

# A level History: Which factors motivate teachers' unit and topic choices?

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## Introduction

During periods of curriculum and qualifications reform, debates typically centre on establishing the fundamental content, skills and competencies that students should possess in different subject domains. Currently, England is undergoing a period of reform in secondary education, where significant changes to course content are to be introduced, alongside structural changes to general qualifications (Department for Education [DfE], 2010).

At A level, the changes to subject content have been guided by Higher Education. *The Smith Report* (2013), commissioned by The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), made recommendations with regards to content changes for the reformed A level qualifications in 15 subjects. For the subject of History, the Smith Report recommended that A levels should cover at least a 200 year period, and should focus on more than one state. Perhaps in response to difficulties in defining appropriate historical content for the successful transition to university (Hibbert, 2006), there was little direction in terms of specific content areas. Schools have historically been offered flexibility in the topics they cover at A level History. For example, in the current Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) A level (Specification A) there are 16 possible unit combinations available to students, and a range of different topics within each unit can be taught. Other exam boards offer fewer options in terms of unit choice, but a greater range of topic options within units.

Although at first glance this course flexibility would appear to encourage the teaching of a wide range of historical topics, recent research has suggested that schools tend to teach narrow historical periods. For example, in their analysis of the unit and topic choices taken within one History A level, Child, Darlington and Gill (2014) found that schools were more likely to choose units that focused on modern History and within these units, centred on specific twentieth century topics.

The flexibility inherent in A level History qualifications means that teachers have to negotiate competing factors that may influence topic, unit or qualification choices. First, the study of History can serve several purposes for students (see Barton & Levstik, 2004, for a review). For example, Harris (2013) argued that History operates for communities in much the same ways as memory does for individuals, in that it facilitates more informed decision making. Secondly, students are also likely to be engaged by different topics, as they may identify with different geographical regions or cultural backgrounds. As changes to qualifications are introduced, teachers may be aware that the introduction of new topic areas may be problematic if students do not identify with them (Elwood, 2012). Thirdly, students are likely to be influenced by the school they attend (Nelson, Morris, Rickinson, Blenkinsop & Spielhofer, 2001; Vidal Rodeiro, 2007). For example, Vidal Rodeiro (2007) found that independent school students were more likely to choose 'traditional' subjects

(including History) compared to comprehensive school students. Fourthly, teachers may have their own areas of interest or expertise which may influence the topics they teach. This expertise may be developed through experience teaching the topic in school, by previous degree level study, or by personal interest (Chandra, 1987). However, even in cases where teacher expertise is not as well developed, the availability of high-quality resources may encourage teachers to select certain historical topics. In times of curriculum change, teachers have to re-assess these factors for the benefit of the school and the student.

## Aims of the current study

Given the tensions outlined, it is surprising that little previous research has examined which factors influence unit and topic decision choices in History. The present study aimed to use questionnaire data derived from heads of History departments to analyse the motivations underpinning the unit and topic choices for an A level History course. A second aim was to analyse whether the Heads of Department from different school types had different influences underlying their choices.

## Method

The data for the present study were collected as part of a larger research study that aimed to investigate the scope of historical topics taught at A level (see Child et al., 2014). This research involved the statistical analysis of question-level data for an A level History course, and a questionnaire sent to heads of History departments in schools. An overview of the questionnaire method is presented below.

## Participants

Centres that took OCR A level History in June 2013 were contacted by telephone, and asked to provide the full name and contact details for the head of the History department or equivalent. The Heads of Department were then emailed and invited to fill out the questionnaire, which they could access via a weblink. As an acknowledgement of their time, they were offered the opportunity to enter into a prize draw.

Of the 638 Heads of Department contacted, 90 returned the questionnaire (a return rate of 14%). Participants had a mean of 6.71 years of experience ( $SD = 6.21$  years) as Head of Department at the centre where they were currently employed. The centres had spent a mean of 11.89 years teaching OCR A level History ( $SD = 6.25$  years).

Eighty-five of the participants provided information about the type of school where they were teaching. Fifty-two of the centres were state schools, and 33 were independent schools. The percentage of schools in this sample that were independent (39%) is slightly higher than the

overall percentage of independent schools that take OCR History (34%). However, we deemed that this sample was broadly representative of the total population of centres that offered OCR A level History in 2013.

### Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was developed by members of the research team in collaboration with the OCR General Qualifications Reform Subject Team. The questionnaire comprised three sections related to the decision process underlying unit and topic choices for A level History. The first section asked participants for details of their centre and teaching experience. The second section asked them about their role in the decision process of making unit and topic choices (e.g., if it was their decision alone or decided after discussion with colleagues). The third section asked them to rate how important 11 factors are when deciding the unit and topic choices for A level History.

### Piloting

Before the questionnaire was distributed to the participants, a draft version was checked by the OCR Subject Team for History, to ensure that appropriate terminology and question response choices were included. The questionnaire was then sent to a pilot participant, who was a Head of Department for History. The pilot participant was asked to check the questionnaire for anything that they felt would not be understood by participants, and errors in spelling or grammar. They were also asked if there were responses that could be added to any of the questions. Once the recommended changes were made, a weblink for the final version was sent to the main cohort.

## Results

The results are presented in two sections. The first section relates to the unit choice decisions, while the second section relates to the topic choices within each unit.

### Factors affecting unit decisions

Overall, 67.8% of the Heads of Department reported that the decision on the unit choices that would be offered to students was made after discussion with other teachers in their department, while 21.1% of Heads of Department reported that they alone made unit choice decisions. This pattern was similar across the two school types. Overall, it was rare for decisions on unit choice to be made on a class-by-class basis (4.4%). The 6.7% of Heads of Department who selected 'other' explained that they made unit decisions after some form of student consultation. Again, this strategy for unit selection was distributed evenly between the school types.

Table 1 shows how important 11 factors were in deciding the unit choice decisions. Overall, the two most important factors that determined schools' unit topic choice were teacher expertise and student engagement, with over 81% of Heads of Department deeming these factors as important. Other important factors included the availability of paper-based resources and breadth of topics studied across the course. Interestingly, multimedia-based resources were regarded as less important by Heads of Department, as only 10% of them reported them to be important, and 61.1% regarded them as not at all important. The importance of having effective teaching resources for teachers was

**Table 1: Unit decision factors overall and by school type**

Factor	Percentage of participants											
	Important			Somewhat important			Not at all important			Don't know		
	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent
Expertise of the A level teachers within the History Department	82.2	86.8	72.7	15.6	11.3	24.2	1.1	0.0	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Paper-based resources available in the History Department	45.6	56.6	30.3	40.0	32.1	48.5	13.3	9.4	21.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Multimedia resources available in the History Department	10.0	15.1	3.0	27.8	35.8	15.2	61.1	47.2	81.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Resource availability	23.3	32.1	12.1	44.4	47.2	42.4	31.1	18.9	45.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Resource quality	26.7	34.0	18.2	41.1	43.4	36.4	28.9	18.9	42.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Breadth of topics studied across the course	41.1	47.2	36.4	50.0	47.2	48.5	6.7	3.8	12.1	1.1	0.0	3.0
Link between time periods studied across the course	34.4	35.8	36.4	45.6	45.3	42.4	18.9	17.0	21.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Link to the previous educational level	11.1	15.1	6.1	40.0	49.1	27.3	44.4	32.1	60.6	2.2	1.9	3.0
Student engagement with course content	81.1	90.6	66.7	16.7	7.5	30.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Perceived ease of unit content	14.4	20.8	6.1	52.2	54.7	48.5	31.1	20.8	45.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Links to A level History courses previously taught at the school	6.7	9.4	0.0	16.7	22.6	3.0	67.8	58.5	87.9	4.4	5.7	3.0

supported by the finding that resource availability and resource quality was rated as important by approximately a quarter of respondents. The factor that was rated overall as least important was links to A level courses previously taught at the school, with over two thirds of participants rating it as not at all important.

There were differences found between school type with respect to which factors were most important in making unit decisions. Whilst 90.6% of state school Heads of Department deemed student engagement to be important, only 66.7% of independent school Heads of Department thought this was an important factor. To test whether this difference between school type was statistically significant, Fisher's Exact test was run with the categorical variables of *school type* (state versus independent) and *important or other*<sup>1</sup>. Fisher's Exact test was found to be significant ( $p = .018$ ) suggesting that student engagement was significantly more important in state schools, when deciding which units to select. Paper-based resources were also more important for state schools compared to independent schools, with a difference between them of 26.3 percentage points (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .034$ ). Similarly, Heads of Department at state schools perceived resources as being more important in making unit decisions compared to independent schools. At state schools, 32.1% and 34.0% of Heads of Department regarded resource availability and resource quality respectively to be important compared to 12.1% and 18.2% at independent schools. However, the difference between school type for resource availability was only

approaching significance (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .073$ ), and the difference for resource quality was non-significant (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .265$ ). State school Heads of Department also rated ease of course content to be important more than independent school Heads of Department (20.8% versus 6.1%), although again this difference was only marginally significant (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .083$ ). Expertise of the teachers within the department was thought to be important overall, but there was no significant difference found between school types (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .283$ ).

### Factors affecting topic decisions

Overall, 68.9% of the Heads of Department reported that the decision on the topic choices that would be offered to students was decided after discussion with other teachers in their department, while 23.3% of Heads of Department reported that they alone made unit choice decisions. This pattern was again similar across the two school types. It was rare for decisions to be made on a class-by-class basis (7.8%) and this strategy was distributed evenly between state and independent schools.

Table 2 shows how important 11 factors were in deciding the topic choice decisions. Overall, expertise of the A level teachers and student engagement with course content were regarded as the two most important factors in making topic decisions, with over 71% of Heads of Department reporting these factors to be important. Other factors that were highly rated as important by Heads of Department included paper-based resources and breadth of topics studied across the course. Relative to paper-based resources, multimedia-based resources were regarded as less important by Heads of Department, with only 13.3% rating them as important and over half rating them as not at all important. Other

1. The other category comprised of centres that had rated student engagement as *Somewhat important, Not at all important, or Don't know*. T.C. Benton (personal communication, 7 May 2014).

**Table 2: Topic decision factors overall and by school type**

Factor	Percentage of participants											
	Important			Somewhat important			Not at all important			Don't know		
	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent	Overall	State	Independent
Expertise of the A level teachers within the History Department	78.9	86.8	63.6	13.3	5.7	27.3	2.2	1.9	3.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Paper-based resources available in the History Department	42.2	54.7	24.2	38.9	30.2	48.5	13.3	9.4	21.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Multimedia resources available in the History Department	13.3	20.8	3.0	27.8	34.0	15.2	52.2	39.6	72.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Resource availability	22.2	32.1	9.1	43.3	45.3	39.4	28.9	18.9	42.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Resource quality	23.3	34.0	9.1	41.1	41.5	39.4	30.0	18.9	45.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Breadth of topics studied across the course	35.6	37.7	36.4	51.1	54.7	42.4	5.6	1.9	9.1	1.1	0.0	3.0
Link between time periods studied across the course	22.2	24.5	21.2	52.2	52.8	48.5	17.8	15.1	21.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Link to the previous educational level	10.0	13.2	6.1	37.8	47.2	24.2	45.6	34.0	60.6	2.2	1.9	3.0
Student engagement with course content	72.2	83.0	54.5	22.2	11.3	39.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Perceived ease of unit content	11.1	18.9	0.0	52.2	56.6	45.5	30.0	20.8	42.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Links to A level History courses previously taught at the school	4.4	7.5	0.0	20.0	30.2	1.0	62.2	47.2	84.8	4.4	5.7	3.0

factors of less importance to Heads of Department included links to previous A levels taught within the department and links to the previous educational level, both of which were rated as not at all important by over 45% of Heads of Department. The importance of having effective teaching resources for teachers was again supported by the finding that resource availability and resource quality was rated as important by over a fifth of Heads of Department.

This pattern of results by school type was similar to the findings of the unit level decision factors. Although student engagement was reported to be important overall, significantly fewer independent school Heads of Department perceived this factor to be important compared to state Heads of Department (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .008$ ). Interestingly, while at the unit level there was no significant difference found in the perception of the importance of teacher expertise between school types, at the topic level, a significant difference was found (Fisher's Exact,  $p = .020$ ), with Heads of Department at state schools more likely to rate teacher expertise as important compared to independent school Heads of Department. For the factors that related to resources (paper-based resources, multimedia-based resources, resource availability, and resource quality), state school Heads of Department were more likely to rate these as important compared to independent school Heads of Department; for all of these factors there was a difference of 17.8 percentage points or greater. Fisher's Exact test revealed that the differences for all the resource-related factors were significant (paper-based resources,  $p = .018$ ; multimedia-based resources,  $p = .038$ ; resource availability,  $p = .039$ ; resource quality,  $p = .032$ ).

Heads of Department of independent schools perceived factors that were linked to the students' or schools' past experience with qualifications (link to previous level of education, and links to previously taught A level History courses) as not important more often (60.6% and 42.4% respectively) than state Heads of Department (34% and 20.8%). In both cases, Fisher's Exact was significant (link to previous education,  $p = .033$ ; links to previously taught A level History courses,  $p = .001$ ).

Finally, state school Heads of Department also rated ease of course content to be important more than independent school Heads of Department (18.9% versus 0%; Fisher's Exact,  $p = .14$ ).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the importance of 11 factors that History departments might consider in the selection of A level History units and topics. This was in the context of previous research that had found a tendency for schools to select units and topics that covered similar historical periods and geographical locations. The questionnaire data revealed that some factors were more important than others and that in some cases their importance was influenced by school type.

The factor that was rated as most important overall at the unit and topic levels was teacher expertise. However, while there was no statistical difference observed between state and independent schools for this factor at the *unit* level, there was a difference observed at the *topic* level. A similar finding was observed at the topic level in terms of the importance of resources, with state school Heads of Department rating resources as more important compared to independent schools. It is likely that these factors are related. State school Heads of Department perhaps need more assurance that teachers are comfortable with the topic that they have been asked to teach. This consideration may be in response to

the size of the state school departments relative to independent schools (DfE, 2011). The availability and quality of resources, however, may be a mediating factor for teachers that have less experience with particular topics, or in times of curriculum change (Child, Devine & Wilson, 2013). Interestingly, paper-based resources appeared to be more highly valued by the Heads of Department, which contrasts to the increasingly multimedia driven delivery in other subject areas (Bauer, 2005; Hooper & Rieber, 1995). One interpretation is that the focus of History on the analysis of the relation between evidence and the construction of historical accounts (Barton & Levstik, 2003) lends itself to more kinaesthetic, physical representations of sources.

Student engagement was rated overall as the second most important factor in making unit and topic choices. However, it is unclear as to why independent schools were less likely to rate student engagement as important compared to state schools. One potential reason may be that state schools are typically confronted with a more varied student population in terms of cultural background (DfE, 2014). Whilst students play an active role in the construction of their own knowledge and relate this knowledge to their experience, they also inhabit the pedagogical framework constructed by teachers. As part of this 'social' or 'didactic' contract (Brousseau, 1984; Schubauer-Leoni, Bell, Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1989) students rely on the teacher to make decisions related to course content and delivery. For state school teachers, this concern may be at the forefront of their thinking when deciding which topics to teach. However, in the present study, a similar number of state and independent school Heads of Department reported to consulting students before making unit decisions in the present study. Future research is required to determine the process of student consultation for courses where unit choices are available. For example, it may be the case that while some teachers may consult students to merely confirm unit choices, other teachers may be more open to student-level decision making at an early stage. An analysis of these processes may reveal differences in teacher approaches to the initial building of course content in collaboration with students.

Breadth of topic coverage was identified as important for the majority of Heads of Department. This contrasts with the Child et al. (2014) finding that at the unit level, schools are more likely to teach topics that cover similar time periods and subject matter. Teachers may be looking for internal coherence within the qualification, so that maximum depth can be achieved in topic areas that are of interest to students (or that they can identify with, Harris, 2013). This qualification-level coherence could also be in response to teaching time pressures, or the assumption that for students who intend to study History at university, content knowledge is less important than skill development (Smith, 2013). Indeed, in the first year at university, courses focus on key skills which are then applied to historical periods. For example, at the University of Exeter, the three compulsory modules taken by first year undergraduates relate to the development of skills in referencing appropriately, thematic analysis of sources, working independently, and understanding recurring themes in History (University of Exeter, 2014). These core modules are supplemented by modules on particular historical periods and topics.

The desire for within-qualification content coherence observed in the present study does not appear to be matched by the intention to match up the study of topics between GCSE and A level. It appears then that for History, particular historical content knowledge is not a prerequisite for effective transfer to the next educational stage. This is interesting as it contrasts with the new National Curriculum's emphasis on

'chronologically secure knowledge' and recent political rhetoric on "Our island [UK's] story" (Gove, 2010).

The recommendations of the *Smith Report* (2013) outline a qualifications framework for A level History that allows students to cover a sufficient breath of historical eras, but with few limitations on specific topics. In some cases, this 'enforced optionality' approach to A level History qualifications will mean a period of adjustment (Child et al., 2014), with new topics introduced for the first time to meet the demands of the qualification. For example, the newly accredited OCR A level History course (OCR, 2014) comprises four compulsory units based on geographical factors (British and non-British History) and skills development (thematic understanding and a topic-based essay). Within both the British and non-British History units, there are over 21 topics that can be studied, with newly introduced areas of study including *The Rise of Islam (c. 550–750)*, *Japan (1853–1937)*, and *Charlemagne (768–814)*. Future research could explore how students before and after the reforms perceive A level qualifications in terms of their aims and their usefulness for undergraduate study. It would also be interesting to explore the implicit assumption that the skills developed during the study of A level History are largely in isolation to the context provided by the historical period studied. Analysing students' perceptions of the skills they learned studying History may reveal that the topic areas they identified with most were more effective in developing their analytical and written abilities.

#### Acknowledgements

We wish to thank our Research Division colleagues, Tom Benton, Sylvia Green, Tom Bramley, Lucy Chambers and Irenka Suto, and Mike Goddard from OCR, for their helpful advice on this article. We also wish to thank Jo Ireland, Research Division, for her administrative assistance during the study. Finally, we are grateful to the participants for engaging with this research.

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