

Trends in History Provision in UK Higher Education

June 2022

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 Provision 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.

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Trends in History Provision

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.

This executive summary accompanies the *Trends in History Provision in UK Higher Education* report, released by History UK in June 2022. The full report is an edited and shortened version of a research consultancy report authored by Gareth Brown and David Harvie for History UK in February 2022. The research and the report have been shaped by a History UK working group: Yolana Pringle (lead), Jamie Wood, Elizabeth Tingle, Manuela Williams, Sara Barker, Sarah Holland, Daniel Laqua, and Antonio Sennis.