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An investigation of the motivations underpinning student and teacher topic choice in History qualifications

Simon Child, Ellie Darlington & Tim Gill

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Research Division
Cambridge Assessment
1 Regent Street
Cambridge
CB2 1GG

Child.S@cambridgeassessment.org.uk

www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

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Abstract

History is one of the most popular subjects in compulsory and Further Education in the UK, ranking as the fifth most taken A level subject, and the sixth most taken AS level subject (Joint Council for Qualifications, 2013). The study of History can serve several purposes including identity formation (Harris, 2013), the learning of national or democratic values (Barton & Levstik, 2004), and preparation for university (Smith, 2013). Interestingly, there is no currently accepted body of knowledge that forms a prerequisite for the study of History at university (Hibbert, 2006). This lack of consensus has resulted in examination boards offering choice within the structure and content of their History qualifications. However, it has yet to be investigated how this curricular approach is utilised by different school and college types and their students. This paper presents statistical and questionnaire data related to Further Education qualifications in History to investigate two research questions:

1. What historical topics do students study in History qualifications?
2. What motivations underpin the selection of these topics?

First, a statistical analysis was conducted of candidates' unit and topic choices for AS and A level History qualifications offered by a national exam board. The analysis was split by school type (state and independent) and school attainment (low, medium and high). Secondly, a questionnaire was developed that asked heads of History departments ($N = 89$) about their schools' A level History unit and topic choices, and their motivations for making these selections.

There was a preference for modern History topics, compared to medieval and early modern History topics, with 60% of schools sampled studying modern History *exclusively*, compared to 25% for medieval and early modern. The two most common motivating factors underlying teachers' choices of units and topics were found to be teacher expertise and perceived student engagement. Fisher's Exact analyses revealed that these motivations were deemed significantly more important by state school teachers, compared to independent school teachers, in guiding their topic selections (both $p < .05$). There were also statistically significant differences between school types in terms of how their heads of department rated the importance of the curriculum support offered via resources.

These findings are discussed with reference to the recent qualifications reform in the UK, which includes attempts to increase historical breadth studied within the school curriculum. Implications of the proposed reforms in relation to History students' transitions from school to university are also discussed.