of understanding, and little chance for students to catch up on work missed due to illness or other adverse circumstances. Because of the rate at which content must be covered, missing even one lesson can be stressful for students. Teachers also report that the sheer level of content within the GCSE has deterred students from considering A-level history.

It is important to emphasise that history teachers have consistently welcomed the requirements in the current national criteria for GCSE specifications to include coverage of history on 3 different time scales (depth, period, and thematic) and from 3 different periods (medieval, early modern and modern). Among the 2024 survey respondents, 77% thought that the chronological scope should be retained, and 76% thought the requirement to study 3 different periods should be retained. It is the way in which these different elements have been combined that creates a need for 5 (rather than 4) elements, while the level of content to be included in each has effectively been determined through specification design and the Ofqual approval process. Ofqual would benefit from designated subject specialist

consultants who are able to take a more critical approach to specification design for subject integrity as well as the integrity of assessment routes.

**Content selection must have resonance.** All history can provide insight into what it is to be human and into the human condition; however what is offered within the specifications should also be resonant, providing links to real-world issues and events in order to support greater understanding of the challenges of our time, such as climate change, the legacies of empire and developments in the Middle-East. There was also support in responses to our secondary survey for types of content that could be seen to link more directly to different kinds of career and employment opportunities, acknowledging the links between history and the creative industries and the heritage sector, with links, for example, to conservation and restoration, tourism and even computer gaming. A pilot of such a course, which emphasised vocational use of history, was cut before its potential benefits (and challenges) could be properly evaluated. There was also very strong support from respondents to our 2024 secondary survey for a more inclusive approach in specifying GCSE curriculum content - ensuring better representation of the diversity of the past. While there was particularly strong support for the greater inclusion of women (80%) and Black and Asian British history (77%), other ways of ensuring better representation were supported too - working class history (73%), history of people with disabilities (68%) and LGBTQ+ histories (67%).

**The treatment of sources and interpretations in GCSE specifications needs review.** The flexibility of the National Curriculum has allowed for innovative work at Key Stage 3 in developing students' understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed from sources used critically as evidence, and of how and why different interpretations of the past are produced and how they can be evaluated. GCSE specifications represent a step backwards given the artificial nature of many of the exam questions and arbitrary decisions by examination boards about what kinds of (otherwise valid) answers are recognised by their mark-schemes. An example of this problematic issue is the way in which questions about why interpretations differ set by the Edexcel exam board require students only to focus on the historian's methods and the types of question that they were seeking to address (but not on the person advancing the interpretation or the context in which they were doing so). In contrast AQA only rewards answers that focus on the person putting forward the interpretation and their context.

A-level is generally regarded by teachers as better reflecting the nature of the subject - rebuilding on the original groundwork established at Key Stage 3, and redressing the distortions of GCSE (again, particularly in relation to historical interpretations).

**Assessment needs to change.** Our surveys reveal that there is certainly no will among teachers for a return to coursework at GCSE. When asked what changes they would like to GCSE only 3 respondents (out of 385) requested a return to coursework. However, the sheer amount of content specified and the number of different kinds of assessment tasks thought necessary to evaluate this learning now means that students are sitting up to 30 written exams. The demands that these exert are having an adverse effect on our student population. It is no surprise that over 20% of 8-16 year-olds (rising to 23.3% of 17-19 year-olds) are experiencing mental health issues. While this figure has stabilised following a sharp rise in the wake of the Covid pandemic, it is not improving. This must be addressed. The extent of the specified content is such that only around 10% of what has been studied is



actually examined in any one year, leaving students oppressed by all that they are expected to master, yet often frustrated that they have not been able to demonstrate what they have learned and understood. A reduction in content must lead to a reduction in the examination burden.

We need to find new ways to assess students' knowledge and understanding that do not add to teacher workload, while reducing the undue emphasis on written assessment. The latter should obviously continue to form an integral part of the examination process, but schools can perhaps follow universities in using a wider range of assessment tools. Current examinations in history provide limited opportunities for lower-attaining students, with few low tariff questions and a vast range of complex question stems. A reduction in the number of question stems was the second most common request among the 2024 secondary survey respondents, with some noting that students have to learn the specific requirements of 10 different types of question. Unless there is a regular mechanism for specification renewal, examination boards must be allowed to repeat questions within the lifetime of a specification, in order to avoid increasingly obscure or arbitrary questions. When asked to choose between a range of options for making GCSE history examinations more accessible, particularly to lower-attaining students, 67% of respondents simply asked for a reduction in the content of the specification while 12% asked for less complex questions. Only 9% suggested that they would prefer the introduction of tiered papers.

## Post-16

**A-level is fit for purpose, but some changes are needed.** We currently stand alone in the formation of our post-16 curriculum. Most European jurisdictions have a less specialised approach to post-16 study, opting for a baccalaureate style of qualification. There is an argument to allow for a broader approach to post-16 education in the longer term; however, respondents to our surveys since the last revised specifications were issued indicate that teachers are broadly happy with the current A-level specifications. However, given the fact that the last review was not a full review and was carried out on a relatively swift timescale, some attention needs to be paid to content issues, particularly in relation to those units that were essentially imported unchanged from earlier specifications.

Universities tell us that sometimes students struggle to engage effectively with the broad overview coverage that is often a feature of undergraduate programmes. Care therefore needs to be taken to ensure that across the units of study, students are able to draw broader comparisons across time. Universities also tell us that they need students to come to undergraduate history with more refined disciplinary skills, therefore a more coherent approach across the secondary age range that avoids the severe distortions imposed by the current GCSE specifications would ensure a more secure understanding of the disciplinary skills required for undergraduate study.

There is support among teachers and academic historians to keep the non-examined assessment (NEA). The Historical Association is therefore also supportive. By the time students reach A-level it is to be expected that they become better acquainted with the work of the historian. The NEA fulfils this purpose. It is also a way in which students can

develop their research and independent thought and learning skills, things highly valued by universities and an essential part of preparing students for further study.

While there have been concerns raised over the potential impact of AI upon the future of such assessments, the dominant view remains that the NEA coursework element should stay but that the potential risks of AI should be managed. The two most popular suggestions from respondents to our 2024 secondary survey about how to manage the risks of AI were the inclusion of some form of oral assessment (49%) or that students should be explicitly taught to use it responsibly (44%).

## Use of AI

**We must work with AI.** As outlined above, there have been concerns over the impact of AI upon the integrity of the non-examined assessment at A-level; however, both teacher and student survey responses show this concern to be unfounded. In a Historical Association survey of over 2300 students (of which 774 were of GCSE or A-level age), only 10% picked out AI as their top-rated technology for supporting their learning and in fact out of all of the 6 choices given to them, use of AI came 5th, falling behind revision and quiz apps, YouTube and social media. This is mirrored in teacher responses to our 2024 secondary survey who did not perceive student use of AI to be particularly pervasive, with only 18% indicating its use by half or more of their A-level students. While of course vigilance is necessary, AI is constantly learning and there is a need to mitigate against the environmental impact of increasing use. Since it is certainly here to stay and student use is likely to increase (with a further 57% of survey respondents noting that a few students were now experimenting with it), the greater emphasis should be placed upon supporting students (and teachers) to work effectively with AI. We must continue to develop learning and assessment that preserves the central objective of developing critical skills and training and testing students to think independently and creatively in ways that machines are unable to do.

While generative AI teaching resources have their place, these are not the antidote to teacher workload issues and can in fact only be used critically by a teacher who has enough knowledge to be able to spot misconceptions, omissions and inaccuracies. There is a real danger that in the hands of those ill-equipped to utilise generative AI in the production of subject specific teaching plans and resources, lessons will be based upon dry materials lacking in creativity at best and inaccuracies and the reinforcement of stereotypes at worst.

## Further information

2024 Historical Association survey reports are not yet published. Surveys from previous years can be found here:

<https://www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/rg-survey-results>

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