Revisiting the topics taught as part of an OCR A level History qualification

Karen Dunn British Council, **Ellie Darlington** and **Tom Benton** Research Division (The study was completed when the first named author was based in the Research Division)

Introduction

Given the introduction of a broader range of options in the Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) new General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level (A level) History, this article follows on from a previous analysis of A level History options based on the previous specification for OCR History (Specification A) (Child, Darlington, & Gill, 2014, 2015). That research relied on OCR History centres responding to requests for participation in an online survey. However, OCR's introduction of an online 'specification creator' tool for centres has provided quantitative information about the topics which schools intend to teach their students as part of their A level.

OCR introduced a redeveloped specification, History H505, for first teaching in September 2015. It aimed to provide more 'stretch and challenge' for students, and requires that students study topics which cover a chronological range of at least 200 years. It comprises three units: *British History* (13 possible topics), *Non-British History* (24 topics), and *Historical Themes* (21 topics).

Teachers have the option to select a combination of topics across the three units rather than selecting a particular 'route' through the course based on time period (Medieval/Early Modern/Modern) as per past specifications. There are two provisos to the new approach:

1. They must meet the Government's requirements for 200-year minimum coverage (Department for Education [DfE], 2014);

2. They do not include prohibited unit combinations.

Of the 6,552 possible combinations of topics under the 3 units, 338 are prohibited owing to non-compliance with the 200-year rule, and an additional 144 combinations are prohibited because of an overlap in content. This leaves 6,070 permitted topic combinations across the 3 units – a vast range of options.

Aims

As with the previous study, we sought to establish what the common topic choices and combinations are.

It was intended that the analysis could enable some comparisons to be made with the previous findings (Child et al., 2014). However, since the structure of the options available to schools has changed considerably, it is not possible to make direct links. It must also be noted that the mode of collecting the information is quite different: in the previous study the teachers were canvassed about their choices post hoc, whilst this study used data collected before the teaching of the course had begun. There was also a much stronger motivation for teachers to provide the information analysed in this study, since the internet tool used to collect the information was also informing them about the viability of their topic choices.

Method

The A level Specification Creator tool

Information regarding A level History options was collected from 438 schools using OCR's Specification Creator[1]. Schools considering teaching an OCR History A level course are recommended to use this tool in order to ensure that their choice of options from the three groups of A level History units fits the minimum 200-year requirement set out by the DfE (2014).
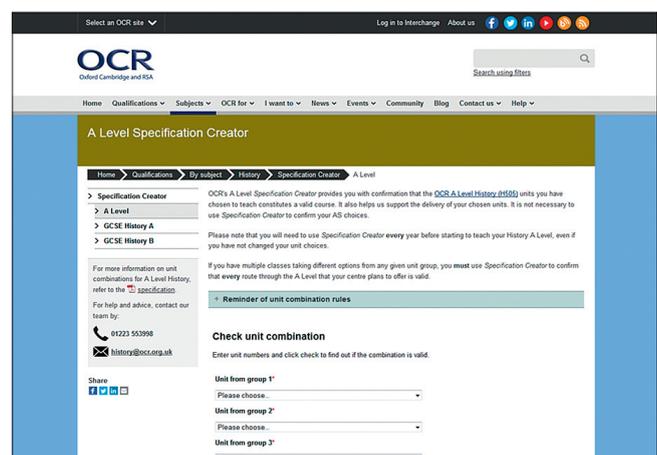

Figure 1: OCR's A level Specification Creator tool

It is useful to highlight a number of caveats regarding the data that are used for this study. There was nothing preventing a number of different teachers from the same school entering a range of unit choices for their students. For example, some individual classes could study certain topic combinations, and other classes different ones depending on individual teacher specialisms. Additionally, it is possible that teachers would enter a number of possible options into the specification creator, just to check their viability, but only in reality be offering a single route through the course to their students. Teachers may indeed even choose a different awarding body altogether before their students take their examinations.

There will be no definitive information about the number of centres that follow OCR's A level History course for 2017 until the candidates are entered for the final examinations. However, it is assumed unlikely that the teachers will have had motivation to enter misleading information

---

1. http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/by-subject/history/specification-creator/a-level-specification-creator/

into the Specification Creator; therefore the information collected in this manner is believed to be a reasonably accurate reflection of their intentions.

In order to tackle such issues and to ensure that the data analysed represented a situation as close to reality as possible, some data cleaning took place. Duplicate entries from the same schools were removed. Sometimes one user accidentally submitted the same options twice. On other occasions, multiple teachers from the same school had used the Specification Creator and entered the same information as each other. In instances when multiple submissions were made from one school, the school was contacted[2] to ascertain whether all of the options specified in the submissions were being pursued.

Information from the Specification Creator tool was extracted in October 2015, once schools had begun teaching to the specification.

National databases

Following the extraction and cleaning of the information from the Specification Creator database, centre number information was used to gain insight into the centres represented in the dataset. Summary information about the schools (e.g., school sector, number of A level candidates) was retrieved from the National Centre Number database, and information on school attainment was calculated using National Pupil Database (NPD) information.

Data collected

School sector: Information from 438 schools was collected. The majority (69.6 per cent) were state schools, 24.9 per cent were from the independent sector, and the remaining schools categorised either as 'other' (e.g., hospital schools) or the relevant data was missing.

School attainment: Mean A level scores in 2015 across all subjects and all awarding bodies were calculated by assigning a number to each A level grade (A*=6, A=5, B=4, etc.) and taking the mean of all A levels taken by all of the students at the school.

Following the methodology employed by Child et al. (2014), participating centres were then divided into 'High', 'Medium' and 'Low' groups based upon the relative attainment of the centres included in this dataset. That is, it did not link to any external measure/benchmark of attainment. The number of centres in each category and some descriptive information about the attainment are given in Table 1.

Table 1: A level score distributions within each attainment category[3]

Attainment	A level scores				No. of participating centres (%)
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	
Low	1.67	3.22	2.9130	.25959	134 (32.9)
Medium	3.23	3.68	3.4315	.12334	136 (33.4)
High	3.69	5.27	4.1460	.36921	137 (33.7)

---

2. This was only done if the user had indicated on the Specification Creator that they were willing to be contacted.

3. The frequency data excludes that for 31 centres where attainment categories could not be categorised because the relevant data was not available.

As an indication of how to interpret this data, in 2015 the average A level grade awarded was equivalent to a C+ (DfE, 2015). The data in Table 1 approximates to a 'low-attaining' centre as having an average result of a D+, a 'medium' centre of a C and a 'high-attaining' centre a B- in A levels.

Cohort size: Schools were asked to give an estimate of the cohort size for each of the routes through the course they were teaching. Table 2 shows that the majority of participants reported that their cohorts would be at most 20 students large, with a significant minority reporting cohorts of between 21 and 40 students.

Table 2: Cohort estimates

Cohort estimate	No. of schools (%)
0–20	272 (53.8)
21–40	151 (29.8)
41–60	49 (9.7)
61–80	15 (3.0)
81–99	12 (2.4)
100+	7 (1.4)
Total	**506 (100.0)**

Multiple routes: Fifty-six schools indicated that they would be offering several routes through the course. That is, different classes within the same school may have been studying different topics from each other. Of these, nine schools were offering more than two routes (with a maximum of five routes offered by two schools).

Some cautions

Naturally the information about each of the schools summarised above does not represent entirely independent variables. Schools with a greater number than 1,000 total A level entries across all subjects are exclusively within the state sector. The majority of schools in the low and medium attainment groups are from the state sector; with independent schools dominating those represented in the high attainment group (see Table 3).

Table 3: Attainment categories by school sector

Attainment category	School type				Total
	Independent	State	Other	Missing	
Low	7	119	5	3	134
Medium	13	119	0	4	136
High	83	52	1	1	137
Total	**103**	**290**	**6**	**8**	**407**

Additionally, owing to the fact that there are a large number of different topic choices and therefore combinations, a number of the possible topics and combinations will not be offered by any OCR centres this year. In fact, it would be impossible for all combinations to be offered as there are 6,070 permitted combinations but far fewer schools which teach A level History.

Table 4: Most popular topics for Unit 1: *British History*

Overall rank	Unit	Topic	Medieval	Early Modern	Modern	No. of schools offering topic (%)
4	Y106	England 1485–1558: The Early Tudors		●		98 (19.4)
5	Y113	Britain 1930–1997			●	96 (19.0)
8	Y107	England 1547–1603: The Later Tudors		●		71 (14.0)
9	Y108	The Early Stuarts and the Origins of the Civil War 1603–1660		●		67 (13.2)
10	Y105	England 1445–1509: Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII	●			47 (9.3)
11=	Y112	Britain 1900–1951			●	44 (8.7)
19=	Y102	Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest 1035–1107	●			27 (5.3)
21=	Y110	From Pitt to Peel: Britain 1783–1853			●	26 (5.1)
30=	Y109*	The Making of Georgian Britain 1678–c.1760		●		9 (1.8)
32=	Y111	Liberals, Conservatives and the Rise of Labour 1846–1918			●	8 (1.6)
40=	Y101*	Alfred and the Making of England 871–1016	●			5 (1.0)
40=	Y103*	England 1199–1272	●			5 (1.0)
45=	Y104*	England 1377–1455	●			3 (0.6)
					Total	**506 (100.0)**

Table 5: Most popular topics for Unit 2: *Non-British History*

Overall rank	Unit	Topic	Medieval	Early Modern	Modern	No. of schools offering topic (%)
3	Y221	Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963			●	108 (21.3)
6	Y219	Russia 1894–1941			●	74 (14.6)
7=	Y213	The French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon 1774–1815			●	72 (14.2)
11=	Y223	The Cold War in Europe 1941–1995			●	44 (8.7)
15	Y212*	The American Revolution 1740–1796		●		31 (6.1)
16	Y203	The Crusades and the Crusader States 1095–1192	●			30 (5.9)
17=	Y222	The Cold War in Asia 1945–1993			●	28 (5.5)
19=	Y216	The USA in the 19th Century: Westward expansion and Civil War 1803–c.1890			●	27 (5.3)
24	Y218	International Relations 1890–1941			●	16 (3.2)
26=	Y207	The German Reformation and the rule of Charles V 1500–1559		●		12 (2.4)
26=	Y215	Italy and Unification 1789–1896			●	12 (2.4)
26=	Y220	Italy 1896–1943			●	12 (2.4)
29	Y206	Spain 1469–1556		●		10 (2.0)
37=	Y204*	Genghis Khan and the Explosion from the Steppes c.1167–1405	●			6 (1.2)
37=	Y224*	Apartheid and Reconciliation: South African Politics 1948–1999			●	6 (1.2)
40=	Y210*	Russia 1645–1741		●		5 (1.0)
44	Y208	Philip II 1556–1598		●		4 (0.8)
45=	Y209*	African Kingdoms c.1400–c.1800: four case studies		●		3 (0.6)
50=	Y205	Exploration, Encounters and Empire 1445–1570		●		2 (0.4)
50=	Y217*	Japan 1853–1937			●	2 (0.4)
50=	Y211*	The Rise and Decline of the Mughal Empire in India 1526–1739		●		1 (0.2)
50=	Y214	France 1814–1870			●	1 (0.2)
55=	Y201*	The Rise of Islam c.550–750	●			0 (0.0)
55=	Y202*	Charlemagne 768–814	●			0 (0.0)
					Total	**506 (100.0)**

Table 6: Most popular topics for Unit 3: *Historical Themes*

Overall rank	Unit	Topic	Period			No. of schools offering topic (%)
			Medieval	Early Modern	Modern	
1	Y319	Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1992			●	149 (29.4)
2	Y318	Russia and its Rulers 1855–1964			●	133 (26.3)
13=	Y306	Rebellion and Disorder under the Tudors 1485–1603		●		38 (7.5)
13=	Y312*	Popular Culture and the Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries		●		38 (7.5)
17=	Y315	The Changing Nature of Warfare 1792–1945			●	28 (5.5)
21=	Y316	Britain and Ireland 1791–1921			●	26 (5.1)
23	Y314	The Challenge of German Nationalism 1789–1919			●	21 (4.2)
25	Y321*	The Middle East 1908–2011: Ottomans to Arab Spring			●	14 (2.8)
30=	Y317*	China and its Rulers 1839–1989			●	9 (1.8)
32=	Y311*	The Origins and Growth of the British Empire 1558–1783		●		8 (1.6)
34=	Y305	The Renaissance c.1400–c.1600	●			7 (1.4)
34=	Y307	Tudor Foreign Policy 1485–1603		●		7 (1.4)
34=	Y320*	From Colonialism to Independence: The British Empire 1857–1965			●	7 (1.4)
37=	Y302*	The Viking Age c.790–1066	●			6 (1.2)
40=	Y313	The Ascendancy of France 1610–1715		●		5 (1.0)
45=	Y303	English Government and the Church 1066–1216	●			3 (0.6)
45=	Y308	The Catholic Reformation 1492–1610		●		3 (0.6)
45=	Y310	The Development of the Nation State: France 1498–1610		●		3 (0.6)
50=	Y304*	The Church and Medieval Heresy c.1100–1437	●			1 (0.2)
55=	Y301*	The Early Anglo Saxons c.400–800	●			0 (0.0)
					Total	506 (100.0)

What are the most common topic choices and combinations?

Of interest are the individual topic combinations in each unit, as well as the topics that are commonly combined with one another.

The data reported in this section encompass only the responses from schools identified as state or independent schools. Data for other types of centre (e.g., A level resit colleges) or for centres for which this data was missing were excluded both in case they skewed the results, and because the previous study only analysed data from these two types of school.

Most popular topics for each unit

Tables 4–6 show the most popular topics for each unit. There is a predominance of Modern and Early Modern topics at the top of the popularity listing across all three units. None of the Medieval topics attracted more than 10% of schools.

The top choices are also heavily weighted towards topics that are the same as or extended from OCR's previous A level History specification. However, notable exceptions are *Y212: The American Revolution 1740–1796*, attracting 6.1% of the Unit 2 choices, and *Y312: Popular Culture and the Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, attracting 7.5% of the Unit 3 choices. In all, 29.1% of schools were intending to teach at least one topic new to the specification. This was the case for both independent schools and state schools, and across low, medium and high-attaining schools.

Topics which are new to this specification are indicated with an

asterisk (*) next to the unit code in Tables 4–6 and throughout the remainder of this article.

There were some differences in the choices of certain Unit 2 topics between schools which were classified as high-, medium- and low-attaining (some of these differences are visible in Figure 2). For example, low-attaining schools were much more likely to have offered *Y221: Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963* ($\chi^2(2)=12.622$, $p=.002$) and *Y218: International Relations 1890–1941* ($\chi^2(2)=7.935$, $p=.019$) to their students than medium- or high-attaining schools. Similarly, *Y319: Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1993* was selected by significantly fewer higher-attaining schools than medium- and low-attaining schools ($\chi^2(2)=6.372$, $p=.041$).

Conversely, high-attaining schools were significantly more likely to offer *Y213: The French Revolution and the Rule of Napoleon 1774–1815* to their students than medium- or low-attaining schools ($\chi^2(2)=7.884$, $p=.019$). Similar can be said for *Y207: The German Reformation and the rule of Charles V 1500–1559*.

There were some differences in the choices of state and independent schools. Specifically, independent schools were significantly more likely to teach *Y203: The Crusades and the Crusader States 1095–1192* ($\chi^2(1)=4.572$, $p=.032$). Conversely, state schools were significantly more likely to offer *Y219: Russia 1894–1941* ($\chi^2(1)=4.100$, $p=.043$) as shown in Figure 3.

Many of the most popular Unit 1, 2 and 3 choices were also popular in the old specification. For example, the following topics from the current specification featured in both the top 15 topic choices identified by Child et al. (2014) based on the old specification, and the top 15 from Tables 4, 5 and 6:
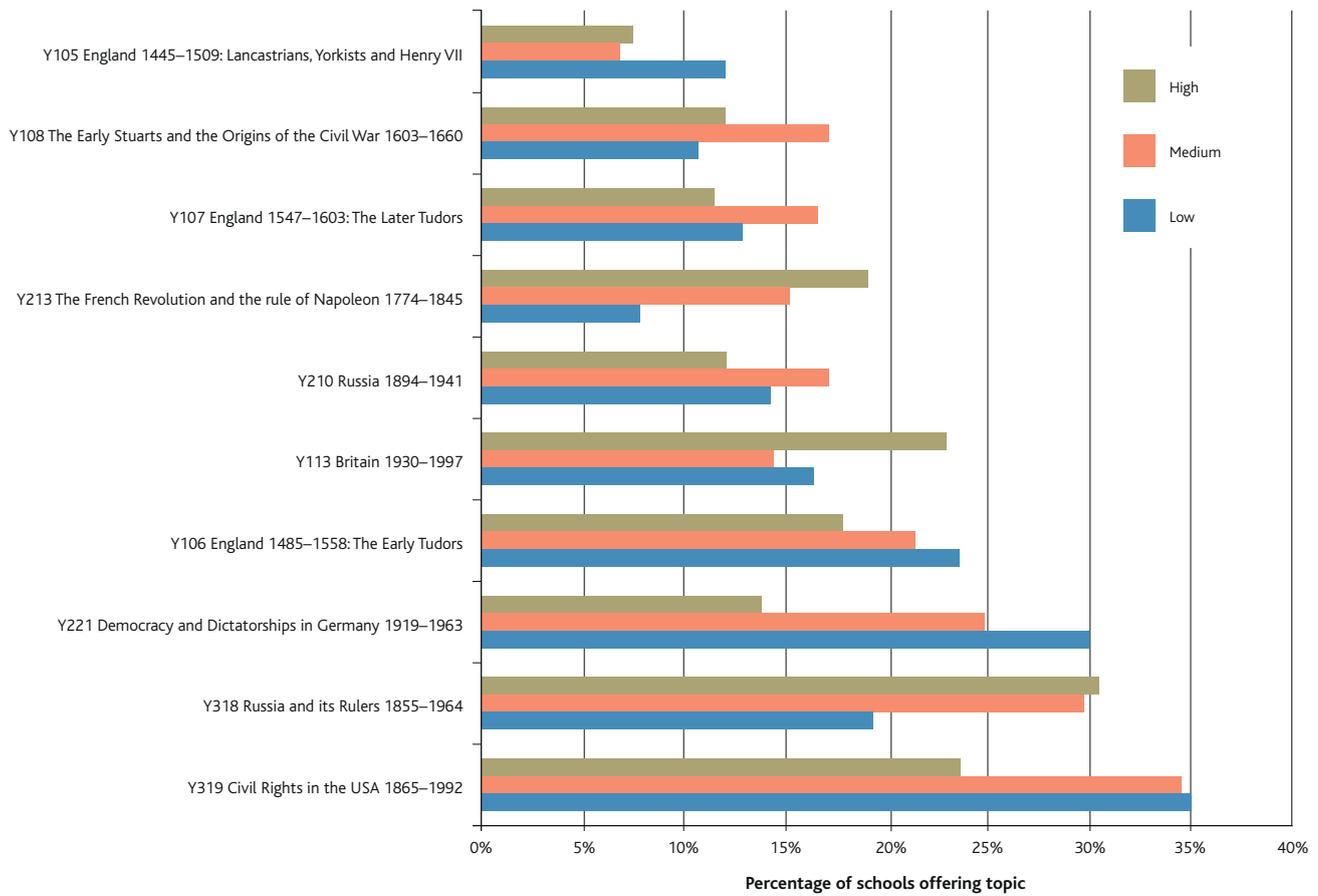
**Figure 2: The 10 most popular topics by school attainment level**
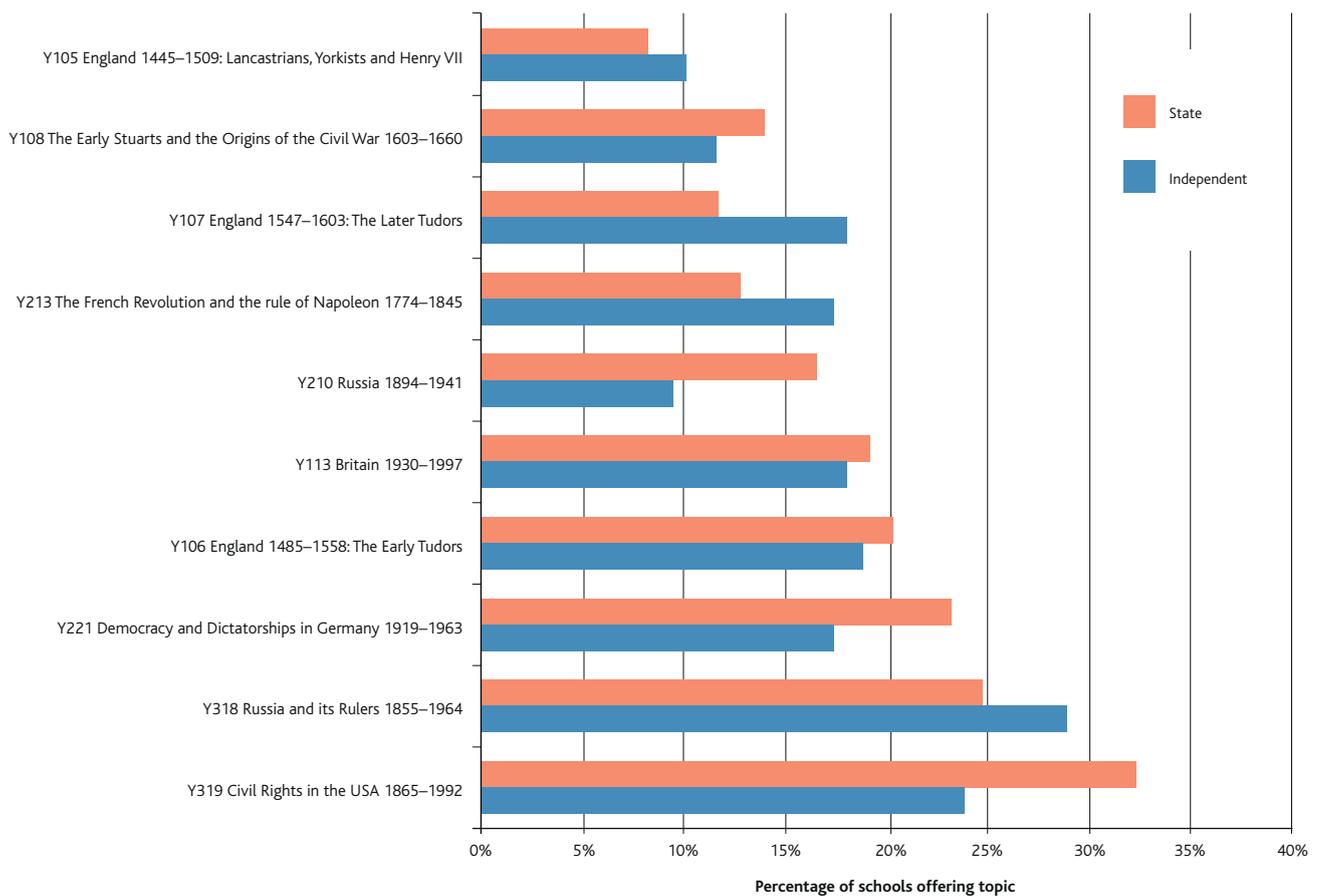
Figure 3: The 10 most popular topics by school type

- Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1992
- Russia and its Rulers 1855–1964[4]
- Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963
- England 1485–1558: The Early Tudors and/or England 1547–1603: The Later Tudors[5]
- Russia 1894–1941[6]
- The French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon 1774–1815[7]

None of the significant differences between school sector or attainment level matched the differences identified in the previous study. This may largely be due to the fact that the topics currently available for study have undergone considerable restructuring, and the methodology employed in data collection is very different between that reported here and that used by Child et al. (2014). The 2014 study examined the topic choices of 90 schools; however, the Specification Creator has enabled the collection of data from 438 schools for the present study, meaning that the findings are more representative of all schools offering OCR's A level History qualification.

Most popular topic combinations

There are a huge number of possible combinations of units (see Figure 4), which mean that even the most popular 'three-way' combination reported in this study only represented 3 percent of all routes. This means that with regard to three-way combinations, schools are not herding towards a single route through the course and are taking advantage of the wide-ranging options available in combining topics to meet their individual needs. The five most popular combinations are given in Table 7. Note that all of the topics are from Modern periods, with the exception of Y106 and Y107.

---

4. The old specification's topic was Russian Dictatorship 1855–1992.
5. The old specification's topic was Rebellion and Disorder under the Tudors 1485–1603.
6. The old specification's topic was From Autocracy to Communism: Russia 1894–1941.
7. The old specification's topic was The Origins and Course of the French Revolution 1774–1795.
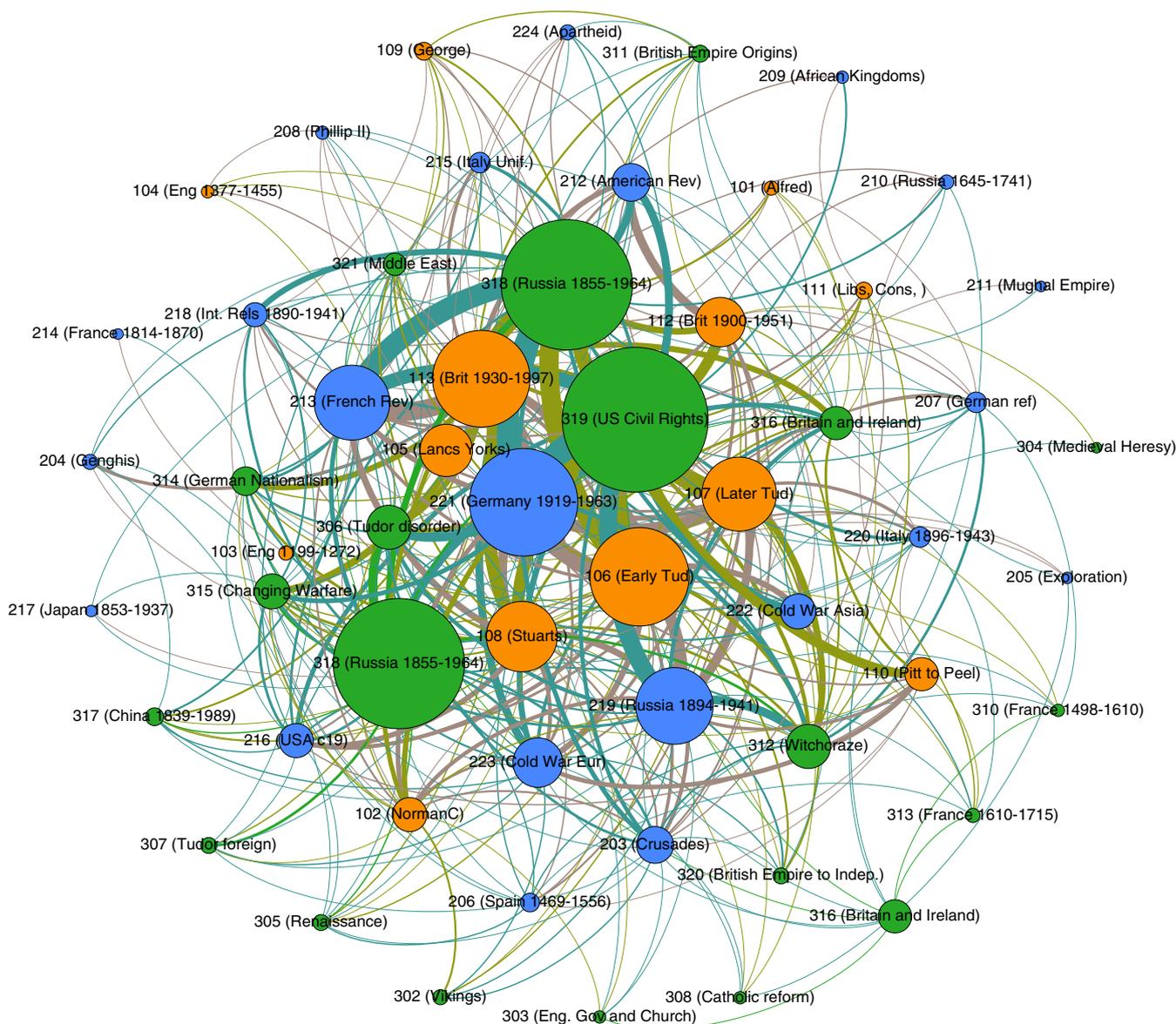
Figure 4: Network diagram showing the most popular topics and topic combinations

Table 7: Top 5 most popular three-way unit combinations

Rank	Unit 1 choice		Unit 2 choice		Unit 3 choice		No. of schools (%)
1	Y113	Britain 1930–1997	Y213	The French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon 1774–1815	Y318	Russia and its Rulers 1855–1964	15 (3.0)
2=	Y106	England 1485–1558: The Early Tudors	Y221	Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963	Y319	Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1992	12 (2.4)
2=	Y106	England 1485–1558: The Early Tudors	Y221	Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963	Y318	Russia and its Rulers 1855–1964	12 (2.4)
4	Y106	England 1485–1558: The Early Tudors	Y219	Russia 1894–1941	Y319	Civil Rights in the USA 1865–1992	9 (1.8)
5	Y107	England 1547–1603: The Later Tudors	Y221	Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963	Y318	Russia and its Rulers 1855–1964	8 (1.6)

Figure 4 highlights the vast number of different topic combinations that are possible through this A level History course. The colour coding shows Unit 1 topics in orange, Unit 2 topics in blue and Unit 3 topics in green. The node size is relative to the number of schools which reported to be offering that topic, with the thickness of the interconnecting lines indicating the popularity of that particular combination of topics.

Limitations

The key limitation of this research is the fact that it relies upon teachers' plans for teaching History A level for assessment in 2017 not changing and being accurate. The Specification Creator is a relatively casual instrument, and the teachers are by no means tied to the intentions stated. Feedback from the selection of teachers emailed as part of the research does indicate that schools largely entered topic choices that reflected their teaching intention as of summer 2015. Equally, there is little motivation for teachers to input misleading information at the outset; however situations at individual schools may change prior to the date of the final examination. This data therefore must be treated as speculative, rather than a definite representation of the final choices made.

Key observations

The common topic choices under each individual unit do not produce any unexpected findings. There is a predominance of Modern and Early Modern topics at the top of the popularity listing across all three units. None of the Medieval topics attract more than 10 per cent of schools. This is in line with the findings relating to the old specification (Child et al., 2014).

The most popular topics in British History relate to the Tudors and Stuarts, as well as very Modern History (e.g., *Y113: Britain 1930–1997*). In European history, the most popular topics concern Russia in the early 20th century and Germany's leadership in the first half of the 20th century. Worldwide, topics based on events in the United States are the most popular.

Whilst teachers have selected a range of topics within each unit, the most popular topics in each of the units are those that were popular in the old specification. The topics schools choose to teach as part of A level History have been found to be primarily based on teacher expertise and resource availability (Child et al., 2015). Therefore, it is unsurprising that topics which were introduced for the first time in the new specification do not feature in the top choices. Nonetheless, *Y312: Popular Culture and the Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, and *Y212: The American Revolution 1740–1796* were both brand new topics for this specification and both feature in the top 15 most popular units across the whole specification, indicating that there is appetite amongst schools for something new to teach.

References

Child, S., Darlington, E., & Gill, T. (2014). An analysis of the unit and topic choices made in an OCR A level History course. *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication*, *18*, 2–9.

Child, S., Darlington, E., & Gill, T. (2015). A level History choices: Which factors motivate teachers' unit and topic choices? *Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication*: *19*, 2–6.

Department for Education. (2014). *GCE AS and A level subject content for history*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-as-and-a-level-for-history

Department for Education. (2015). *School and College Performance Tables: 2014 Performance Tables Archive*. Retrieved from http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/2014/index.html