

# Project Outline

## Introduction

In outlining the project's scope, aims and rationale, the starting point is the benchmarking document for History, which was first published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 2000 and again, in slightly revised form, in 2007. The Agency is an independent body that, within British higher education, seeks 'to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education'. The Agency's benchmarking statements, which cover a wide range of subject areas, provide general guidance on curriculum development matters at undergraduate level, raising key issues that need to be addressed in designing and implementing degree-level programmes. Since there is no intention to dictate practice, and since, for the most part, the statements are fairly brief, much scope arises for sharing ideas on appropriate ways of responding to the guidance they offer, not least as far as progression matters are concerned.

## History benchmarking

The QAA's revised benchmarking statement for history highlights the responsibility of departments 'clearly and explicitly to articulate how a given programme facilitates progression over the years of study'. In this context, progression is concerned with how students gain in 'insight, competence and performance' as they proceed through their undergraduate programmes. The statement notes that history is a non-sequential discipline, essentially concerned with students 'developing and reinforcing similar skills and qualities' and 'learning by doing'. No particular model of achieving progression is advocated, but two general approaches are noted:

1. students undertake the same type of activities with a growing competence studying different subject matter;
2. differing characteristics are attached to particular course units, with routes through them for students being prescribed.

Although the statement gives a central role to progression in designing history curricula, its discussion on the matter is brief. Accordingly, there is much scope for further investigation of progression matters, both in terms of the general approaches that are adopted and of the particular practices at institutional level.

The Statement can be viewed at

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/default.asp>

## Project scope

Devising a research project into how progression is achieved in degree-level history courses raises several key issues that need to be taken into account in defining its nature and scope.

They are:

### 1. The curricular dimensions and history progression

Along with progression, the history benchmarking statement deals with four other key curricular dimensions, namely content selection, skills and qualities of mind; teaching approaches; and assessment. For all but assessment, examples of progression are given.

They are:

**Content** - noting that a move from broadly-based to more focused course units is not necessarily the most appropriate.

**Skills enhancement** - citing the development of an 'increasing capacity for sustained written and/or oral analysis'.

**Teaching approach** - mentioning the encouragement of greater independence in learning.

#### Points arising:

1. Examples of assessment progression might be concerned with the nature of the assignments students are required to undertake. For instance, giving oral presentations with the aid of bullet-point prompts might be seen as a more demanding task than reading from a script and might be expected, therefore, to occur as a regular feature in the later stages of programmes.
2. Considering progression within each of the main curricular dimensions covered in the benchmarking document provides a convenient framework for analysis, although, in practice, linkage is likely to occur. Thus an assessment regime that increasingly emphasises coursework at the expense of examinations might be linked with enhancing analytical skills through making growing use of primary evidence in informing coursework assignments.
3. Investigating elements of progression in history programmes plainly has greater use value for curriculum design purposes if the underpinning rationale can also be clarified and assessed.

### 2. Defining progression from level to level within history programmes

The benchmarking statement is concerned with how, through course design, students are helped to achieve improvements in the quality of their work over the three or four years of a history undergraduate course. But the question also arises of delineating progression from level to level as they proceed through their programmes of study. In other words, how is the provision made at each level designed to provide greater challenges for students, helping them to achieve more advanced levels of understanding? And what are the incremental learning steps involved? Take, for example, the issue of promoting historiographical understanding, to which the following approach to achieving progression might apply:

**Level 1**

Creating greater awareness of the differing interpretations of historical events and situations that historians put forward. Students recognise and articulate the varying positions that historians have taken.

**Level 2**

As well as continuing with level 1 provision, thereby reinforcing their understanding, emphasis is placed on the need for students to make critical evaluations of differing historical interpretations and to understand why these differences arise.

**Level 3**

As well as continuing with level 1 and level 2 provision, again with reinforcement in mind, opportunity is given for students to undertake original investigation of historiographical issues with the aid of primary evidence, with a view to forming their own interpretations.

**Points arising:**

1. Historiographical understanding is seen as a key issue for students to address throughout their studies. Activity once introduced continues to be reinforced through continued application but in differing contexts, whilst more demanding activities are incorporated at each level.
2. It might be thought that such a progression is too gradual, failing to allow students to achieve their own interpretations at an early enough stage in their studies. Accordingly, the scheme might be modified so that, say, increasing opportunity is allowed for students to inform historiographical issues through deploying primary evidence in at least some modules from the outset or at level 2, but doing so in a more comprehensive way, perhaps in every module, at level 3 or 4.
3. In dealing with the academic challenges that are incorporated from level to level within degree programmes, the term 'differentiation' may be usefully employed.

**3. Learning from more general practice**

Extending the research more fully into overseas history courses, as well as into the provision made within other subject areas, brings advantage in two main ways.

1. The degree-level history courses offered in the UK provide a substantial amount of information on which to base a research project, provision being made in around 100 institutions. However, going beyond them massively adds to the evidential base on which to draw, helping to lessen the impact of non-response, or of limited response, from UK history providers.
2. Comparative analysis of approaches to achieving progression can be undertaken, both with regard to history teaching taking place in differing contexts and to the perspectives offered by other disciplines.

### **Points arising:**

1. Drawing on such an extensive body of evidence brings problems with devising the research strategy, a matter which is discussed in the following section.
2. The question also arises of deciding how far the research should go beyond consideration of the practices employed and engage with theoretical perspectives on the notion of progression that might be expected to occur in the general educational literature.

### **4. Extending existing research**

As noted in the introduction, the project extends research already undertaken into progression in undergraduate history courses by the project director. This research is outlined in Section 3, but the key features of the approach used may be mentioned here. They are:

Outline detail on progression practices was obtained from thirty-one history departments in the UK during 2002/3. A questionnaire was used in order to obtain standardised responses.

Additional detail was obtained from history department websites and other documentation and from follow-up enquiry.

Research was extended into North American and Australian practices, thereby allowing a degree of international comparison.

### **Points arising**

1. The research was undertaken using availability sampling, so that the results cannot be regarded as representative of general practices. Nonetheless, they are informative about progression issues and they raise further matters that are worthy of investigation. One example is that of how history courses can progressively enhance students' ICT skills, not least with their employability in mind.
2. Attempts were made, not always successfully, to tease out the rationale underpinning the progression elements that could be discerned. In some instances, however, insights could be obtained by relating the inferences drawn to observations made in the general educational literature. The rationale for moving increasingly from breadth to depth of coverage in terms of course content provides a case in point.

### **Project aims**

Arising from the above considerations, the main objectives of the project are to:

1. review more fully the existing literature dealing with progression in relation to higher education history provision;

2. extend the available research data concerned with how history departments in the UK and overseas are achieving progression;
3. identify and analyse in more detail the underpinning rationale that history departments employ with regard to progression;
4. provide insights into the ways in which progression is achieved in other academic disciplines at undergraduate level, especially those that are cognate to history;
5. disseminate the project findings with a view to encouraging discussion about, and informing the process of, curricular design in higher education degree courses with regard to progression matters.

## **Project rationale**

Part of the rationale for the project arises from the responsibility placed on history departments by the History benchmarking document to articulate how their programmes of study facilitate progression. The reasoning behind this statement is not given, but it is certainly intended to elicit positive responses, no doubt with the needs of both teacher and taught in mind. Certainly considering progression from these two perspectives provides further justification for the project.

As far as teaching is concerned, there is a need to guard against markedly different expectations arising with regard to the individual course units offered at each level of provision. In this respect, course units that are too demanding can be as disadvantageous as those that fail to stretch students sufficiently. By ensuring a reasonable level of consistency with regard to expectations at each level, however, the collective efforts of the team in achieving programme requirements are more likely to be realised.

As far as students are concerned, there is a need to articulate the demands that degree programmes make on them as they move from one level to the next. The assumption can all too easily be made that students understand these demands when, in fact, their grasp of them is at best shaky. Without adequate guidance on the nature and extent of the value added they should be achieving as they progress, students may well be content to continue performing at levels characteristic of early-stage provision.