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Trends in History in UK Higher Education

History UK, June 2022

This report is an edited and shortened version of a research consultancy report prepared by Gareth Brown and David Harvie for History UK in February 2022.

The original report is available from History UK on request.

The research and this report were shaped by a History UK working group: Yolana Pringle (lead), Sara Barker, Sarah Holland, Daniel Laqua, Antonio Sennis, Elizabeth Tingle, Manuela Williams and Jamie Wood.

Contents

Executive summary

News of staff cuts and course closures at a number of universities have contributed to a fear that history is under threat, particularly in post-92 universities. Yet there is little publicly available or accessible data that can provide a more detailed picture for history and support advocacy for the subject.

In September 2021, History UK commissioned a research study to scope trends and future directions in history provision, and to help build an evidence base that is accessible for historians. The resulting report, *Trends in History in UK Higher Education,* investigates UK-wide trends in university enrolments, with a focus on history undergraduate programmes, and including recruitment and outcomes.

Our report shows that:

The number of history undergraduates fell by 17% between 2014/15 and 2019/20, and the number of history postgraduates fell by 16%.

- This fall is against a backdrop of rising undergraduate numbers in UK universities, which have grown by 6% between 2014/15 and 2019/20 (and by 23% since 2000/01). The growth in postgraduate numbers has been even greater: they have expanded by 19% between 2014/15 and 2019/20 and by 58% since 2000/01.

The decline in history numbers has been cushioned by students enrolled on other degrees taking history modules as part of their degree.

- Overall, full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolments for history fell by 2% between 2014/15 and 2019/20. This is in contrast to a rise of FTEs across all subjects of 12%.

Scotland has fared better than England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

- For example, history FTE enrolments grew by 10% in Scotland between 2014/15 and 2019/20.

A little over 100 universities are recorded as offering some history provision, but this number is not stable.

- Some institutions have closed history departments in the past few years, including Sunderland, Kingston, and London South Bank. Others, including Goldsmiths and Roehampton, remain under threat.

History provision is highly concentrated in the largest institutions, and this seems set to increase.

- Almost half of all history students (by FTE) are taught in the top quintile (by market share) of institutions that offer history. This share of history FTEs has grown gradually by 3%, from 44% to 47% between 2014/15 and 2019/20. It is not clear, however, whether this increase is a consequence of the lifting of the student numbers cap in 2015/16; there was no sudden increase between 2014/15 and 2015/16.

There is considerable variability – growth and contraction – of history enrolments across institutions.

- While in some institutions, history FTE enrolments rose by as much as 131% between 2014/15 and 2019/20, in others, they have declined by as much as 67% (excluding those institutions that have decided to close history). Despite this, the top quintile of institutions has remained stable: all but four members of 2014/15's top quintile were still in the top 20% in 2019/20.

There is a strong positive correlation between the change in an institution's history FTE numbers and the change in its overall FTE numbers.

- History departments in institutions that have grown their student numbers since 2014/15 have – with few exceptions – fared better than history departments in shrinking institutions. There are of course exceptions to this, especially in instances where a senior management team has made a 'strategic decision' to disinvest from history to facilitate the expansion of other subjects.

History departments in Russell Group universities have also fared better than those in post-92 or non-Russell Group pre-92 institutions.

- This tendency is in addition to the effect produced by the fact that Russell Group overall recruitment has been stronger.

There is no clear correlation between a decline in A-level history uptake and undergraduate history enrolments.

- Students gaining an A-level in history declined between 2015 and 2018, with those achieving higher grades (A*, A, B, C) also declining, by 13-15%. This offers few insights into the decline of history undergraduate numbers, however, as not all universities require students to have studied history at A-level. Historians may want to reflect on whether studying history at A-level now acts as a check on recruitment in a sector that is placing increasing emphasis on inter- and multi-disciplinarity.

There is uncertainty about the effect of the government's 'graduate earnings' discourse on student recruitment.

- Pronouncements on 'dead-end courses' and the reduction by 50% of funding for 'high-cost' subjects in performing and creative arts and media studies have contributed to a sense that the arts and humanities are under attack. It is too early for clear evidence of how, if at all, these are shaping student choices, but optimism among academics is thin on the ground.

Available data on graduate earnings instead suggests that history graduates enjoy lifetime earnings and earnings at different age points that are similar, and often greater, than graduates of many STEM subjects.

- Analysis of the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data set suggests that women history graduates can expect lifetime earnings very similar to that of computing graduates and, for men, to physics graduates.

Introduction

News of staff cuts and course closures at a number of universities have contributed to a fear that history is under threat, particularly in post-92 universities. Yet there is little publicly accessible data that can provide a more detailed picture for history and support advocacy for the subject.

In September 2021, History UK commissioned a research study on undergraduate history providers to build an evidence base relating to current trends and future directions of history provision. This is in line with History UK's mission as an independent body monitoring, promoting, and advocating for history in UK higher education.

The terms of reference were to:

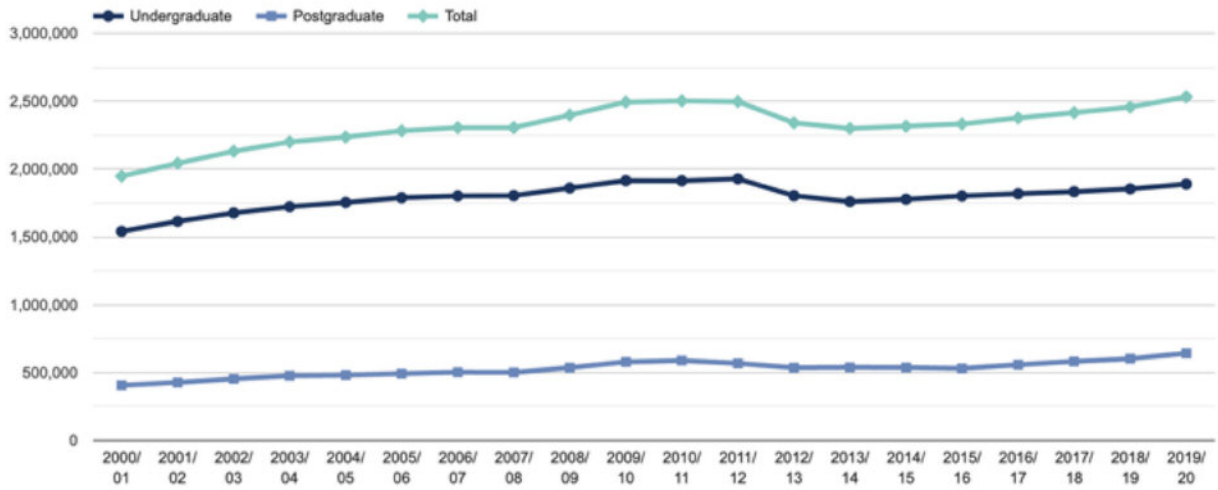
- Scope the availability, accessibility, and uses of relevant quantitative and qualitative data relating to history provision in UK higher education over the last five years.
- Collate and analyse quantitative data on history and history joint-honours degree programmes.
- Provide guidance on how history staff can be enabled to understand, use, and respond to this data.

The resulting report investigates UK-wide trends in university enrolments, with a focus on history, including recruitment and outcomes. Much of this is quantitative: it draws predominantly on data for the years 2014/15-2019/20 published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Some data for 2020/21 was published in January 2022, too late for inclusion in the report. The report also offers a qualitative analysis of the challenges facing historians across UK HE as a starting point for future work.

History enrolments

The number of students studying in UK universities has grown by 30 percent over the past two decades, from fewer than 2 million enrolled students in 2000/01 to more than 2½ million in 2019/20 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Students enrolled in UK universities, 2000/01–2019/20.
Source: HESA, available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.



These data include both full-time and part-time students. In 2019/20 there were 2,015,320 of the former and 517,065 of the latter. [1]

Full-time equivalent (FTE) data, which gives 'a picture of the overall student load' (HESA), and so more accurately captures a university's associated student income, also show a rise in enrolments (Table 1).

Table 1. HE Student (FTE) enrolments, by region – total.
Source: HESA, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-37.

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	5-year change
East Midlands	133,345	137,260	142,680	150,305	155,500	164,325	23%
East of England	101,900	102,775	106,355	108,810	112,240	120,935	19%
London	296,420	300,200	307,800	314,940	320,395	333,815	13%
North East	85,225	85,560	87,415	89,800	91,530	96,020	13%
North West	190,420	195,815	200,355	201,990	203,500	209,285	10%
Northern Ireland	43,150	42,620	42,445	42,415	43,130	44,085	2%
Scotland	187,415	192,655	198,505	204,935	211,220	216,465	16%
South East	260,520	264,110	267,085	268,275	270,455	278,780	7%
South West	135,130	137,925	143,095	146,935	150,980	154,315	14%
Wales	103,235	100,305	101,135	102,255	103,625	107,470	4%
West Midlands	152,075	160,055	166,770	171,695	175,500	180,590	19%
Yorks and Humber	164,370	165,735	168,220	170,990	173,925	176,500	7%
Total	**1,853,205**	**1,885,015**	**1,931,860**	**1,973,345**	**2,012,000**	**2,082,585**	**12%**

Between 2014/15 and 2019/20 every region and constituent country of the UK has experienced a year-on-year increase in total enrolments, although the extent of this increase has varied: 23% for the East Midlands, just 2% for Northern Ireland. By contrast, the change in enrolments for history is more variable: history enrolments in Northern Ireland have fallen by a quarter; in London they have been more-or-less stable; they have grown by 10% in Scotland (Table 2).[2]

Table 2. HE Student (FTE) enrolments, by region – history.
Source: HESA, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-37.

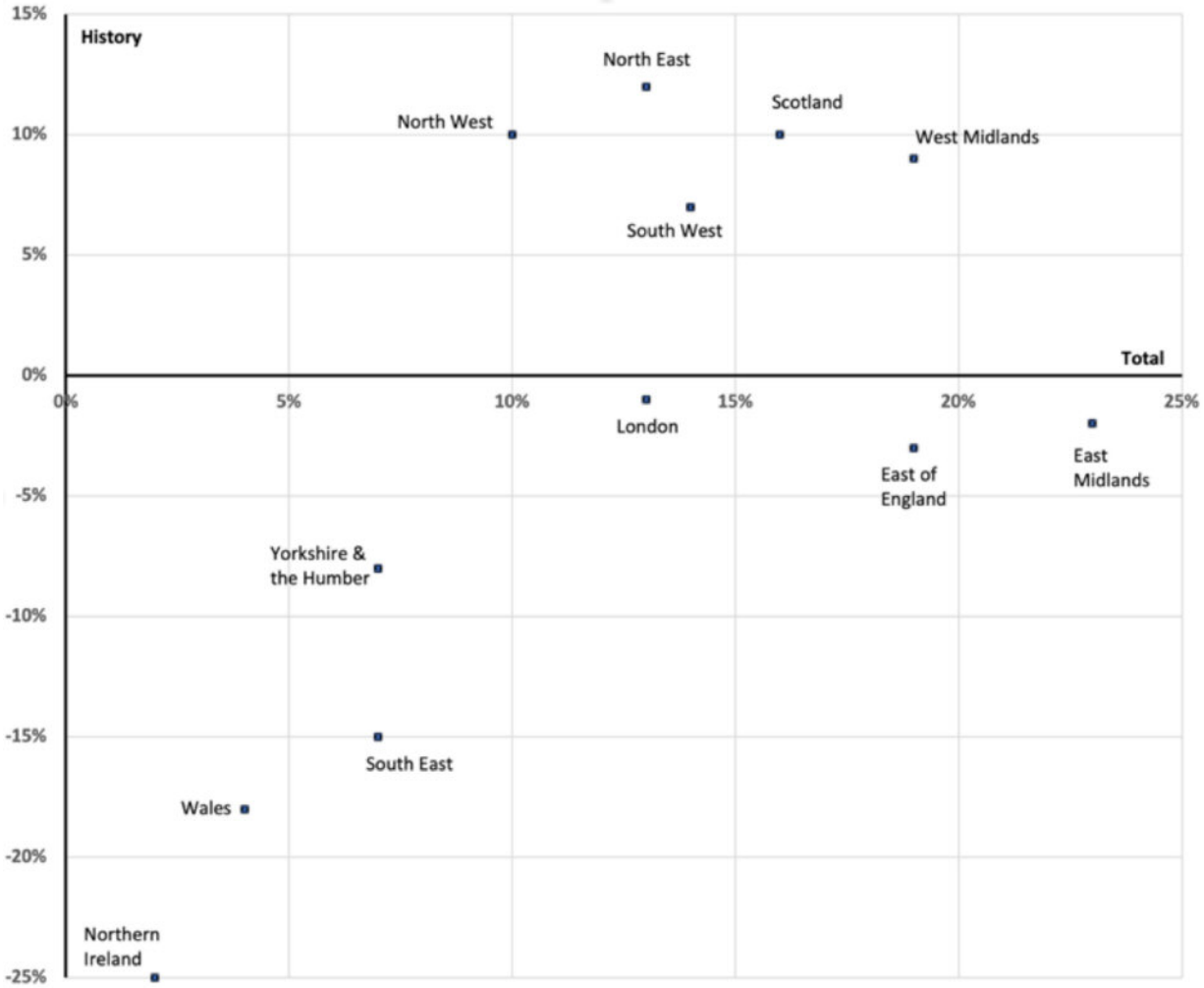
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	5-year change
East Midlands	3,170	3,285	3,395	3,360	3,165	3,110	-2%
East of England	2,700	2,660	2,805	2,795	2,740	2,630	-3%
London	5,880	5,980	6,150	6,090	5,875	5,795	-1%
North East	1,910	1,965	1,965	2,035	2,070	2,145	12%
North West	3,080	3,035	3,190	3,385	3,330	3,395	10%
Northern Ireland	845	800	740	710	685	635	-25%
Scotland	4,700	4,985	5,115	5,415	5,310	5,185	10%
South East	8,275	8,285	8,125	7,805	7,480	7,035	-15%
South West	2,855	2,950	2,980	2,845	2,930	3,065	7%
Wales	2,580	2,315	2,470	2,480	2,415	2,115	-18%
West Midlands	2,465	2,560	2,725	2,760	2,720	2,685	9%
Yorks and Humber	3,915	4,000	4,175	4,020	3,815	3,595	-8%
Total	**42,375**	**42,820**	**43,835**	**43,700**	**42,535**	**41,390**	**-2%**

A scatterplot of total regional enrolments against those for history reveals a rough pattern: regions in which total enrolments have grown more tend to have seen either a rise in history enrolments or a small decline (Figure 2). This relatively strong correlation between enrolments in history and overall enrolments is repeated when we look at individual universities later in this section.

[1] HESA, 'HE student enrolments by level of study', available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.

[2] There is a data irregularity here. Prior to 2021, HESA data related only to publicly funded HE providers in the UK, plus the private University of Buckingham. It then began collecting data from a slightly wider set of higher education providers, combining the so-called HESA Student record and the HESA Student alternative record. Figures above include student numbers from both records. However, the HESA Student alternative record does not include information on cost centres (i.e. academic subjects). Totals recorded below are thus slightly lower than those above, by a factor of approximately 3 percent.

Figure 2. Changes in enrolments, 2014/15–2019/20, by region: Total vis-à-vis history.
Source: HESA, available a: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.



During 2019/20 there were 106 institutions with history students enrolled, but with consideration variable between them (Table 3). Older, higher status institutions (e.g. Russell Group) tend to have higher overall numbers and a higher proportion of postgraduate students. The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London), the private University of Buckingham, and the post-92 University of Wolverhampton are exceptions, all with relatively low overall numbers, but a high proportion of postgraduate students.

The relationship between total history enrolments and FTE is also variable. For institutions with a high proportion of part-time students (e.g. Open University), the ratio of FTE to total number is low. For more than half of all these institutions this ratio lies between 0.6 and unity, suggesting a combination of some part-time students and students studying history with some other subjects. Finally, for roughly a third of universities in Table 3, the FTE is higher than the number recorded as enrolled on history programmes, suggesting the inclusion of students who study some history modules as part of their degree, but who are not counted as history students. This potentially provides 'cushioning' for departments where total history enrolments are in decline.

Table 3. Student enrolments in history, 2019/20.
Overall enrolments and by level and mode of study and full-time equivalent.
Source: FTE data are from HESA's Table 37, which provides data from 2014/15, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-37. Other data are from Table 49, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-49.[3]

	Postgraduate		Undergraduate			
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Total	FTE
Open University	5	210	0	2,805	3,020	1,220
University of Oxford	395	150	1,065	85	1,690	1,285
University of Glasgow	100	95	820	445	1,460	1,020
University of Edinburgh	175	60	1,125	15	1,380	1,140
University of Exeter	85	30	1,245	5	1,360	1,220
University of Birmingham	110	155	1,020	0	1,290	1,030
University of Cambridge	360	30	670	30	1,090	1,305
University College London	170	45	845	25	1,080	975
University of Leeds	105	35	870	0	1,010	815
King's College London	145	70	770	5	990	770
University of Nottingham	50	10	900	20	975	885
University of Manchester	115	35	775	0	925	790
University of Warwick	65	15	830	10	920	910
University of Bristol	65	35	785	5	885	885
Cardiff University	20	10	795	20	845	845
Queen Mary University of London	45	15	775	0	840	840
University of Liverpool	60	15	740	20	830	655
University of Kent	105	20	670	15	810	810
University of York	75	50	670	0	800	780
University of East Anglia	55	35	690	10	790	740
University of Sheffield	120	20	615	10	765	695
University of Durham	75	5	665	0	745	800
LSE	290	35	385	0	705	675
University of Southampton	40	25	635	0	700	635
Newcastle University	50	15	615	0	680	655
University of St Andrews	125	10	540	5	680	945
Royal Holloway	85	40	515	10	645	555
Manchester Metropolitan University	35	15	580	5	640	645
University of Strathclyde	75	190	320	0	585	405
University of Lincoln	40	20	490	5	555	530
University of Lancaster	55	25	425	0	505	450
Birkbeck College	55	150	115	175	500	570
University of Stirling	70	25	365	10	465	375
Swansea University	65	20	360	15	460	360
University of Leicester	60	50	345	0	460	535
Queen's University Belfast	100	25	315	15	455	430
University of Winchester	25	25	380	15	445	450
University of Aberdeen	30	20	370	5	425	465
University of Reading	25	35	365	0	425	345
University of Sussex	25	5	390	0	425	660
University of Dundee	10	90	265	45	415	335
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	25	15	340	0	385	365
Nottingham Trent University	15	10	345	5	380	365
Aberystwyth University	35	20	290	5	350	270

[3] This table only provides figures for 2019/20. Roughly comparable historical data can be found at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-13.

Liverpool John Moores University	5	0	335	10	345	325
University of Wolverhampton	5	150	165	10	330	215
University of Essex	35	15	245	0	300	320
University of Hull	45	15	235	0	295	300
University of Plymouth	20	10	250	5	285	345
York St John University	25	10	250	0	280	305
Goldsmiths College	20	25	225	5	270	260
Bangor University	50	10	200	5	265	235
Oxford Brookes University	10	20	225	5	260	470
University of the Highlands and Islands	5	35	185	40	260	245
Canterbury Christ Church University	25	15	200	10	245	245
University of Portsmouth	10	35	200	0	240	230
De Montfort University	25	25	180	0	235	205
Sheffield Hallam University	5	5	225	5	235	240
University of Chester	25	10	185	10	230	215
Keele University	10	5	205	0	225	200
Loughborough University	10	0	215	0	225	260
Leeds Beckett University	10	10	190	5	215	205
SOAS University of London	45	20	135	0	200	220
University of Huddersfield	15	10	170	0	200	190
University of the West of England	0	0	180	5	185	180
University of Wales Trinity Saint David	25	70	85	5	185	150
Ulster University	10	5	145	25	180	175
Bath Spa University	10	5	150	5	170	195
Brunel University London	5	5	150	5	165	135
Teesside University	20	10	110	20	165	160
University of Chichester	15	15	125	5	160	170
Coventry University	0	0	155	5	155	115
University of Derby	0	0	145	10	155	180
University of South Wales	5	5	135	0	150	145
Edge Hill University	10	5	125	0	140	130
Liverpool Hope University	15	5	115	5	140	110
University of Brighton	15	25	95	5	140	75
University of Central Lancashire	20	5	110	5	140	0
Roehampton University	10	20	100	5	135	255
University of Salford	5	5	110	0	120	75
University of Westminster	0	0	115	5	120	150
University of Northampton	10	15	85	5	110	95
University of Hertfordshire	5	25	65	5	105	100
University of Worcester	5	5	90	5	105	95
University of Sunderland	0	0	95	5	100	165
Uni. of London (Institutes & activities)	45	55	0	0	95	110
Newman University	0	5	85	0	90	75
Anglia Ruskin University	5	0	75	0	85	100
Bournemouth University	0	0	85	0	85	140
City, University of London	0	0	85	0	85	0
University of Buckingham	40	35	15	0	85	150
University of Greenwich	5	5	80	0	85	175
University of Gloucestershire	0	0	70	5	75	95
University of Suffolk	0	0	60	10	75	65
St Mary's University, Twickenham	0	0	55	5	60	65
Bishop Grosseteste University	10	0	30	0	45	55
Glyndŵr University	0	0	40	5	40	40
Staffordshire University	0	10	25	5	35	40
New College of the Humanities	0	5	20	0	25	–
Aston University	0	0	20	0	20	0
Leeds Trinity University	5	5	10	0	20	65
London South Bank University	0	0	20	0	20	0
Richmond, American International Uni	0		15	0	15	–
Kingston University	0	5	5	0	10	60
University of East London	0	0	10	0	10	10
Middlesex University	5	0	0	0	5	0

Note: A dash indicates data are not available for FTE.

Analysis of historical trends in the number of history FTEs over five years reveals a high concentration of history provision, with close to half of all history students (in FTE terms) being taught in the top 20% of institutions by market share: 44% in 2014/15, rising to 47% by 2019/20 (Table 4). Since there are just a few more than 100 universities recorded as offering history, this top quintile contains 20 institutions. With the second quintile capturing more than a quarter of history FTEs, there are two-fifths of universities teaching three-quarters of history FTEs.

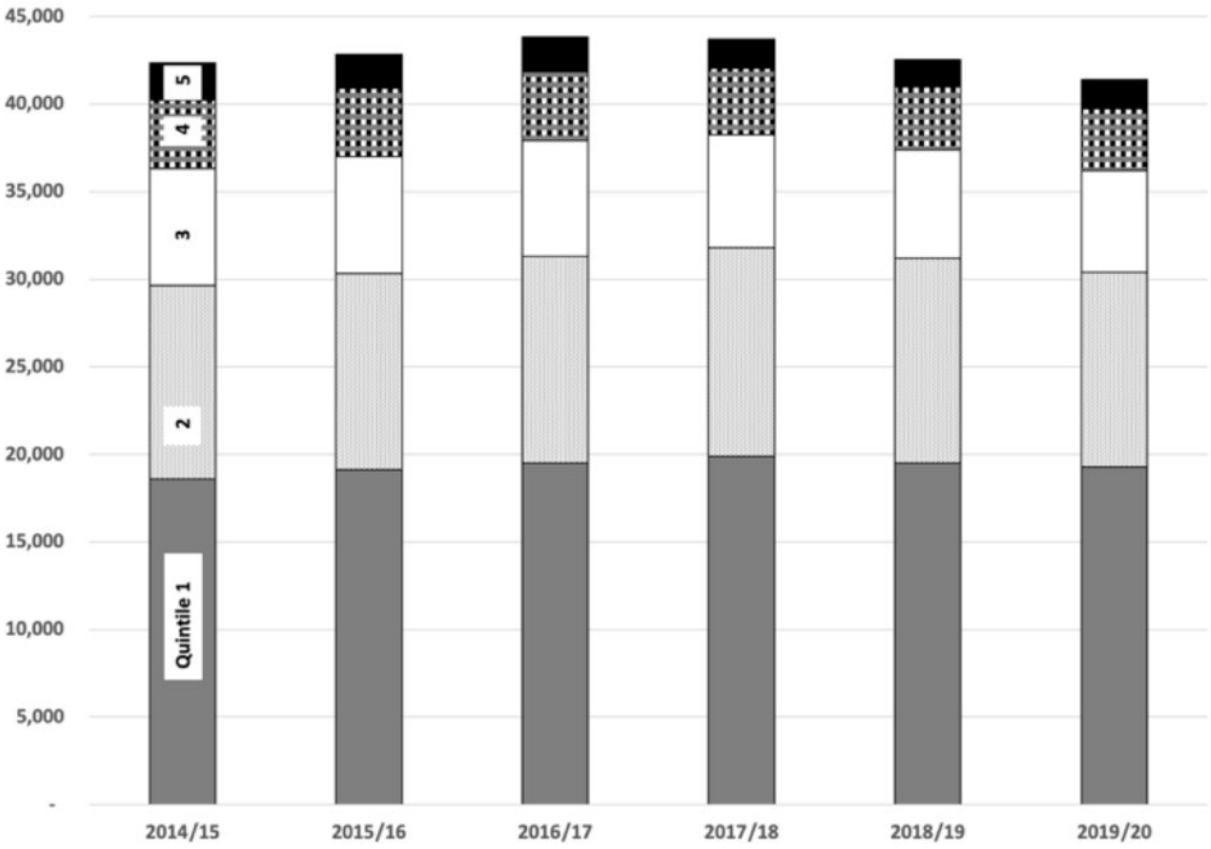
Table 4. Full-Time Equivalent enrolments in history and overall, 2014/15–2019/20.
Source: HESA Table 37, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/ table-37. Institutions are ranked in descending order of history FTEs for 2019/20 at the 104 institutions HESA records as having students enrolled on history courses.

	History						Overall (i.e. all subjects)	5-year change	
	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	2019/20	History	Overall
University of Cambridge	1,160	1,170	1,190	1,215	1,255	1,305	20,385	13%	8%
University of Oxford	1,280	1,285	1,280	1,310	1,320	1,285	20,890	0%	3%
Open University	1,695	1,585	1,410	1,270	1,230	1,220	68,390	-28%	2%
University of Exeter	1,010	1,085	1,160	1,125	1,225	1,220	24,940	21%	28%
University of Edinburgh	1,060	1,110	1,110	1,230	1,140	1,140	32,800	8%	23%
University of Birmingham	860	875	955	995	1,000	1,030	32,560	20%	18%
University of Glasgow	790	890	925	1,015	1,090	1,020	28,250	29%	22%
University College London	960	1,060	995	990	900	975	36,900	2%	36%
University of St Andrews	910	975	1,010	1,030	975	945	9,645	4%	9%
University of Warwick	760	850	935	965	950	910	23,890	20%	27%
University of Bristol	855	885	925	895	850	885	25,660	4%	28%
University of Nottingham	895	880	805	805	735	885	33,110	-1%	14%
Cardiff University	590	640	760	850	900	845	28,270	43%	16%
Queen Mary Uni. of London	515	645	705	725	795	840	20,430	63%	36%
University of Leeds	790	795	825	845	860	815	34,820	3%	22%
University of Kent	890	930	925	905	870	810	17,200	-9%	-1%
University of Durham	640	650	645	665	715	800	18,720	25%	14%
University of Manchester	605	590	735	730	775	790	37,420	31%	6%
University of York	870	865	895	885	840	780	17,965	-10%	19%
King's College London	785	820	845	960	895	770	29,190	-2%	29%
University of East Anglia	580	615	765	840	840	740	16,245	28%	15%
University of Sheffield	660	750	880	850	785	695	27,840	5%	12%
LSE	625	625	670	695	710	675	11,310	8%	17%
University of Sussex	680	640	645	650	655	660	18,510	-3%	43%
Newcastle University	620	650	695	670	660	655	26,920	6%	23%
University of Liverpool	460	560	540	690	665	655	27,125	42%	32%
Manchester Met University	585	630	630	655	645	645	29,830	10%	10%
University of Southampton	810	890	885	900	750	635	21,175	-22%	-3%
Birkbeck College	775	620	675	620	600	570	8,050	-26%	-11%
Royal Holloway	660	720	740	665	610	555	10,710	-16%	18%
University of Leicester	695	725	805	765	665	535	14,695	-23%	2%
Courtauld Institute of Art	435	480	470	500	485	530	530	22%	18%
University of Lincoln	310	410	515	560	585	530	14,530	71%	34%
Oxford Brookes University	455	465	405	420	485	470	14,485	3%	1%
University of Aberdeen	450	430	470	495	525	465	12,915	3%	9%
University of Lancaster	300	300	320	365	405	450	14,665	50%	25%
University of Winchester	455	490	520	515	485	450	7,265	-1%	17%
Queen's University Belfast	525	500	445	460	435	430	20,195	-18%	7%
University of Strathclyde	425	455	465	465	415	405	19,770	-5%	15%
University of Stirling	330	380	380	390	365	375	9,960	14%	17%

	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	2019/20	History	Overall
Nottingham Trent University	500	495	475	445	385	365	31,670	-27%	34%
University of Northumbria	350	360	300	355	345	365	23,495	4%	4%
Swansea University	745	515	540	520	455	360	17,740	-52%	29%
University of Reading	335	335	375	415	400	345	16,185	3%	24%
University of Plymouth	390	360	340	315	355	345	16,180	-12%	-27%
University of Dundee	305	270	315	320	315	335	13,430	10%	23%
Liverpool John Moores Uni	295	340	355	350	335	325	21,765	10%	18%
University of Essex	465	460	440	395	355	320	15,075	-31%	21%
York St John University	310	285	270	290	295	305	6,250	-2%	13%
University of Hull	450	420	430	385	350	300	12,695	-33%	-7%
Aberystwyth University	420	365	355	325	310	270	6,265	-36%	-21%
Goldsmiths College	295	290	305	300	300	260	9,145	-12%	25%
Loughborough University	130	165	195	230	240	260	17,130	100%	20%
Roehampton University	120	125	160	170	205	255	11,570	113%	68%
Canterbury Christ Church Uni	515	465	365	315	295	245	11,170	-52%	-9%
Uni of the Highlands & Islands	185	200	225	245	250	245	7,145	32%	19%
Sheffield Hallam University	360	350	335	280	255	240	26,355	-33%	2%
Bangor University	295	295	320	325	325	235	8,800	-20%	-5%
University of Portsmouth	225	220	230	230	220	230	23,595	2%	21%
SOAS University of London	320	325	345	320	245	220	4,660	-31%	-3%
University of Wolverhampton	225	250	235	225	210	215	15,310	-4%	-1%
University of Chester	305	310	285	285	245	215	10,690	-30%	-1%
De Montfort University	215	235	225	210	195	205	25,295	-5%	55%
Leeds Beckett University	185	260	255	210	195	205	19,485	11%	-6%
Keele University	180	185	205	220	215	200	9,195	11%	16%
Bath Spa University	265	275	255	210	220	195	7,330	-26%	18%
University of Huddersfield	200	190	190	195	180	190	14,855	-5%	-9%
University of Derby	200	180	180	190	185	180	15,540	-10%	27%
Uni of the West of England	240	245	220	205	180	180	25,110	-25%	18%
University of Greenwich	200	205	180	165	165	175	16,565	-13%	3%
Ulster University	290	270	260	225	225	175	19,680	-40%	-3%
University of Chichester	210	205	240	240	205	170	4,660	-19%	-3%
University of Sunderland	135	145	150	185	195	165	12,620	22%	7%
Teesside University	160	160	175	160	155	160	14,265	0%	13%
University of Buckingham	70	85	150	145	135	150	3,100	114%	101%
University of Westminster	240	220	225	200	185	150	17,200	-38%	0%
Uni of Wales Trinity St David	65	85	105	190	160	150	9,660	131%	25%
University of South Wales	335	300	285	170	160	145	17,700	-57%	-10%
Bournemouth University	0	0	0	0	0	140	15,165	–	6%
Brunel University London	120	125	150	170	145	135	14,185	13%	17%
Edge Hill University	150	125	120	120	75	130	10,925	-13%	-12%
Coventry University	115	120	100	115	115	115	33,395	0%	43%
Liverpool Hope University	105	100	95	100	110	110	4,480	5%	1%
Uni London (Insts & activities)	130	120	135	65	70	110	195	-15%	11%
Anglia Ruskin University	220	195	150	125	105	100	21,680	-55%	36%
University of Hertfordshire	185	130	175	145	115	100	20,520	-46%	8%
University of Northampton	160	140	125	100	110	95	10,395	-41%	-1%
University of Gloucestershire	95	95	80	90	95	95	6,820	0%	-2%
University of Worcester	150	140	130	115	100	95	8,730	-37%	5%
Glasgow Caledonian Uni	125	135	90	75	80	90	15,010	-28%	7%
Newman University	100	100	100	85	85	75	2,345	-25%	6%
University of Brighton	225	230	175	70	75	75	15,850	-67%	-9%
University of Salford	110	80	115	85	80	75	18,570	-32%	16%
Leeds Trinity University	85	85	90	85	45	65	4,495	-24%	49%
St Mary's Uni, Twickenham	105	105	105	90	95	65	4,690	-38%	5%
University of Suffolk	90	90	85	75	70	65	7,550	-28%	94%
Kingston University	165	150	140	90	60	60	15,770	-64%	-16%
Bishop Grosseteste University	60	60	70	65	65	55	1,965	-8%	-5%
Glyndŵr University	65	45	35	40	35	40	3,700	-38%	-25%
Staffordshire University	70	45	65	40	45	40	11,635	-43%	-9%
University of East London	70	50	45	30	15	10	12,555	-86%	-1%
Aston University	0	0	0	0	0	0	12,895	–	36%
London Metropolitan Uni	15	20	0	0	0	0	8,230	-100%	-26%
Uni of Central Lancashire	160	0	0	0	0	0	20,030	-100%	-1%
Total	**42,360**	**42,850**	**43,825**	**43,715**	**42,525**	**41,385**	**1,748,520**	**-2%**	**12%**

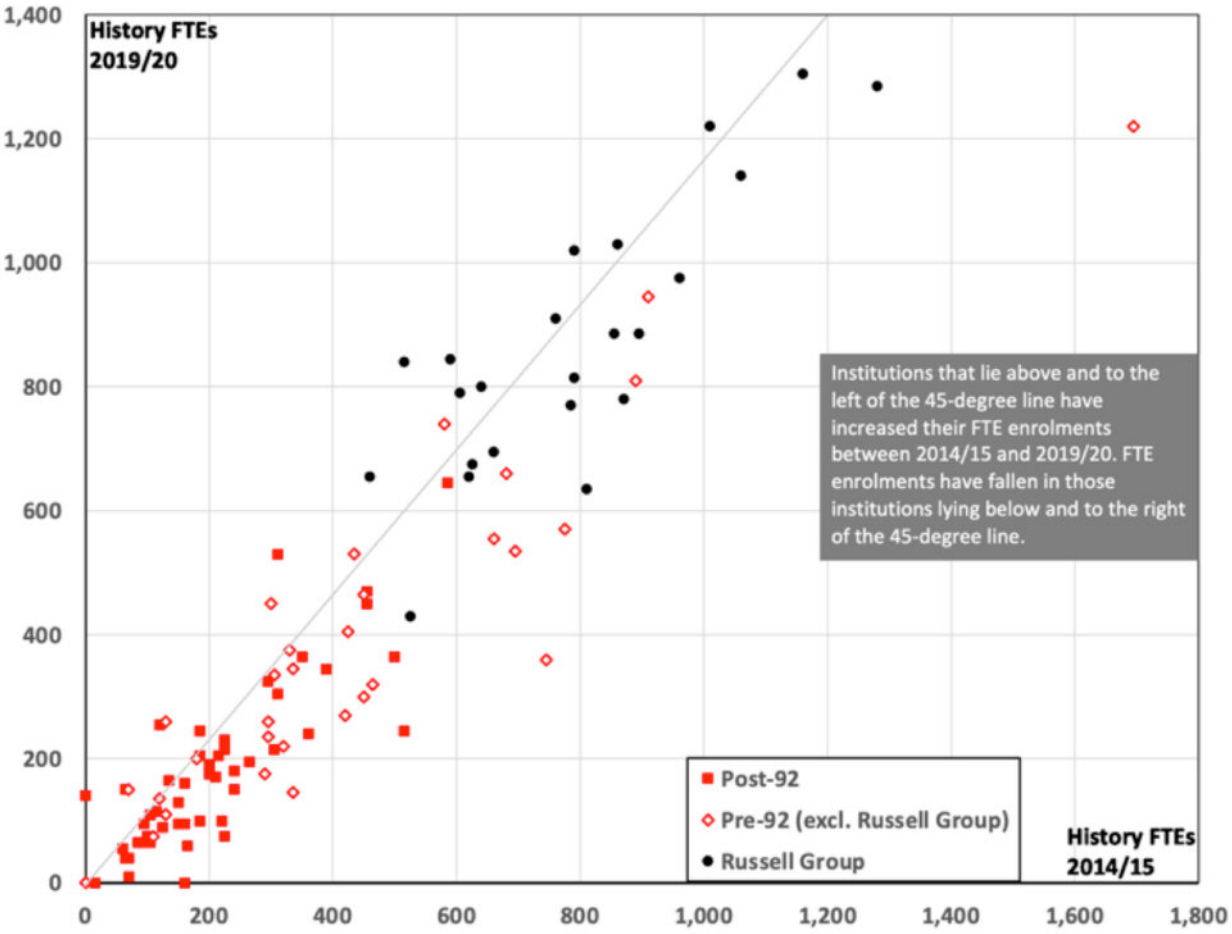
While the top quintile of institutions has increased its share of history FTEs by 3%, it is not clear that this is a consequence of the lifting of the student numbers cap in 2015/16. There was no sudden increase between 2014/15 and 2015/16, for example. In fact, it is surprising that the top providers have not increased their market share more during this period, given the removal of this cap (Figure 3). At the time of conducting the analysis data for 2020/21 had not yet been published. It is likely this will change for 2020/21 and, even more so, for 2021/22, with anecdotal evidence suggesting some universities significantly 'over recruited' during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 3. History FTE enrolments, 2014/15–2019/20, by quintiles.
Source: Derived from Table 4, above. In this chart universities are ranked in order of number of history FTEs, for each year, and then grouped by quintile.



The 'stability' of institutions' history FTE enrolments are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. History enrolments (FTEs), 2014/15 vis-à-vis 2019/20 (by status).
Source: HESA Table 37, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/ table-37.



Change in history FTEs cannot be considered in isolation from each institution's total enrolment, however. There is a clear positive correlation between the two figures. In other words, the better an institution has done overall in terms of recruitment, the better its history department is likely to have done (and vice versa) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Changes in FTE enrolments, 2014/15–2019/20. Total vis-à-vis history (by status).

Source: HESA Table 37, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/ table-37.

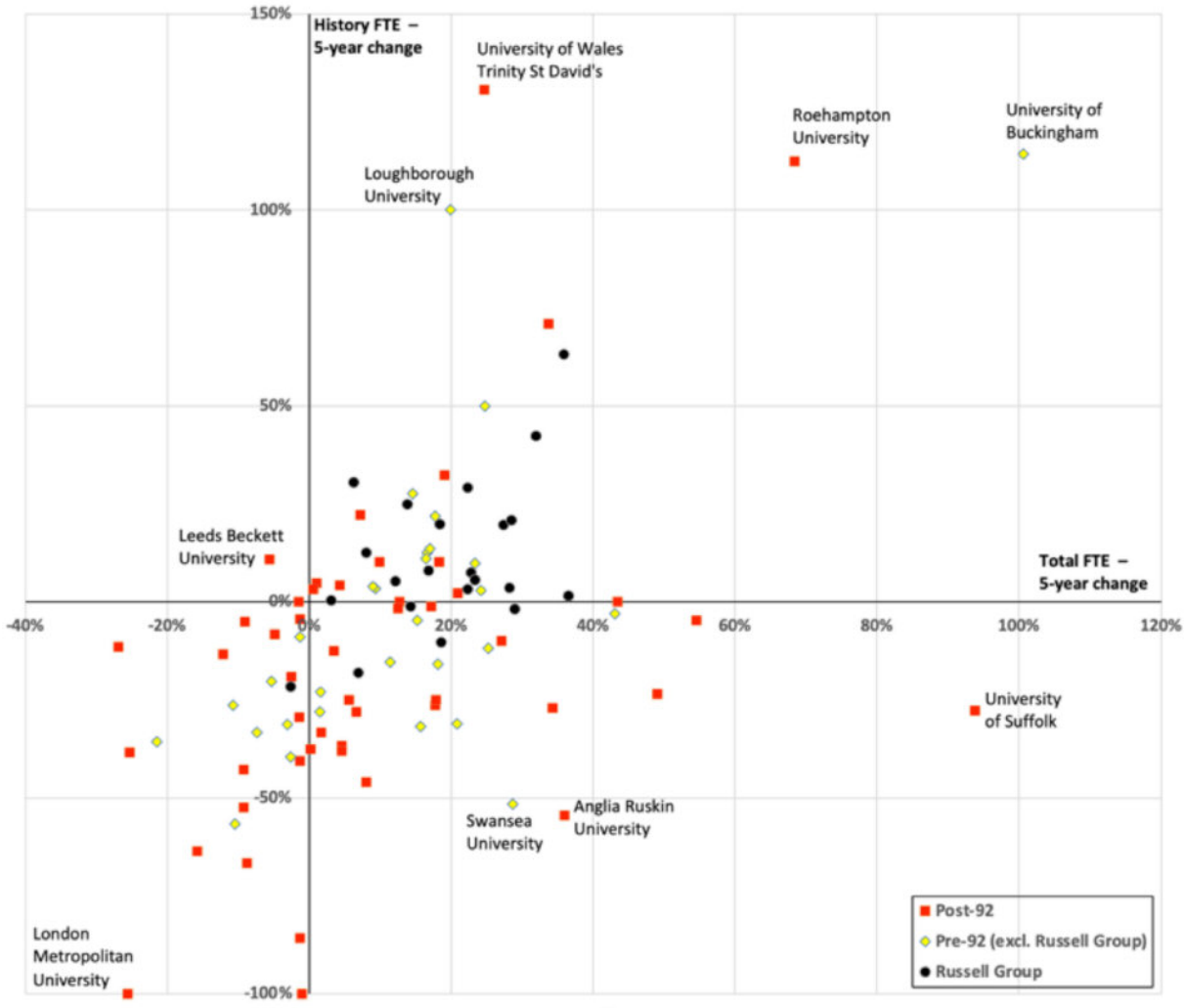
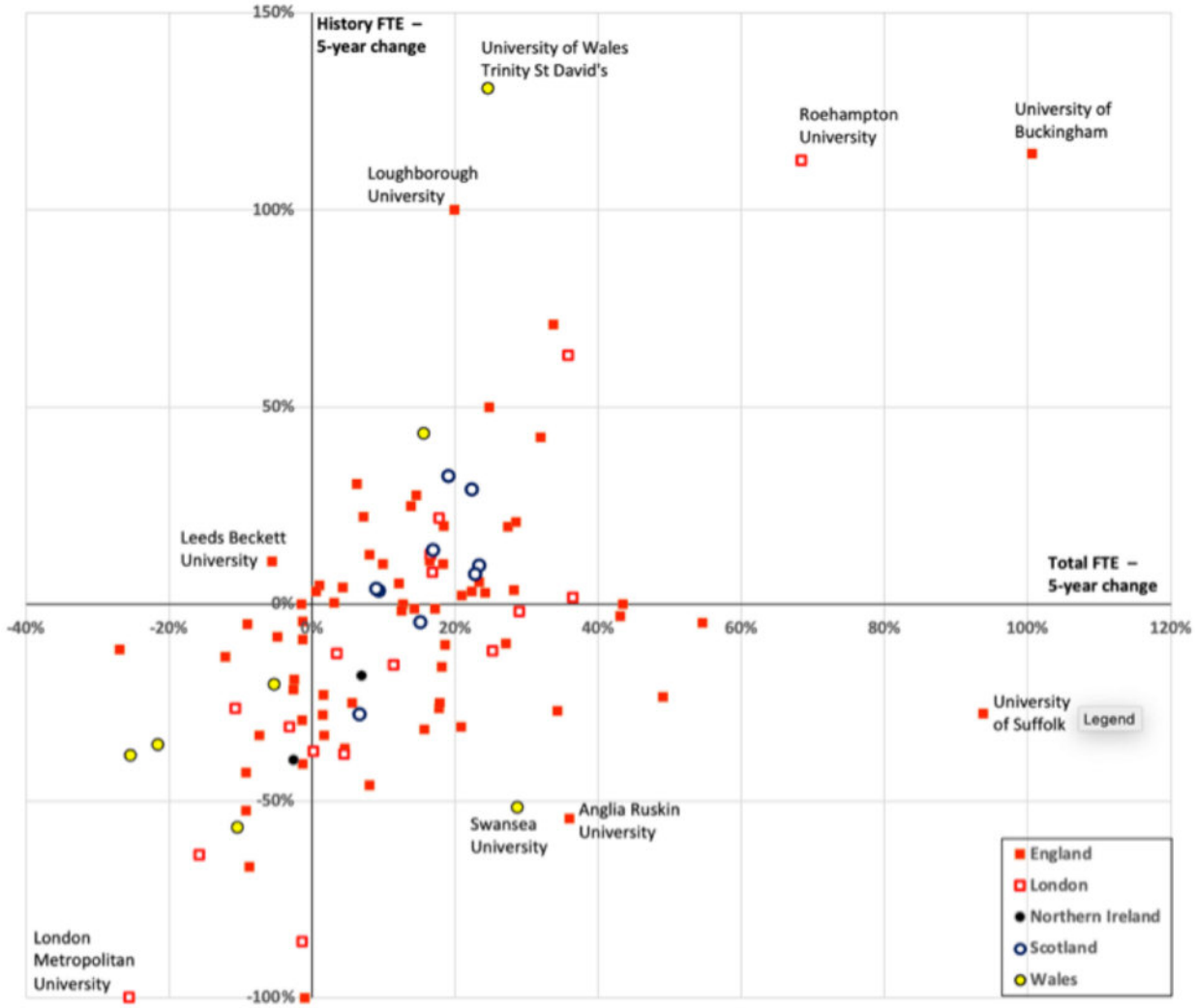


Figure 5 appears to show little difference between non-Russell Group 'old' universities and 'new' universities. Russell Group enrolments, in contrast, both total and for history, have almost all grown over this 5-year period.

This relationship between overall FTEs and history FTEs at institutional level explains the similar relationship observed at regional level. Yet separating out the institutions by region (Figure 6) reveals few clear patterns. It is worth noting, however, that all but two of Scotland's nine universities are located in the upper-right quadrant (the exceptions are Glasgow Caledonian and Strathclyde), and all but one of Wales's four institutions are in the lower-left quadrant (Cardiff is the exception).

Figure 6. Changes in FTE enrolments, 2014/15–2019/20. Total vis-à-vis history (by country/region).

Source: HESA Table 37, available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/ table-37.



What this suggests is that history recruitment is very much dependent on overall institutional recruitment or standing. This is an important result. If true, it implies that academic historians have limited power to limit or reverse declines in recruitment to their department – and thus top-down threats to their departments – independent of the wider collective of their colleagues.

Finally, one contextual factor often cited as having an impact on recruitment is A-level take-up. Indeed, a possible reason for the decline in history enrolments is a decline in students studying history at A-level.

As Figures 7 and 8 show, the number of A-level students in England gaining an A-level in history declined between 2015 and 2018, with those achieving higher grades (A*, A, B, C) also declining, by between 13 and 15%, depending on which of those top four grades one includes. By contrast, the number of students gaining high-grade A-levels in any subject declined by only 4–5%. Overall, the number of A-level history students has fallen to its its lowest level in more than a decade, whilst overall A-level numbers look set to rise.

Figure 7. Number of students achieving A-levels in England, by grade, 2008–2001 – all subjects.

Source: Ofqual, 'A level outcomes in England', available at: https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/Outcomes/.

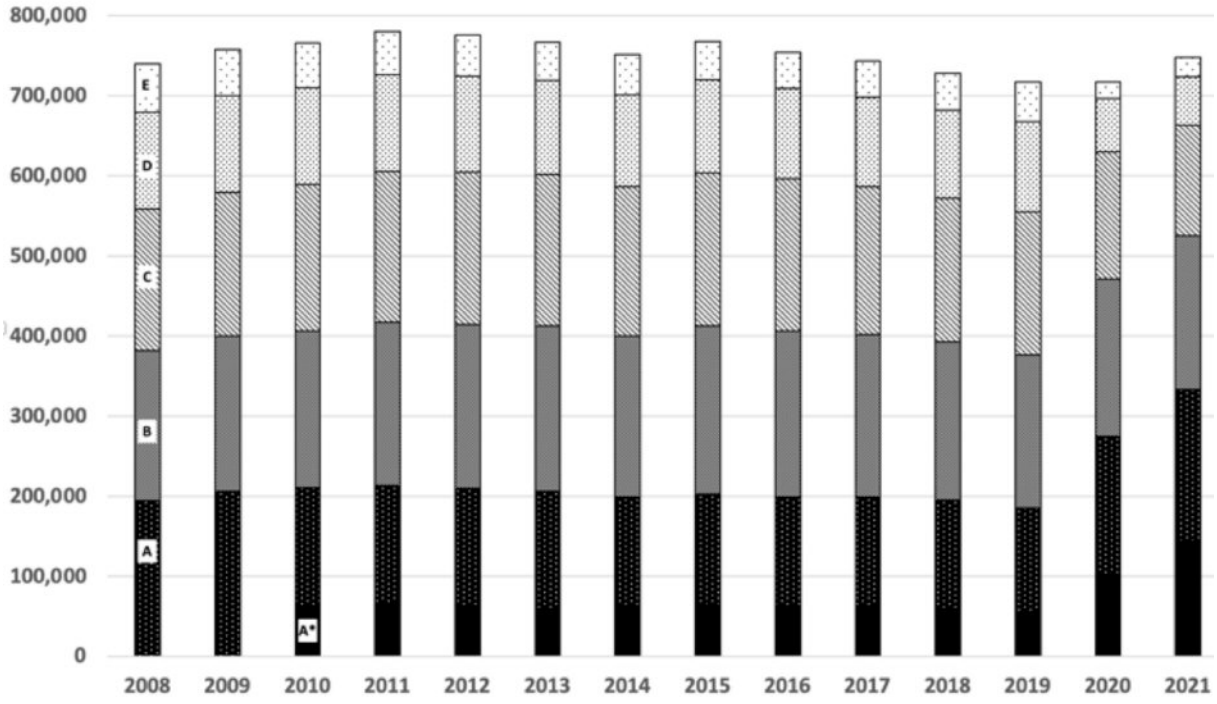
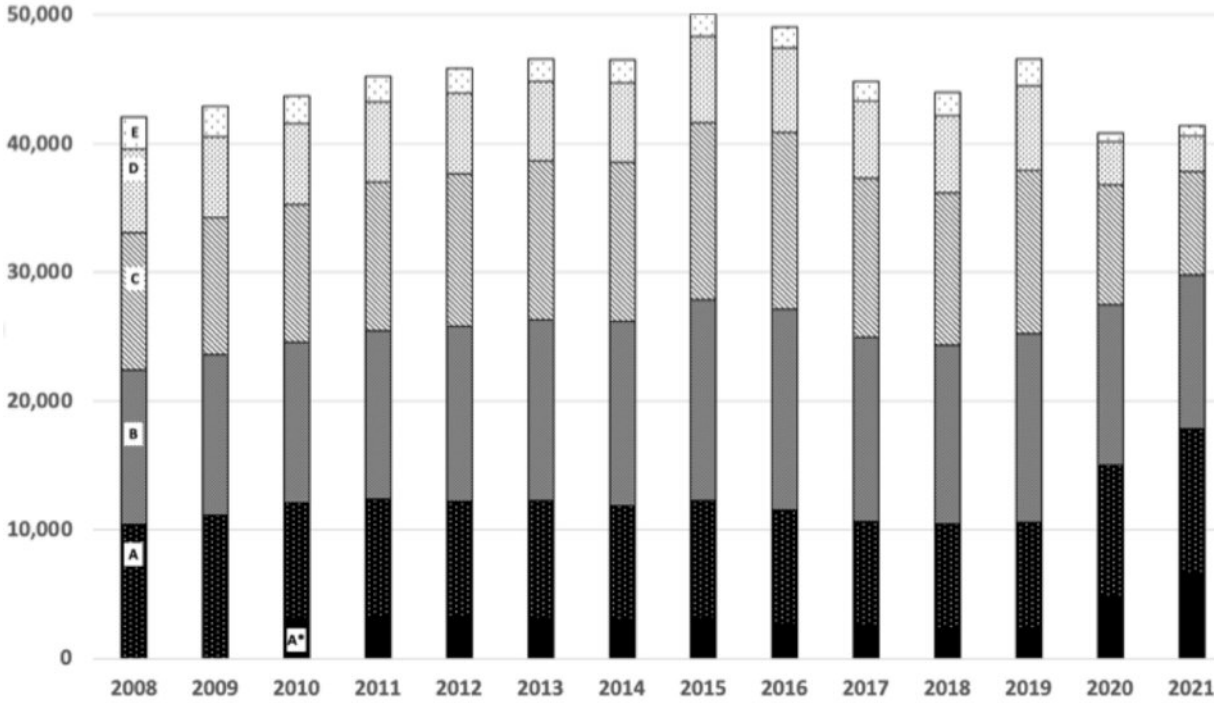


Figure 8. Number of students achieving A-levels in England, by grade, 2008–2001 – history.

Source: Source: Ofqual, 'A level outcomes in England', at: https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/ apps/Alevel/Outcomes/.



As not all universities require students studying history to have an A-level in the subject,[4] historians may want to reflect on whether studying history at A-level now acts as a check on recruitment in a sector that is placing increasing emphasis on inter- and multi-disciplinarity.

[4] Since these data for England seemingly offer us few insights, we have not gathered equivalent figures for the other nations of the UK. Figures can be found at: StatsWales (https://statswales.gov.wales/; search 'A levels'); the Joint Council for Qualifications (for both Wales and Northern Ireland; https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/); and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (https://www.sqa.org.uk).

History outcomes

In a speech in February 2021, the then-Education Secretary Gavin Williamson decried 'dead-end courses that give [students] nothing but a mountain of debt. [Instead] we need universities and colleges to work together to address the gaps in our labour market, and create the valuable and technical courses our society needs.' [5]

Although he didn't name any specific subjects or subject areas, Williamson, who himself studied history at A-level (at a sixth-form college) and social sciences at (Bradford) university, clearly had arts and humanities degrees in his sights. Just one month earlier, Williamson had written to the Office for Students, instructing it to 'reduce funding by 50% for high-cost subjects that do not support these priorities', namely, 'high-cost, high-value subjects that support the NHS and wider healthcare policy, high-cost STEM subjects and/or specific labour market needs'. [6]

There is growing analysis, however, that considers the value of humanities in a way that directly addresses such 'mountain of debt' rhetoric. This work confronts the assumption, implicit or explicit in much of the argument, that while we might value history (and the wider humanities) for their fostering of good citizens and for their intrinsic value, history and humanities graduates are less 'employable' than their STEM peers and/or command lower graduate earnings.

Many of the headline figures around the earnings gap between arts and humanities and social sciences (AHSS) and STEM graduates are misleading, skewed by the very high earnings of a few specialist STEM professions such as medicine and dentistry. Delving more deeply into Labour Force Survey data, HESA's Destinations of Leavers Survey and Longitudinal Destination of Leavers Survey, as the British Academy does in *Qualified for the Future* (2020), reveals that earnings differentials within AHSS graduates and *within* STEM graduates are wider than those *between* AHSS and STEM graduates. Thus, while graduates of historical and philosophical studies typically earn less than those who studied mathematics or engineering, they are better remunerated than graduates of psychology or agriculture.[7]

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[5] The speech was reported in *Times Higher Education*, 25 February 2021, available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/williamson-dead-end-degrees-give-students-nothing-butdebt. The full text is available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-speaks-at-launch-of-digital-learning-review.

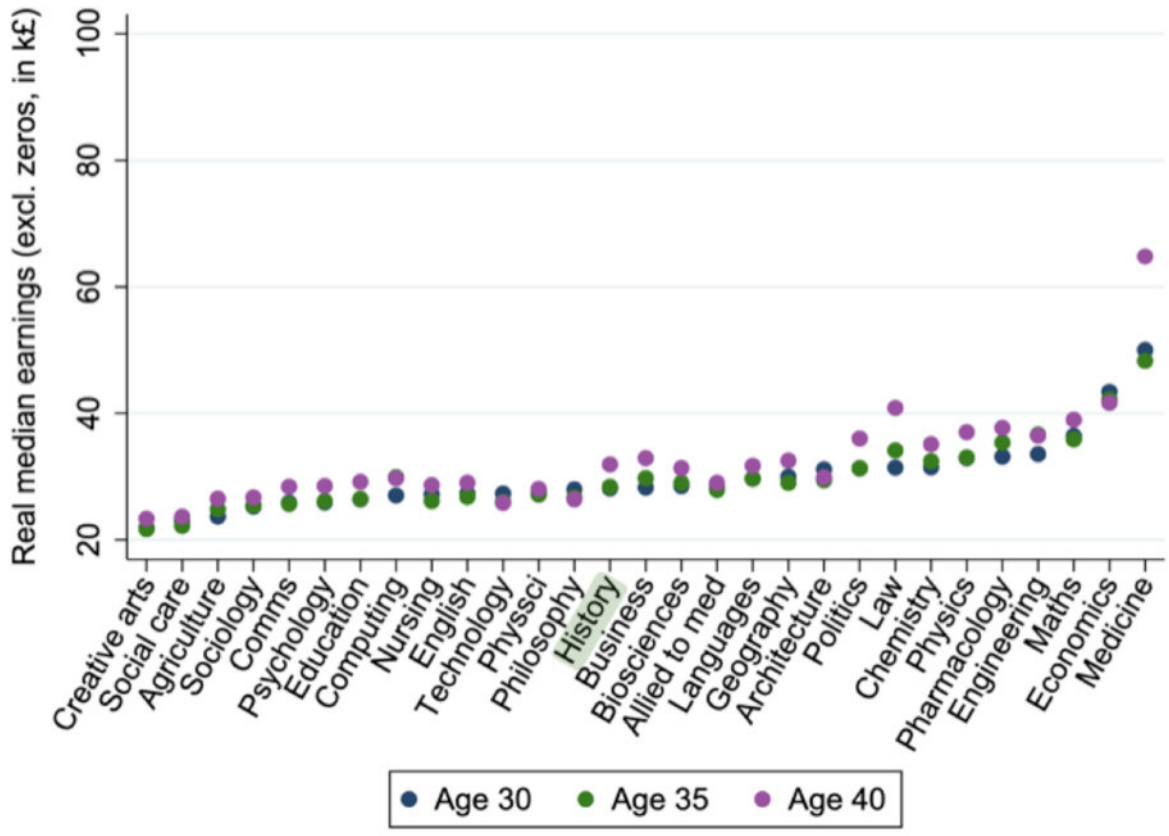
[6] The letter is available at https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/a3814453-4c28-404a-bf76-490183867d9a/rt-hon-gavin-williamson-cbe-mp-t-grant-ofs-chair-smb.pdf. The British government is not alone in defunding arts and humanities. In Australia, for instance, a new higher education plan sees differential fees for different subjects: while students of maths and other STEM subjects will pay less, students' contributions towards humanities courses will more than double. See Michelle Gratton, 'Fee cuts for nursing and teaching but big hikes for law and humanities in package expanding university places', *The Conversation*, 18 June 2020, available at: https://theconversation.com/fee-cuts-for-nursing-and-teaching-but-big-hikes-for-law-and-humanities-in-package-expanding-university-places-141064.

[7] The British Academy's *Qualified for the Future: quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills* (2020) is available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/.

Median pre-tax earnings in 2016, arranged by subject, for individuals aged 30, 35, and 40 indicate this degree of variation within AHSS and STEM subjects (Figures 9 and 10). These figures, reproduced from the Institute of Fiscal Studies' (IFS) *The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020), are the result of an analysis of data from a Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data set, which links various records, including from HESA, HM Revenue & Customs, and the Department for Work & Pensions.[8]

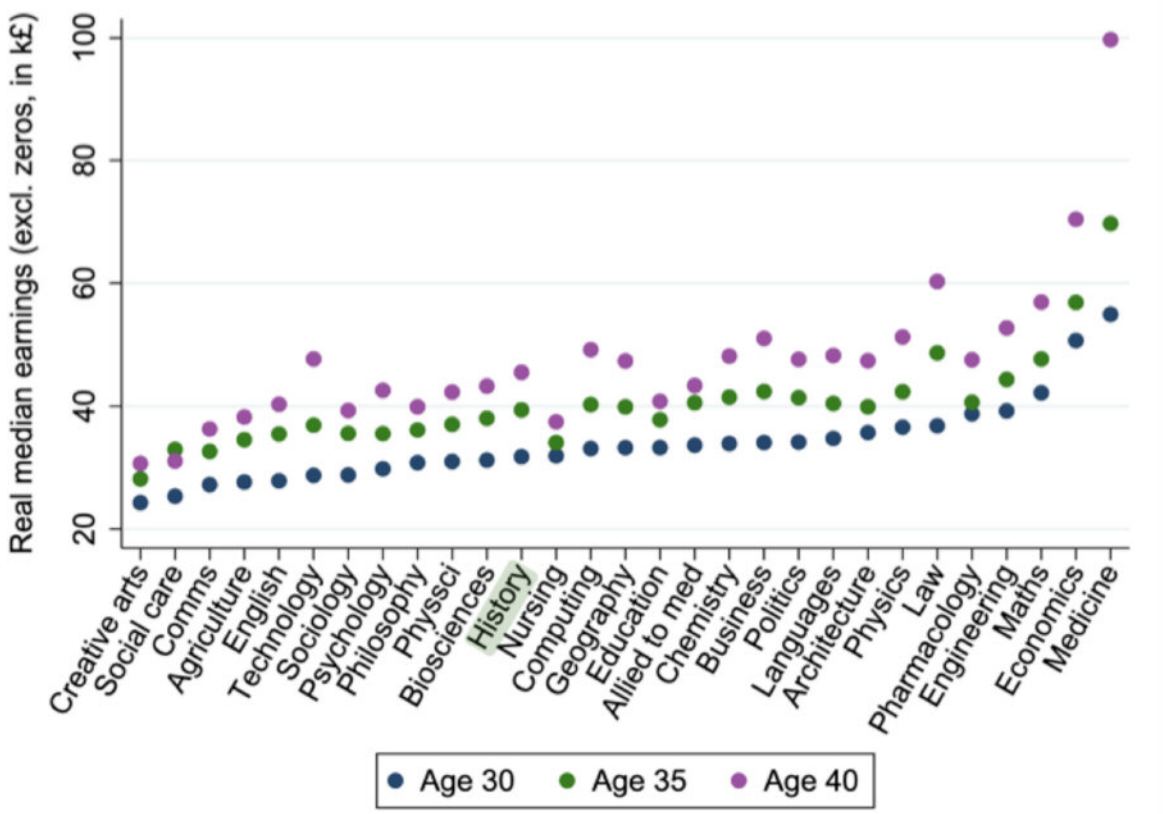
For several of the STEM subjects to the right of history, the history graduate will expect to catch up by age 40. These data suggest, moreover, that by age 40, a woman history graduate will earn more than a female architect. The data for men suggest the 40-year-old history graduate will be earning more than a male graduate of a subject allied to medicine. Together, Figures 9 and 10 show very clearly the gendered outcomes of the UK's labour market. Earning differentials are not large at age 30, yet only a decade later, large gaps have opened up.

Figure 9. Women's median pre-tax earnings by subject in 2016.
Figure reproduced from: IFS, T*he impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020), Fig. 1, p. 17, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14729.



[8] The IFS' *The impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020) estimates economic or financial returns – both private returns to the individual and public returns to the taxpayer – to undergraduate degrees for graduates domiciled in England, and also accounts for individuals' background characteristics and prior attainment. The estimates are based on individuals born in the mid-1980s who went to university in the mid-2000s, observing their earnings until age 30 and then projecting forward expected future earnings. It expresses lifetime earnings as a net present value, i.e. all earnings (actual and projected) are included, but future earnings are discounted and the further in the future the more the discount.

Figure 10. Men's median pre-tax earnings by subject in 2016.
Figure reproduced from: IFS, T*he impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020), Fig. 2, p. 18, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14729.



Studying estimated net lifetime earnings by subject, it would be hard to agree with Williamson that a history student graduates with 'nothing but a mountain of debt'. In fact, one might be surprised to see the profiles of women history graduates' expected lifetime earnings very similar to that of computing graduates' and, for men, history adjacent to physics (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11. Net lifetime earnings of women by subject.
Figure reproduced from: IFS, T*he impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020), Fig. 10, p. 40, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14729.

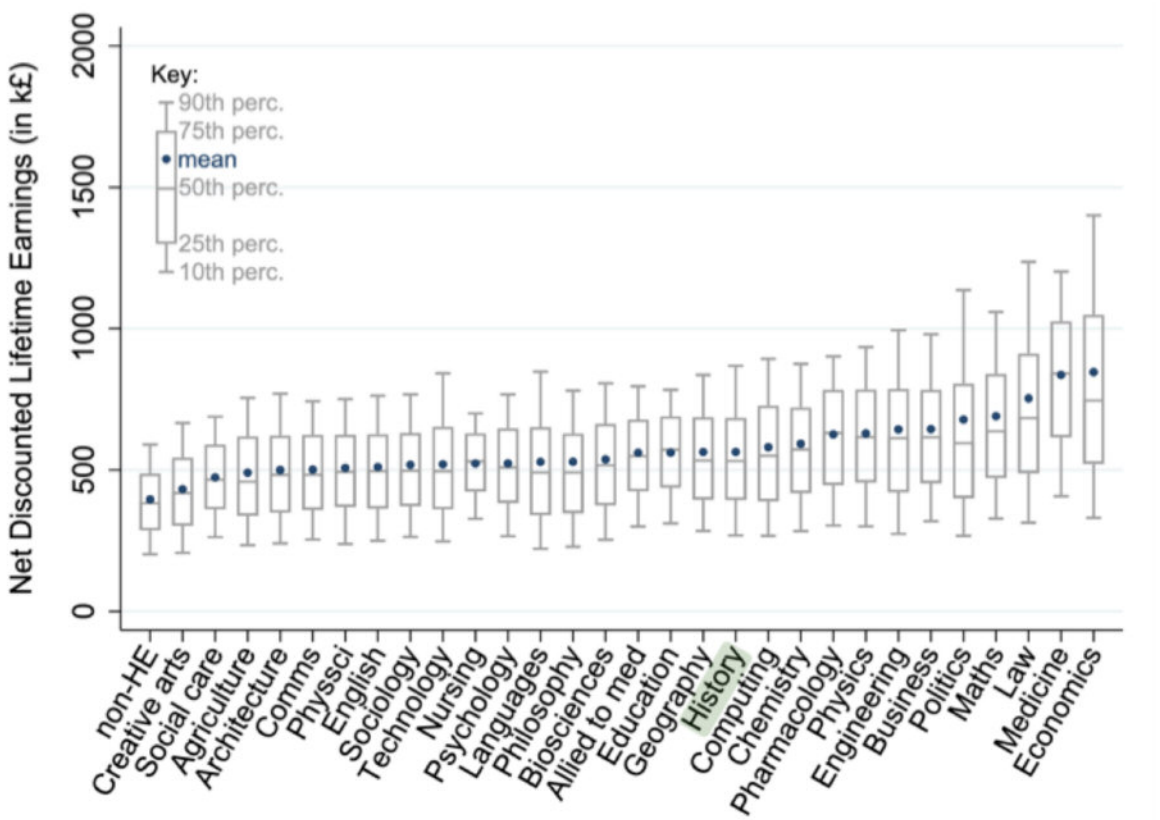
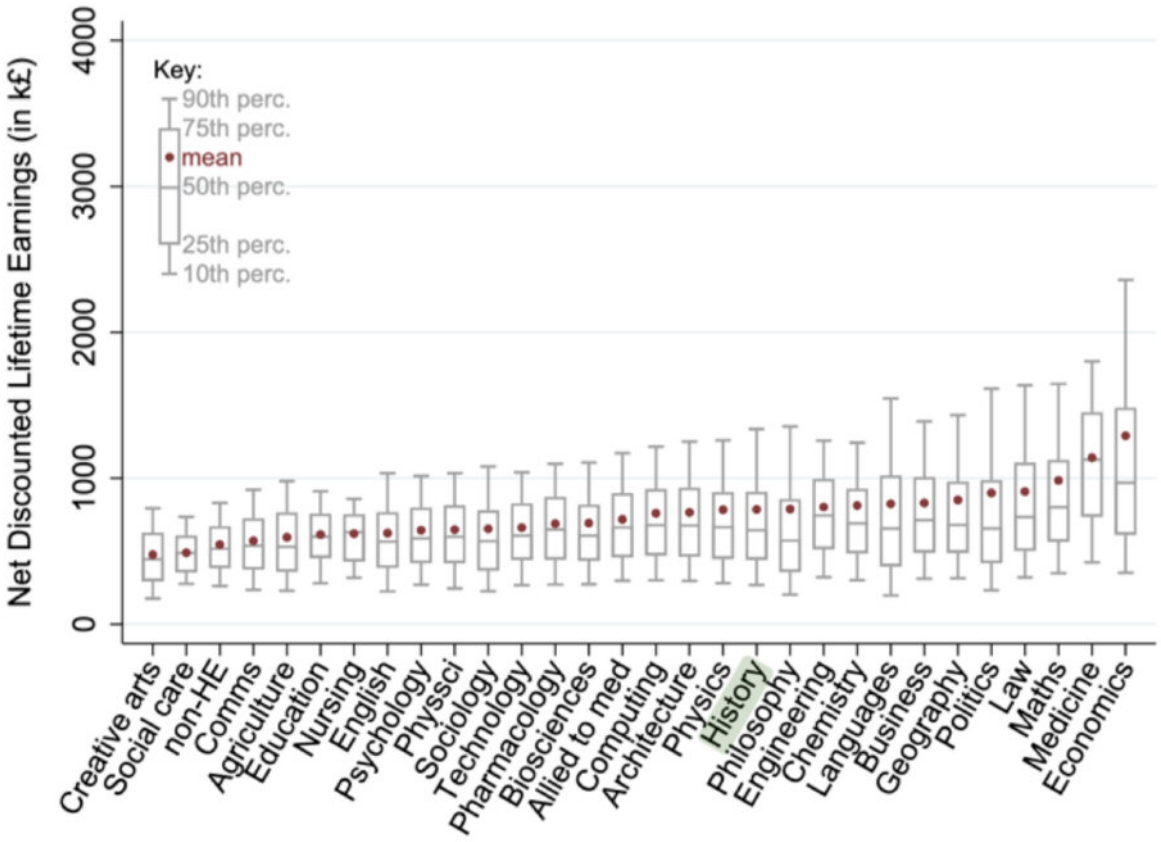


Figure 12. Net lifetime earnings of men by subject.
Figure reproduced from: IFS, T*he impact of undergraduate degrees on lifetime earnings* (2020), Fig. 11, p. 41, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14729.



It is important to flag an issue that is rarely acknowledged by those who conduct and deploy such analysis. All such econometric or statistical analysis of expected future earnings relies on historic data and thus involves the assumption that the future will be very similar to the past. The financial crisis that erupted in 2007, the COVID-19 pandemic, longer-term trends that have seen a shift of wealth from wage-workers to asset-owners, and unfolding climate catastrophe all upset that assumption.

There are also difficulties in disentangling the effect on graduate earnings of underlying differences between students, university attended, and course studied, as well as gender, though many studies attempt to do this in increasingly sophisticated ways. The IFS' *The relative labour market returns to different degrees* (2018) explains the issue, and summarises their analysis of the LEO dataset:

> Medicine, maths and economics graduates all typically earn at least 30% more than the average graduate, while creative arts graduates earn around 25% less on average. A large proportion of these differences in raw earnings can be explained by differences in the characteristics of students taking these degrees. However, after accounting for these, significant differences in the relative returns to different subjects remain. Once these differences have been controlled for, medicine and economics degrees have returns around 20% greater than the average degree, and business, computing and architecture degrees all offer relative earnings premia in excess of 10% above the average earnings for graduates. Creative arts – which enrols more than 10% of all students – still has very low returns: around 15% less than the average degree.[9]

The 'headline' differentials suggest an economics graduate will typically earn roughly three-quarters more than an individual who studied some form of creative arts. If someone is lucky or talented enough to have the choice of studying either economics or creative arts, they would still earn more if they graduated with an economics degree than with a creative arts degree but only 40% more.

The example – and the finding it highlights – is important: if individuals with aptitude in both STEM and 'creative' subjects are steered towards or persuaded to study subjects in the former category, this will have the effect of further widening the earnings gap, thus increasing financial pressures on the next generation to make similar choices, and so on.

Similar disentanglement is necessary to distinguish the earnings effect of having attended a higher-status institution (a Russell Group university, say) from the presumed greater ability of most students who have gained entry to such an institution.

The implications of the LEO dataset for higher education are concerning. It offers the ability to estimate the private economic return to a particular degree programme at a particular institution, thus providing think tanks, policy wonks and advisors with stronger arguments for closing down 'nothing but a mountain of debt' courses. Others may put forward proposals for more extreme differential pricing of programmes, as in the Australian case (see fn. 6) and as we already see globally with the 'competitive' pricing of MBAs.

As already noted, there are key problems with such econometric models of expected lifetime earnings. In addition to assuming the future will be pretty much like the past, they also accept as a fixed reality that some institutions are better than others. A well-qualified prospective student might prefer an 'inferior' institution for many reasons – the syllabus, the lecturers, the campus, or its location – and many continue to prioritise these in decision-making. But, on the econometric model, they are only likely to choose that institution if the 'cost' of making this choice, in terms of lost earnings (or expected lost earnings), is relatively low. This may become self-fulfilling. The result being a tendency for the 'most able' students to attend the 'best' university they can, thus further widening earning gaps between 'best' and 'worst' institutions.

If, as the British Academy argues in its report, AHSS graduates are as resilient to economic shocks as STEM graduates, are more flexible and adaptable, and have the 'insights and skills… crucial to addressing future challenges, alongside STEM', then we need to champion it.[10] What all of this suggests for historians, and for humanities more generally, is a need to build up new evidence for the skills AHSS graduates offer in the workplace and to individual graduates through lifelong learning, regardless of the perceived status of the institution.

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[9] IFS, *The relative labour market returns to different degrees* (2018), pp. 5-6, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/publications/13036.

[10] The British Academy's Qualified for the Future: quantifying demand for arts, humanities and social science skills (2020) is available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/. It draws on a 2019 report by the consultancy London Economics, *Understanding the career paths of AHSS graduates in the UK and their contribution to the economy,* which itself analyses Labour Force Survey data. It also draws on HESA's Destination of Leavers Survey and Longitudinal Destination of Leavers Survey (at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/longitudinal-destinations).

Reflections by historians

As part of this study, the research consultants conducted interviews with historians from a small cross-section of UK HE institutions. In drafting the present document, we have summarised some observations from these findings. These comments complement the quantitative analysis but the much smaller sample size means that we would caution against using them to draw strong conclusions rather than as signposting avenues for further exploration.

At one of our sample institutions, history has been under sustained and serious threat, with a proposal of job losses. These losses are one element of what has primarily been presented as a financial recovery plan necessitating budget cuts (with other departments likely to be subjected to cuts or restructuring in the near future too). Our respondent told us that the financial case masks what is primarily a reorganisation aimed at an epochal shift in terms of the kinds of subjects offered by the institution – away from a focus on arts and humanities, and towards design and technology and, potentially, some STEM profiles.

Justification for the targeting of history, according to our respondent, has been based on an evidence-light narrative around, first, its supposed status as a dying discipline, second, the disproportionate cost of the department to the institution, and third, a failure to meet recruitment targets. Our respondent told us that members of the department had been able to present a well-evidenced counter-case that, far from dying, interest in history at A-level has increased during the pandemic period and looks likely to continue to grow, leading to a probable recruitment upturn. In our respondent's view, senior managers had attempted to win support for their restructuring through the cynical and exploitative mobilising of buzzwords pertaining to racial justice and the global, but appear to be engaged neither with their underlying ideas and critiques of them nor with what is actually already taught and researched in the department.

Undergraduate recruitment is considered to be an ever-present pressure, even when there is no immediate cause for concern. In one post-92 university, large amounts invested into campus and estate development have been predicated on increased recruitment. The institutional approach to this has hinged on the creation of more courses to generate more income. The pressure to run new undergraduate programmes has loosened oversight at the higher levels meaning that planning mistakes were a more frequent occurrence. The need to generate more and more undergraduate recruitment has also produced a drive toward reorganisation as senior managers are appointed with change mandates. Although this may be intended to meet the needs of areas of the institution where there are genuine recruitment crises, knock-on effects for other areas are inevitable.

At another post-92, there has been no substantial threat of cuts (and certainly none of closure), with stable recruitment and the department performing within expectations. Yet no wiggle-room has been built into staffing structure, with the subsequent result that staff already on full workloads must cover for colleagues on sick leave or parental leave, for example. Among mixed feelings about this change, there has been a sense in this department that specialisms have been devalued by the fluid and interchangeable ways that staff are assigned to roles.

The course structure norm is to offer only core modules, taken by all students. This has made it harder to diversify areas of and approaches to teaching, but the long-term stability of student numbers make it hard to say what, if any, impact this might have.

At one university in Scotland, there are workload pressures on staff as a result of both high recent student recruitment levels and cuts to professional services. Success in student recruitment has led to the creation of a number of new staff positions but not at a level commensurate with increasing student numbers, meaning that the student-to-staff ratio is increasing steadily. A focus on the creation of research-intensive positions with very little teaching allowance means that the ratio 'on paper' also does not reflect the actual number of staff members in teaching and student-facing pastoral roles. Incongruously married to this are ongoing difficulties in securing permanent contracts for teaching-focused staff. The disproportionality between student recruitment and staff workload has resulted in high instances of stress and burnout. Whilst history is not under any threat of direct cuts, both of these factors create what may well be an unsustainable situation in the longer term.

In one Russell Group university in the north of England, undergraduate history enrolments had peaked in 2016/17 before returning to 2014/2015 levels, whilst at the postgraduate level they had increased steadily. In both cases, this was commensurate with university-wide enrolment. One consequence of this recruitment arc was the tendency for targets that had been presented as being exceptional during the period of over-recruitment to have been subsequently normalised, thus becoming harder to meet, and giving the false impression of worsening performance.

A number of our respondents pointed to shifts in enrolments over the last few years. At the Russell Group institution mentioned above, the dip in undergraduate numbers was compensated for by an uptick in postgraduate enrolments. At the Scottish university, the marked increase in postgraduate enrolments is particularly felt by staff in the context of workload. The increase in postgraduate enrolments here is attributed to a strong emphasis on internal recruitment – conversion from undergraduate to postgraduate courses.

One point that was raised was the tendency to treat history as a subject that does not necessarily require rooms, meaning that, in many places during periods of lockdown, teaching remained online for longer than many other subjects. This may have implications that are yet to be felt fully, particularly in terms of progression and continuation. In one post-92, our respondent remarked that demographics with less intellectual confidence had tended to find a lack of face-to-face teaching harder than others. If this is generalisable, it creates the suspicion that history, in particular in less prestigious institutions, may have been put at a particular disadvantage by the pandemic.

Respondents at all five institutions touched on employability discourses, particularly government-driven narratives around graduate earnings. This seemed at odds, as one pointed out, with cuts to student services (and, in particular, careers advice). At many institutions, both study skills and employability are increasingly embedded into the curriculum, further adding to staff responsibilities. At the Russell Group institution in the north of England, while our respondent did not perceive direct threats to the provision of history, they discussed a degree of general anxiety among colleagues about discourses around employability and post-degree earnings.

They noted that academics were increasingly under pressure to incorporate an employability element into their courses, to the extent that some 'employability activities' were now credit-generating - an approach common to other AHSS subjects at the institution. Our respondent speculated (though without certain knowledge) that this was likely not the case in STEM subjects.

While the small sample means we must be wary of generalising, there are patterns that seem to align with the quantitative and qualitative data analysed in the previous sections. The first is the variability in enrolments across the sector, and the ways this plays out not only between different institution 'types', but within those groups. While at those Russell Group institutions that have seen increases in student numbers since 2014/15 there are significant workload pressures, in some of the more prestigious of those institutions, the effects are starting to be offset by the creation of new posts (the same is not necessarily true for those at the 'lower-end' of the Russell Group).

Second, is the ways that employability and the skills agenda may, in time, reinforce the perceived differences between the more prestigious and less prestigious institutions, as seen in econometric models of lifetime earnings. While employability is increasingly important across the sector, it is in post-92s that we have seen the most sustained and innovative efforts to embed employability as integral parts of curricula. With many of these institutions experiencing recruitment pressures, efforts around employability and skills are likely to intensify, with programmes refocused on 'vocational' history or the 'applied humanities'. The result may be the emergence of a new two-tier system of history degrees.

Conclusion

The data gathered in this report suggest that academic historians in isolation from colleagues have, at best, limited power to reverse a decline in history recruitment. Instead, with reasonable consistency, such declines appear to be symptomatic of overall falls in recruitment in host institutions. This indicates that a key element to fighting off threats lies in building cross-disciplinary (or, in resourcing terms, cross-departmental) relationships of collaboration and solidarity.

Along with traditional vehicles of workplace solidarity such as local union branches, this could be approached through efforts to enhance the porousness of departmental resourcing so that ring-fencing of budgets cannot act as a material barrier to collaboration. Additionally, history is almost unique within HE in that it is applicable to every other subject (in the sense that any given subject has its own history). This presents special opportunities for pedagogical collaboration that may better enmesh history departments with others in their host institution.

Over-recruitment by, in particular, some Russell Group universities also looks likely to continue to present challenges. Anecdotal evidence leads us to speculate that enrolment data yet to be published are likely to show this problem as having worsened. The tragedy in this is, of course, that over-recruitment is neither to the benefit of the universities that miss out, nor to the benefit of those that over-recruit.

Again, this is unlikely to be a problem that can be meaningfully influenced at the level of the individual department – and is not one that is peculiar to history. Other than playing the long game of working to transform the higher education system into one in which individual institutions are not constituted as atomised business units in competition with one another, or changes in government policy along the lines of a reintroduction of recruitment caps, it is hard to see a clear route to tackling this particular problem.

Some of the effects of the increasingly binary system of higher education, in which there are 'over-performing' and 'under-performing' institutions for the arts and humanities, have yet to be fully realised. Unfunded research time in pre-92 non-Russell Group universities may come under threat in the coming years. With recruitment being highly variable in some of these institutions, notably SOAS and Goldsmiths, unfunded research may start to be restricted, being seen as a 'drain on limited resources'. [11]

Another major battleground appears to be the discourse around a particular construction of value, namely, 'employability' and post-degree incomes, in which history in particular appears to have found itself the recipient of undeserved criticism. The notion that history (and AHSS subjects more generally) do not have value in this limited and problematic sense, whilst STEM subjects do, is wholly and demonstrably false.

Should evidence-based counter-arguments in this area fail to persuade – perhaps revealing that the issue is less one of economic value and more one of the sort of critical subjectivities produced by a training in history – it will be incumbent upon history academics (indeed, one might argue, all academics) to shift the terms of the debate by challenging this notion of value.

There remain key areas for further enquiry, however. This includes in-depth studies of institutions where there have been cuts or closures, as well as where such threats have been successfully resisted. Questions relating to pandemic teaching provision (in relation to other subjects in the same institution) may yield useful data, as may questions on the apparent impact of 'value for money' and graduate earnings discourse on senior management decision-making (or, put more simply, their presence in justifications for managerial decisions).

Finally, the report reinforces the need for sector-wide discussions on history provision, not only in terms of enrolments and outcomes, but of workloads and curricula. What do sustainable history programmes look like, and how might these best meet the needs not only of future students, but of staff and wider communities? There are opportunities here to drive new narratives around history and its value, and we should start having these conversations in earnest now.

[10] See: Andrew McGettigan, 'History and higher education policy reform: what happens next', 25 April 2022, available at: https://www.history-uk.ac.uk/2022/04/25/history-and-higher-education-policy-reform-what-happens-next/.