



MINUTES

Meeting of History UK, 7 July 2022, 14:00 via Zoom

Present: Yolana Pringle (Co-Convenor, Roehampton); Jamie Wood (Co-Convenor, Lincoln); Grainne Goodwin (Secretary, Leeds Beckett); Sara Barker (Research Officer, Leeds); Simon Peplow (ECR Rep, Warwick); Manuela Williams (Communications Officer, Strathclyde); Coreen McGuire (Teaching Officer, Durham); Tracey Loughran (Essex); Heidi Mekhrkens (Aberdeen); Leanne Calvert (Hertfordshire); Bronach Kane (Cardiff); Deborah Toner (Leicester); Ruth Atherton (South Wales); Tim Grady (Chester); Anna Plassart (OU); Daniel Laqua (Northumbria); Deborah Sutton (Lancaster); Rosie Knight (Sheffield); Sarah Crook (Swansea); Richard Hawkins (Wolverhampton)

Apologies: Sarah Holland (Nottingham); Andrew Jotischky (Royal Holloway); Adrian Howkins (Bristol); Inge Dornan (Brunel); Siobhan Talbott (Keele); Ross Balzaretto (Nottingham); Liz Tingle (De Montfort); Fabian Hilrich (Edinburgh); Christienna Fryar (Goldsmiths); Euryan Roberts (Bangor)

1. Co-convenors' Report

1.1. *Trends in History in UK Higher Education* (June 2022)

Thanks were expressed to members of the working group on editing down the consultants' report and making it accessible. Special thanks were paid to Yolana for coordinating the editorial work and liaising with consultants. The first blog post by Liz Tingle appeared last week, Daniel Laqua's post will appear on Friday 8th July, with more to follow in due course. To date there has been some good engagement on social media and HUK have been contacted by RHS and History departments from across the UK about the report. Discussion in today's meeting under Section 4.2 will consider how the report will inform HUK work going forward.

1.2. Secretary position

Grainne Goodwin from Leeds Beckett was welcomed as the new HUK Secretary.

1.3. Co-convenorship position

From August 2022 Antonio Sennis (UCL) will take up co-convenorship. He has been shadowing Jamie and Yolana since May and has had some input in the *Trends in History* report. He has some ideas about the advocacy side of HUK going forward.

On behalf of HUK, Yolana extended wholehearted thanks to Jamie in his role as co-convenor and his involvement since 2014 in setting up the twitter account and website, and in staying on for an extra year in the role. He will continue to help with the website for the immediate future.

2. Officers' Reports

Officers' Reports are available at:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cippbl_IVP7HthiKLKvZVyiqlzZdcfXbGNKtVbf2LeQ/edit

In summary, HUK accounts look very healthy. The largest expense in 2021/22 was spending on the consultants compiling the *Trends in History* report and work on its professional presentation for public dissemination. Jamie reminded members that **if anyone has any ideas for projects which require funding the co-convenors are happy to discuss ideas.**

Attention was drawn to some of the other reports, such as the REF Score Audit Paper, cautioning the misuse of internal REF audits for HR purposes. The Arts & Humanities Alliance report highlighted issues around funding, open access and student number caps.

Other reports flagged upcoming events and activities, including the 'Historians in the Media' event organised by Sara Barker for the autumn, an event run by Sarah Holland on assessment to take place in October, continuing work on EDI and assessment by Sarah Holland and Adam Budd, and the upcoming boot camp organised by Simon Peplow in September. Coreen McGuire is working on a proposed UK-wide History Pedagogical Practice Forum and would **welcome expressions of interest or ideas on this and other EDI issues.** Manuela Williams will be working on a policy document on social media over the summer.

3. Updates from institutions

This part of the meeting was not minuted for reasons of privacy and confidentiality, but general and interrelated themes of discussion included:

Restructuring – institutional reorganisation and contraction featured in a number of updates.

Colleagues recognised the threat to cognisant disciplines, such as English, and discussed resultant mergers with other subject areas. These were felt to future-proof Humanities disciplines but also brought their own antagonisms. There was a general feeling that the HE sector was experiencing a wave of restructuring with the appointment of new VCs after the relative stasis of the pandemic, which generates some uncertainty about the future.

Recruitment – pressures of student recruitment are being felt not only in institutions where applications are volatile, but by those universities recruiting significant numbers which adversely affect staff/student ratios and morale.

Policy – impact of policy directions was also highlight, such as the drive for degree apprenticeships, debates around "value for money", threats to foundational degree funding, etc.

Engagement - student attendance and engagement were a concern across the sector, with reflections on whether this is a result of pandemic circumstances or students needing to work to subsidise studies in the current economic climate.

4. Trends in History report: how can we take this further?

4.1 Employability

Members had a thorough discussion of embedding employability and diversifying assessment to develop and reflect specific and transferable skills. In general, there was a positive response to enhancing employability in History degrees, but agreement that this is not a silver bullet for recruitment or graduate outcomes. A number of committee members are involved in projects exploring employability and embedding skills development in the curriculum, including the HUK-funded project on Skills Passports run by Jon Chandler (UCL) and due to report back in the coming months about the mapping of skills and how students navigate their future careers.

There was consensus among members that students (and staff) were alienated when modules and activities were overtly branded as “employability”. Colleagues shared employability provision and innovation activities from their institutions. Deborah Toner noted the employability initiatives at Leicester offer placement-based modules (‘History on the Classroom’, working with local schools, and a ‘Heritage Placement’ working with local heritage partners). Despite the value of these for career preparation and experience, levels of interest did not always satisfy their placement partners. Their degree also offers the Leicester Award, focused on CV writing, job application/interview skills, where students in first and second year worked with a local organisation on presentation, pitching, marketing skills, applying for jobs, reflective element. Students find this useful, but it had no tangible link to improving the marketing of and recruitment to the course. This suggests that we need to know more about applicants and students’ expectations and aspirations.

At Northumbria Daniel Laqua reported that their mandatory skills module was problematic; students do not respond well to it, they can be quite strategic at a modular level and often fail to carry critical reflections forward because they have compartmentalised skills on the employability module. At South Wales, where a compulsory employability module exists, Ruth Atherton suggested that students tend to enjoy and value it *after* they have done it but are not always keen to start. This reflected a shared view that skills were better pitched when they were embedded in non-employability modules and when assessment was adapted to accommodate skills acquisition. Tim Grady (Chester), Yolana Pringle (Roehampton) and Sara Barker (Leeds) shared their sense that students appreciated and got a lot out of modules and assessments that were creative, innovative and had “real world” applications such as podcasts, exhibitions, reflective essays, mini research projects, guided walks, poster presentations, video essays, etc.

Despite the positive reception to many elements of the employability agenda members did raise a number of caveats and points for further consideration:

- The disconnect between student experiences of applied learning and their ability to communicate the skills acquired in applications, CVs and interviews. [This will be addressed in Jon Chandler’s work on the History Skills Passport]
- Perceptions of students (and parents) and how far they align with what we envisage employability and its importance to be.
- Unsuitability of skills/career modules and placements for mature students and those already in employment.
- Should there be a baseline for History employability skills, especially if skills are delivered by “stealth” in option modules and electives?
- Appreciation of less “traditional” jobs and more varied future career trajectories; most students will not go on to be curators or teachers.

- The importance of core historical skills such as critical thinking, communication, data retrieval and analysis, citizenship etc. which are adaptive to many careers.
- Are we making work for ourselves by developing modules and activities if they do not solve the problems of recruitment and graduate outcomes?
- Where does the lifelong learning agenda fit into this?

4.2 Trends in History Report feedback

There was much appreciation for the work that went into this impressive report and debate about how to publicise the good news stories and contend with the more challenging findings. Daniel Laqua (Northumbria) underscored that a 2% fall in numbers is not huge, and we needed more work to explore the correlation between the fall in A-Level History and university take up of History. He cited the fairly healthy state of small/medium-sized History programmes which indicates that there is clearly a place for History as a mainstream subject in HE. Colleagues were also heartened by the link between institutional recruitment and the wellbeing of History recruitment. How receptive we should be to the idea that applicants to History degrees do not necessarily need A-Level History was raised. In connection to this, Yolana Pringle noted that we devote much of our time in first year to breaking poor A-Level History habits so we could be more open to this development.

Tim Grady (Chester) asked how we deal with the difficult aspects of the report, specifically around the decline in A-Level History and reductions in UG/PG History numbers. How do we defend the discipline and address these problems without drawing attention to a narrative of decline and contraction? There were two main responses to this question. Firstly, we need to consider the image-management of History and build coalitions, both institutionally and nationally. Colleagues who were experiencing cuts and restructuring spoke to the importance of partnerships within your university so there was a spokesperson or champion even when History was not represented in management and institutional decision-making. Building connections with local History societies and collaborating with organisations like the Royal Historical Society and geniting a wider platform to counter false narratives about History was recommended.

Secondly, there was a lot of support for greater dialogue with schools and making connections earlier in pre-GCSE cohorts. Members stressed that we needed to know more about what was going on in schools, what was on the curriculum, how History lecturers and teachers might mutually support the discipline and how to tackle perceptions amongst school-goers that History was “difficult” and “boring” as a subject. Members expressed interest in creating a HUK group to investigate working with the Historical Association, developing links with schools, and linking up with the PGCE teams within our own instructions. There was also interest in running an event which might allow us to gather evidence about what students want and networking with more teachers. Deborah Toner, Bronach Kane, Jamie Wood, Coreen McGuire, Tim Grady and Daniel Laqua volunteered to get involved with a HUK group to work on this.

5. AOB/ Date of next meeting

The next meeting will take place in autumn 2022.