

# An analysis of the unit and topic choices made in an OCR A level History course

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## Introduction

In England and Wales, the primary qualification for 16–19 year-olds, the A level, is currently undergoing a period of reform. The reforms were initiated by the UK Coalition Government in 2010, with the publication of a White Paper – *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010). In the white paper, the Government outlined that qualifications should “match up to the best internationally in providing a good basis for [future] education and employment” (p.40), while also providing an effective accountability measure of schools and colleges in the future (Ofqual, 2013).

One of the A levels that has been identified as requiring reform is History. History is one of the most popular subjects at A level, ranking as the fifth most taken A level subject, and the sixth most taken AS level subject (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2013). According to recent research by Vidal Rodeiro and Sutch (2013), 17.1% of university applicants, and 13.5% of students overall, take A level History.

Interestingly, and problematically, there is no currently accepted body of knowledge that forms a prerequisite for the study of History at university (Hibbert, 2006). Indeed, this may explain that, while A level History is increasing in popularity (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2013), it is currently not included in the admissions criteria for undergraduate History for 9 out of the 23 Russell Group universities<sup>1</sup>. In the Smith (2013) review, there was little consensus reached on the fundamental History topics that should be taught at A level. Changes that were proposed in the review were limited to confirming that A level candidates should study “a range of topics from a chronological range of at least 200 years” and should “study the History of more than [one] country or state” (p.lxxxviii).

One of the issues in determining appropriate content for A level History is that the study of History can potentially serve a number of purposes. One of the key motivations for studying History is identity formation. As Harris (2013) noted:

*Without an understanding of where we have come from, without knowledge of accepted values and practice, individuals would not know how to operate within society.* (p.408).

Harris (2013) argued that History operates for communities in much the same way as memory does for individuals, in that it facilitates more informed decision making. There is also the challenge of determining which historical topics to target, as each topic will have implications for individuals’ identity formation. Students are likely to inhabit multiple identities stemming from their ethnic background, culture, language and religion (Department for Education and Skills, 2007), and it has been argued that this diversity should be acknowledged in History courses (Harris, 2013). However, political rhetoric related to History education often revolves around the creation of a sense of national identity and

belonging (Harris, 2013). For example, Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove has said that, in the UK, History should focus on “our island story” (Gove, 2010). This movement towards Anglo-centrism has been criticised as potentially neglecting cultural and social History in favour of “chronological big stories” (Bowen, Bradley, Middleton, Mackillop, & Sheldon, 2012, p.126). Similarly, it has been suggested that there is too much focus in the National Curriculum and post-compulsory history qualifications on European History (Bowen *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, Tillbrook (2002) reported that, at one point, 83% of marks awarded by one examination board for A level History were for the study of only twenty years of German History.

Given the potential of History qualifications to instil knowledge on a wide variety of topics, it is perhaps unsurprising that schools are offered flexibility in the topics they cover. For example, in the current OCR A level (specification A), students can take one of 16 modular routes through the course, and a range of different topics within each module can be taught (see Table 1 for the current historical coverage of the OCR A level). Other examination boards offer fewer options in terms of unit choice, but a greater range of topic options within units. For example, the AQA AS level comprises two compulsory units. One unit has 14 topic options, while the second unit has 18 topic options. Similarly, the WJEC A2 level qualification comprises two compulsory units (one coursework and one examination). For the coursework unit, 9 topic options are offered, while 36 topic options are offered for the examination unit.

## Aims of the current study

This study aimed to explore how schools that offer A level History use the options available to them, in terms of unit and topic choices. Previously it has not been possible to analyse data on the content choices that schools make in History qualifications. However, the movement to computer-based marking within part of the OCR A level, and the concomitant increase in the amount of detailed data that is automatically collected, provided an opportunity to examine the topic choices schools make, at the levels of the unit and the question.

Specifically, this study aimed to determine which units and topics were most commonly taught. It was intended that this data would help establish how optionality within A level History is used, and whether it meets the desired purpose of exposing students to a broad range of historical periods and topics. To investigate further how different schools may utilise the optionality available to them, comparisons were made between different school types (state vs independent), and schools with different levels of performance. It has been found that the uptake of A level History varies according to school type. Burn and Harris (2012) found that, in a sample of 403 centres, 31–40% of ‘new’ academies, 21–30% of grammar schools, 11–20% of comprehensive and independent schools, and less than 10% of ‘old’ academies offered

1. Based on the ‘V100’ standard BA History course (see [ucas.com](http://ucas.com) for further details).

**Table 1: Current scope of OCR A level History (specification A)**

Year	Middle East	China	USA	Europe	Britain
1000-1020					
1020-1040					
1040-1060					
1060-1080					
1080-1100					
1100-1120					
1120-1140					
1140-1160					
1160-1180					
1180-1200					
1200-1220					
1220-1240					
1240-1260					
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1720-1740					
1740-1760					
1760-1780					
1780-1800					
1800-1820					
1820-1840					
1840-1860					
1860-1880					
1880-1900					
1900-1920					
1920-1940					
1940-1960					
1960-1980					
1980-2000					
2000-present					

AS level History. A second aim of the current study was to establish whether there were also differences qualitatively in the A level History content typically taught to students from different school types.

## Method

There were two phases to this study. First, an analysis of candidates' topic choices for one AS level History unit (F961 in June 2013) was conducted. This unit was marked using Scoris, the new online marking platform for OCR examinations, which allowed data at question level to be captured and analysed. For this unit, schools have a choice of two unit options relating to broad historical periods: Option A, Medieval and Early Modern; or Option B, Modern. Within each unit option there is then a choice of six separate *topics* that may be taught. There is a separate exam paper for each unit option, with students required to answer any 2 questions from a choice of 18 (3 from each topic).

Secondly, a questionnaire was developed that asked heads of History departments about their schools' A level History unit and topic choices across the entire A level History course. This was with the intention of gathering data on the modules where online methods of marking were yet to be introduced. The method of data collection and analysis for both phases is provided below.

### Database collation and analysis

The data for analysis of unit F961 was taken from a number of different sources. The information on the unit(s) offered<sup>2</sup> by schools and the topics and questions answered by students in the examinations was downloaded from OCR's internal databases. The unit option and topic choices were analysed by school type and by school attainment level. This data was merged with the National Centre Number database to get information on the school type. To obtain a measure of school attainment, the data was merged with the National Pupil Database to

2. By 'offered' we mean that at least one of the students in any one centre took an examination in that unit.

get data on the performance of all students within each school.

For the analysis by school type, schools were grouped into two categories: state (including comprehensives, academies, grammar schools, secondary modern schools and further education, tertiary and sixth form colleges) and independent schools. It was not possible to have a finer grouping of school type because of the low numbers of schools in some categories. Schools categorised as 'other' or 'unidentified' were excluded from the analysis. There were 240 centres categorised as state schools, totalling 5,676 students, and 123 centres categorised as independent schools, totalling 2,439 students.

For the analysis by school attainment level, centres were categorised into one of three groups (low, medium, and high attaining) by their mean A level score in June 2013 across all subjects and all examination boards. This was calculated by assigning a number to each A level grade (A\*=6, A=5, etc.) and taking the mean of all A levels taken by all of the students at the school. There were 117 schools within each of the attainment categories. Low attaining schools had a mean A level score of 2.86, medium attaining schools had a mean A level score of 3.49, and high attaining schools had a mean A level score of 4.32.

A handful of centres were found to have ten or fewer A level results. With so few results the overall mean may not be very reliable as a measure of attainment so these centres were excluded from the analysis.

### Questionnaire

#### Participants

Centres with candidates who took OCR A level History in June 2013 were identified using the internal database systems at Cambridge Assessment. Each centre was 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 web link. For their time, they were offered the opportunity to enter into a prize draw.

Overall, 638 heads of department were contacted either to their direct email or to a general school email address. Ninety heads of department

returned the questionnaire (a return rate of 14%). Overall, 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 team for History. The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section asked participants for details of their centre and teaching experience. The second section asked about the *unit* options that centres offered to their students, and probed the reasons for these choices. The third section was similar to the second section, but asked participants about *topic* choices within units. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to add any further comments.

#### Piloting

Before the questionnaire was made live, 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, the final version was sent to the main cohort.

## Results

### Analysis of candidates' unit and topic choices

#### Unit choice

For Unit F961, there is a choice of two options that schools can offer: F961A – Medieval and Early Modern 1035–1642; and F961B – Modern 1783–1994. Between the two school types, a similar proportion of schools offered option A (47.5% state, 46.3% independent), while the proportion of schools that offered option A was also similar between the three school attainment groups (44.4% high attaining, 47.9% medium attaining, 48.7% low attaining).

Option B was offered less often in independent schools (39.8%) compared to state schools (46.7%), and also in high attaining schools (39.3%) compared to medium attaining (46.2%) or low attaining (48.7%) schools.

Most centres offered only one of these units to their students but some schools (8.5%) offered both. This was more common in independent schools (13.8%) compared to state schools (5.8%). High attaining schools were also more likely to offer both options compared to state or lower attaining schools (16.2% high attaining, 6% medium attaining, and 2% low attaining).

#### Topic choice

For both unit options, in the exams students were required to answer 2 questions from a choice of 18. Each of the six topics had three questions each. Although students are allowed to mix questions from different topics, it was found that the vast majority (97.2% for option A and 98.6% for option B) answered questions from one topic only. To simplify the analysis, students who answered questions from more than one topic were removed from the data.

There were 30 centres which had some students answering questions from one topic and some from another topic, suggesting that more than one topic had been taught in the school. However, it was still the case that the vast majority of students in these schools did not mix topics in their exam papers. It is possible that these schools taught the topics to different classes.

It is therefore assumed that choice of topic is made at the school level, and students are usually taught one topic only. The following analysis looks at the choice of topic by school type and school attainment group.

Figure 1 presents the percentage of schools choosing each topic for the two options. Schools are counted twice if questions from more than one topic were answered by their students. Amongst schools, *Henry VIII to Mary I* was the most popular for option A (chosen by around 30%), followed by *Lancastrians, Yorkists and Tudors* and *England under Elizabeth I*. For option B, *From Pitt to Peel* was the most popular choice (26.6%), followed by *Domestic developments and Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)*. Results were similar when the raw number of students answering questions from each topic was analysed.

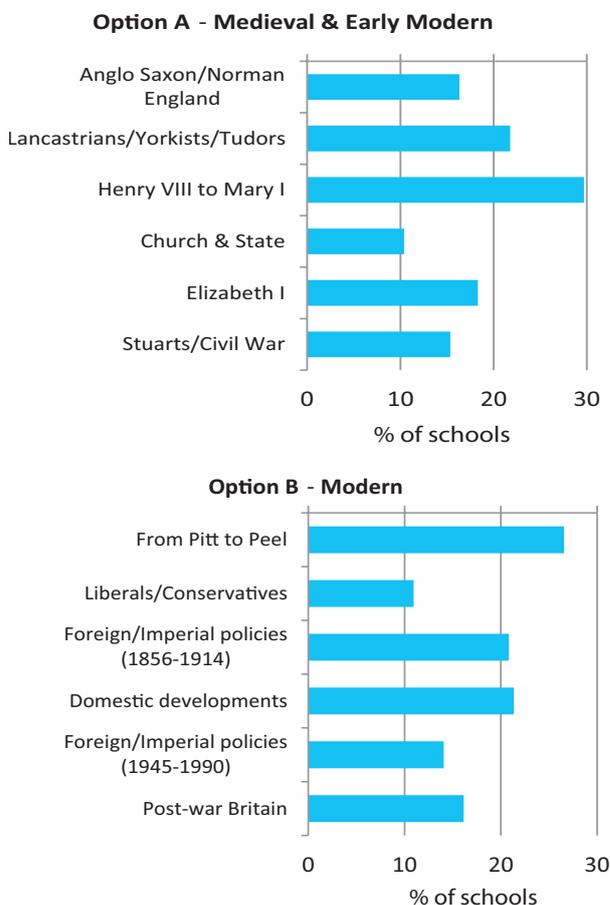


Figure 1: Percentage of schools choosing each topic

### Topic choice by school type

The first stage of this analysis determined the percentage of schools choosing each topic by school type for options A and B (see Figures 2 and 3 respectively). The statistical significance of any differences between groups in topic choice was measured in two different ways. When comparing school types, an independent samples Z-test of differences in proportions was used. However, this method can only be used to compare two different groups, so for differences between school attainment groups a Chi-square frequency test was used.

There were no large differences in topic choice observed between school types, with both types most likely to choose *Henry VIII to Mary I*, followed by *Lancastrians, Yorkists and Tudors*. Independent schools were more likely to choose *Anglo Saxon/Norman England* and less likely to choose *England under Elizabeth I* compared to state schools. However, none of the differences in proportions choosing each topic between state and independent schools were statistically significant.

For option B there were some more substantial differences. State schools were most likely to choose *Domestic developments* or *From Pitt to Peel*, whereas independent schools were most likely to choose *Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)* or *From Pitt to Peel*. Two of the differences between school types were to a statistically significant level. These were 31.8% of independent schools choosing *Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)*, compared with 13.5% of state schools (the probability that this difference could have occurred by chance,  $p=.003$ ) and 26.2% of state schools choosing *Domestic developments*, compared with 12.1% of independent schools ( $p=.024$ ).

### Topic choice by school attainment

Figures 4 and 5 present the percentage of schools within each school attainment group choosing each topic.

High attaining schools were less likely to choose *Lancastrians, Yorkists and Tudors* than lower attaining schools. They were more likely to choose *Church and State*. Low attaining schools were less likely to choose *Henry VIII to Mary I* than higher attaining schools. However, none of these differences were statistically significant.

There were some substantial differences in option B. Low attaining schools were much less likely to choose *From Pitt to Peel* than medium or high attaining schools. They were also less likely to choose *Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)* and more likely to choose *Domestic developments*. High attaining schools were much less likely to choose *Domestic developments* and more likely to choose *Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)* or *Liberals and Conservatives*.

Two of these differences were statistically significant. Just 8.2% of low attaining schools chose *Foreign & Imperial policies (1856–1914)* compared to 17.7% of medium and 32.3% of high attaining schools ( $p<.005$ ). In contrast, 32.8% of low attaining schools chose *Domestic developments*, compared to 21.0% of medium and 12.9% of high attaining schools ( $p<.005$ ).

### Topic choice by school type and school attainment

Finally, an analysis of topic choice by attainment level within each school type was undertaken, to discover whether any of the differences observed were to do with the school type or the school attainment level or both. Using logistic regression, it was possible to investigate if either school type (state or independent) or school attainment (mean A level score) were significant predictors of whether each topic was taught or not.

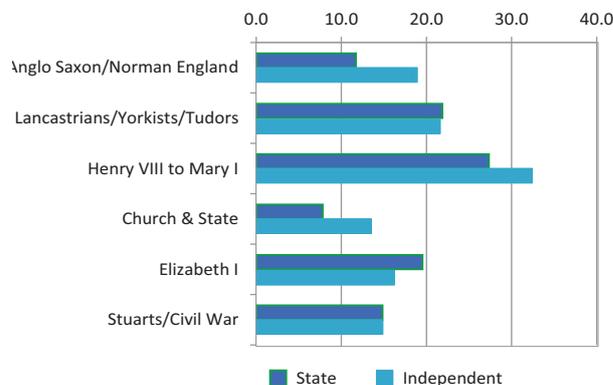


Figure 2: Percentage of schools choosing each topic by school type (option A)

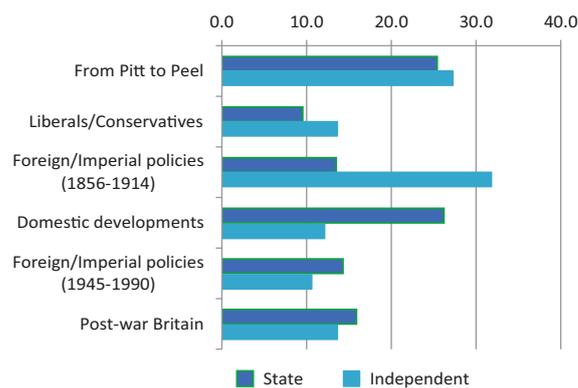


Figure 3: Percentage of schools choosing each topic by school type (option B)

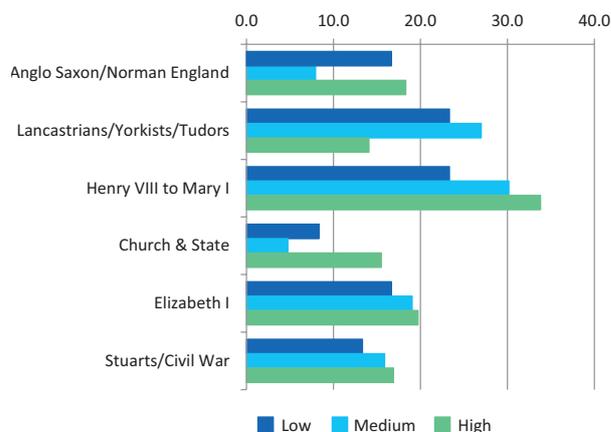


Figure 4: Percentage of schools choosing each topic by school attainment (option A)

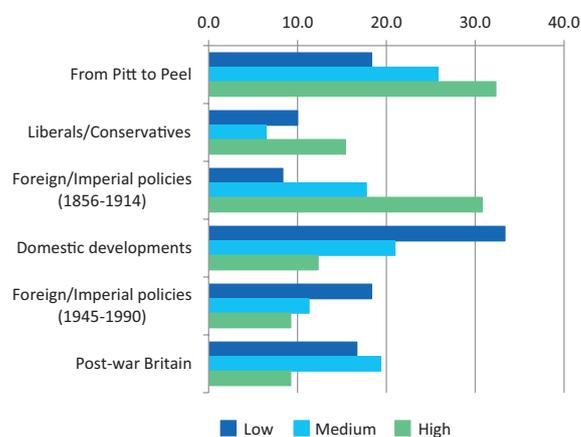


Figure 5: Percentage of schools choosing each topic by school attainment (option B)

**Table 2: Logistic regression model summaries for each unit topic**

Component	Topic	Model summary		Variables in equation			
		Chi-square <sup>3</sup>	Nagelkerke <sup>4</sup>	School attainment		School type	
				Wald <sup>5</sup>	Exp <sup>6</sup>	Wald	Exp
F961A	From Anglo Saxon to Norman England (1035–1087)	3.396	.032	.650	.905	2.342	2.371
	Lancastrians, Yorkists and Tudors (1450–1509)	1.392	.011	1.313	.678	.300	1.307
	Henry VIII to Mary I (1509–1558)	2.596	.022	2.638	1.658	.525	.725
	Church and State (1529–1589)	2.578	.028	.127	1.178	.175	4.388
	England Under Elizabeth I (1558–1603)	.137	.001	.005	.943	.189	3.476
	The Early Stuarts and the Origins of the Civil War (1603–1642)	1.125	.010	1.050	1.496	.258	.750
F961B	From Pitt to Peel (1783–1846)	6.246*	.049	5.732**	2.084	.900	.665
	Liberals and Conservatives (1846–1895)	3.472	.038	2.974	2.061	.176	.780
	Foreign and Imperial policies (1856–1914)	9.991*	.084	1.004	.316	4.236**	2.492
	Domestic developments (1918–1951)	12.138*	.098	6.559**	.429	.704	.672
	Foreign and Imperial policies (1945–1990)	.890	.009	.748	.719	.008	1.050
	Post-War Britain (1951–1994)	1.382	.013	1.118	.685	.004	1.033

\* Overall model significant predictor of topic choice ( $p < .05$ ) \*\* Individual predictor significant predictor within model ( $p < .05$ )

3. If the Chi-square is significant, it indicates that the model with the predictor variables included is a significantly better predictor than using the constant alone.
4. Gives an estimate for the proportion of the total variance that can be explained by the model.
5. Gives a Chi-square value that tests the unique contribution of each predictor.
6. Represents the change in odds of the topic being chosen by a centre, when a unit change of 1 occurs. For example for the topic *From Pitt to Peel (1783–1846)*, centres that had an average A level grade of B were approximately twice as likely to choose this topic than centres that had an mean A level grade of C ( $Exp = 2.084$ ).

Twelve logistic regression analyses were run, using the enter method; one separate regression for each topic in Units F961A and B. For each regression, the outcome variable was dichotomous (topic taught – yes or no). The two predictor variables were the categorical variable school type (state or independent), and the continuous variable centre mean A level performance.

Table 2 shows the overall significance of each model, and the strength of each predictor variable within each model. Overall, the models accounted for less than 10% of the total variance, suggesting generally the models were not strong predictors. However, there were three topics where the regression model was a significantly better predictor than just using the overall proportion (*From Pitt to Peel, 1783–1846; Foreign and Imperial policies, 1856–1914; and Domestic developments, 1918–1951*). All of these topics were within Unit F961B. For the topic *From Pitt to Peel*, a one grade increase in mean A level performance doubled the likelihood that centres would teach this topic area ( $Exp = 2.084$ ). However, school type did not have any significant influence on this topic choice. For the topic *Foreign and Imperial policies (1856–1914)*, independent schools were more than twice as likely to teach this topic compared to state schools ( $Exp = 2.492$ ), although mean A level performance was not a significant predictor. Finally, for the topic *Domestic developments*, a one grade increase in mean A level performance reduced the likelihood that centres would teach this topic area by more than half ( $Exp = .429$ ). No significant interaction effects were found in any of the models.

### Questionnaire findings

As full information on the topic choices was only available for one unit, the questionnaire allowed data to be gathered on choices made across the entire A level History course, for a sub-set of centres. The questionnaire findings are reported in two sections. The first section analyses the *unit* choices that were offered by schools at AS and A level.

The second section analyses the *topics* within each AS and A level unit that were taught by schools.

### Unit choices

The heads of department were asked to report which AS and A2 History unit combinations they offered to students. There were eight possible unit combinations at AS level, and two possible unit combinations at A2 level. The percentage of schools that offered each unit combination is provided in Tables 3 and 4.

The unit combinations that included a Modern History element (combinations 2, 4, 6 and 8 in Table 3) were generally the most commonly offered to students. At AS level the three most popular overall unit combinations (2, 4 and 8) included at least one unit that focused on Modern History, while the two most popular unit combinations included *only* Modern History units. At A2 level, again the unit combination that included a Modern History unit was the most commonly chosen, with over four out of five schools offering it to students.

There were some differences noted between different school types. At AS level there was a higher percentage of independent schools that offered unit combinations that comprised Medieval and Early Modern History units exclusively (combinations 1 and 5 in Table 3), with approximately a quarter of independent schools offering each combination, compared to less than a tenth of state schools. In this sample, state schools were also more likely to offer a unit combination that comprised one Medieval and Early Modern unit and one Modern unit (combinations 2, 3, 6 and 7), although this was not common. For example, 28.3% of state schools offered AS level unit combination 2, while only 9.1% of independent schools did so.

Independent schools were more likely to offer more than one unit combination to students. At AS level, 27.3% of independent schools offered more than one unit, compared to only 13.2% of state schools. At A2 level, 21.2% of independent schools offered more than one unit combination, compared to only 1.9% of state schools.

**Table 3: Unit combinations at AS level offered by different school type**

Unit Combination	Unit Number/Name								Overall number of schools that offer unit combination (%)	Number of <b>state</b> schools that offer unit combination (% of total state schools)	Number of <b>independent</b> schools that offer unit combination (% of total independent schools)
	F961 – British Period History Studies		F962 – European & World History Period Studies		F963 – British History Enquiries		F964 – European & World History Enquiries				
	A – Medieval & Early Modern	B – Modern & Early Modern	A – Medieval & Early Modern	B – Modern & Early Modern	A – Medieval & Early Modern	B – Modern & Early Modern	A – Medieval & Early Modern	B – Modern & Early Modern			
1	✓							✓	13 (14.4)	5 (9.4)	8 (24.2)
2	✓							✓	19 (21.1)	15 (28.3)	3 (9.1)
3		✓						✓	5 (5.6)	2 (3.8)	3 (9.1)
4		✓						✓	30 (33.3)	13 (24.5)	16 (48.5)
5			✓		✓				10 (11.1)	2 (3.8)	16 (48.5)
6			✓					✓	4 (4.4)	2 (3.8)	8 (24.2)
7				✓	✓				10 (11.1)	7 (13.2)	3 (9.1)
8				✓				✓	24 (26.7)	17 (32.1)	6 (18.2)

**Table 4: Unit combinations at A2 level offered by different school type**

Unit Combination	Unit Number/Name		Overall number of schools that offer unit combination (%)	Number of <b>state</b> schools that offer unit combination (% of total state schools)	Number of <b>independent</b> schools that offer unit combination (% of total independent schools)
	F965 – Historical Interpretations & Investigations	F966 – Historical Themes A – Medieval & Early Modern B – Modern			
1	✓	✓	25 (27.8%)	13 (24.5)	12 (36.4)
2	✓	✓	73 (81.1%)	41 (77.4)	28 (84.8)

### Topic choices

The heads of department were asked to report which AS and A2 History topics their centres offered to at least one class of students. These data were analysed to gather information on the popularity of topics across the entire course, and the most popular topics encapsulated within each unit. Table 5 lists the top 18 topic choices across all the units (out of a total of 54 choices), including the unit number, and the period of history it is linked to.

Of the top 18 topic choices within units, 13 of them were from a Modern unit. The most popular Modern units focused primarily on European History, specifically Russia (*Russian Dictatorship, 1855–1992; From Autocracy to Communism: Russia, 1894–1941*), Germany (*Dictatorship and Democracy in Germany, 1933–1963; Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany, 1919–1963*) and topics related to the two World Wars (*Churchill, 1920–1945; The Challenge of German Nationalism, 1789–1919*). The most popular non-European History topics focus primarily on the USA, both domestically (*Civil Rights in the USA, 1865–1992; The Origins of the American Civil War, 1820–1861*) and in respect to foreign relations (*The USA and the Cold War in Asia, 1945–1975*).

The three most popular topics offered within Medieval and Early Modern units were all related to the House of Tudor (*Mid-Tudor Crises, 1536–1569; Rebellion and Disorder under the Tudors, 1485–1603; and Henry VIII to Mary I, 1509–1558*).

### Discussion

The current study intended to investigate the scope of one A level History course, and aimed to understand how schools utilised the optionality available to them. The optionality offered by examination boards at A level History is likely to be in response to the potential for History courses to serve multiple purposes including: covering content across a wide time span; the imperative to prepare students for later study; and the potential for History to aid students' identity formation (Harris, 2013).

The study used statistical information on students' question choices derived from Cambridge Assessment's internal databases, and a questionnaire sent to heads of History departments. Taken together, these two methods of data collection allowed school level analyses across the full scope of the course.

There have been a number of claims which argue that there is too great a focus on 20th century History in UK schools (Fitzgerald & Hodgkinson, 1994; Lang, 1990). Approximately 60% of centres sampled taught either a combination of F961B and F964B or F962B and F963B; the two unit combinations which permit Modern History to be studied exclusively. While, in this qualification at least, choosing a Modern History option does not necessarily mean having to select a 20th century topic, in practice the most popular topic choices were based in the 20th century. Furthermore, whilst the qualification structure permits schools to teach students a

Table 5: Top 18 topic choices offered by centres

Rank	Topic	Unit		Historical period		% Schools teaching that topic	% Schools teaching associated unit who teach that topic
		Code	Name	Medieval & Early Modern	Modern		
1	Russian Dictatorship (1855–1992)	F966	Historical Themes		✓	35.6	45.7
2	Civil Rights in the USA (1865–1992)	F966	Historical Themes		✓	28.9	37.1
3	Dictatorship & Democracy in Germany (1933–1963)	F964	European & World History Enquiries		✓	18.9	35.4
4	Mid-Tudor Crises (1536–1569)	F963	British History Enquiries	✓		14.4	65.0
5=	Churchill (1920–1945)	F963	British History Enquiries		✓	13.3	44.4
5=	Rebellion & Disorder Under the Tudors (1485–1603)	F966	Historical Themes	✓		13.3	50.0
7=	Henry VIII to Mary I (1509–1558)	F961	British History Study Periods	✓		11.1	37.0
7=	Democracy & Dictatorship in Germany (1919–1963)	F962	European & World History Period Studies		✓	11.1	25.6
7=	The Origins & Causes of the French Revolution (1774–1795)	F964	European & World History Enquiries		✓	11.1	20.8
10=	From Pitt to Peel (1783–1846)	F961	British History Study Periods		✓	10.0	26.5
10=	From Autocracy to Communism: Russia (1894–1941)	F962	European & World History Period Studies		✓	10.0	23.1
10=	The Origins of the American Civil War (1820–1861)	F964	European & World History Enquiries		✓	10.0	18.8
10=	The USA & the Cold War in Asia (1945–1975)	F964	European & World History Enquiries		✓	10.0	18.8
14	The Age of Gladstone & Disraeli (1865–1886)	F963	British History Enquiries		✓	8.9	29.6
15=	The First Crusade & Crusader States (1073–1130)	F964	European & World History Enquiries	✓		7.8	58.3
15=	The German Reformation (1517–1555)	F964	European & World History Enquiries	✓		7.8	58.3
15=	The Challenge of German Nationalism (1789–1919)	F966	Historical Themes		✓	7.8	10.0
15=	The Changing Nature of Warfare (1792–1945)	F966	Historical Themes		✓	7.8	10.0

combination of Modern and Medieval History, this is taken up by the minority. In the statistical analysis of Units F961A and B, independent schools were more likely than state schools to have students that answered questions on topics related to both Modern and Medieval and Early Modern periods (although this was not common). This may be due to the additional resources independent schools may have, which allow them to offer different routes through the course. Interestingly, however, the questionnaire analyses revealed both school types favoured units that matched in terms of the period of History studied (e.g. two Modern History units). The two most popular unit combinations at AS level, and the most popular unit combination at A2 level, studied Modern History exclusively.

History courses have also been criticised for their perceived focus on British and European History (Bowen *et al.*, 2012; Evans, 2011; Tillbrook, 2002). The specification investigated in the current study attempts to negate this criticism by incorporating units that cover European and World History. However, the majority of the 23 topics within these units primarily focus on Europe. Non-European topics include the following:

- *Civil Rights in the USA (1865–1992)*
- *The USA in the 19th Century: Westward Expansion and the Civil War (1803–1890)*
- *Crisis in the Middle East (1948–2003)*
- *The Rise of China (1911–1990)*

- *The Origins of the American Civil War (1820–1861)*
- *The USA and the Cold War in Asia (1945–1975)*

The approach to unit and topic selection primarily observed in the study, where students cover increasing amounts about shorter periods of time, is referred to as the 'bore-hole effect' (Fisher, 1995), and has been identified as problematic due to its potential to narrow the scope of History. Indeed, the Smith (2013) review suggested that A level History students should study topics covering at least a 200-year period. The data collected in this project suggest that, in general, schools seek to teach in-depth within a historical era, rather than breadth over different historical periods. For example, the most popular unit combination comprised F961B and F964B, which was taught by one-third of the participants' schools. Within this combination, the most popular topics were *From Pitt to Peel (1783–1846)* and *Dictatorship and Democracy in Germany (1933–1963)*. Students that were taught both these topics studied a period of 180 years. Furthermore, for the second most popular combination observed in the present study (comprising units F962B and F963B), the most popular topics were *Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany (1919–1963)* and *The Age of Gladstone and Disraeli (1865–1886)* respectively, covering a period of only 98 years. Therefore, it is currently possible – and common – within this specification for students not to meet the suggestions made by Smith (2013). As such, whilst the specification does not promote the 'bore-hole effect', it is questionable

whether the optionality promoted by the specification meets the objectives underpinning the course.

The question that arises here is whether a broad coverage of historical periods, and a broad geographical context is indeed required, either for students to make a successful transition to university, or for future life and employment. Unit or topic choice in A level History is not currently a factor to differentiate between applications for university. As mentioned in the introduction, 9 of the 23 Russell Group universities which offer undergraduate degrees in History do not stipulate that applicants must have an A level in History. It is likely that the *skills* developed as part of the study of A level History are what is valued most by admissions tutors (Suto, 2012), as indicated by the fact that History is one of the most popular (Vidal Rodeiro & Sutch, 2013) and most useful (Russell Group, 2013; Suto, 2012) subjects for university applicants.

## Conclusions and implications

The teaching of History, and History qualifications, are influenced by factors related to the personal, political and academic landscape (Harris, 2013), in addition to factors at the level of the school and classroom. The current study was a first attempt to determine the choices centres make, in relation to an A level History course.

In response to the potential for History courses to serve multiple purposes, an optionality approach to History qualifications has been adopted. This study has found that centres appear to favour particular historical periods and topics over others, and that these preferences are, at least in part, determined by the attainment level of schools, and the type of school. Given these observed differences, further research is required to investigate how and why centres prefer certain historical topics over others. Teachers may select topics based on their personal areas of interest or expertise (Bowen *et al.*, 2012). Topic selection may also be guided by a desire for overlap between the current course content, and course content students had covered in previous qualifications. This course coherence may be seen as beneficial to students, as they have a platform of knowledge from which new information and understanding can be achieved. However, it could be problematic if students persist with academic behaviours that are not suitable for the new educational level (Conley, 2010). Furthermore, teachers may be influenced in their History topic choices by the availability (or quality) of curriculum support resources (Child, Devine, & Wilson, 2013; Devine & Wilson, 2013; Wilson & Devine, 2013a, 2013b).

A second avenue for future investigation concerns whether curriculum coherence across the different stages of education can be achieved in the study of History. If historical breadth is not currently being imparted through an optionality approach to A level History, a question arises about whether optionality should indeed be reduced. However, it is currently unclear as to what the appropriate History content at A level would be (Hibbert, 2006). An area for further study may be whether there is value in studying similar subjects at different stages of education (primary, early secondary, GCSE etc.), or whether optionality in History is utilised and valued differently by different populations taking History qualifications (e.g. different ethnic or socio-economic groups).

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