

Section 3. History teaching literature review

Introduction

The literature on higher education teaching has much to say about content selection, skills enhancement, learning and teaching approaches and assessment techniques. However, with regard to progression, the other major curricular dimension discussed in the history benchmarking statement, the contrary is true. In general, only brief attention is given to the issue, with comment being buried in consideration of other matters.

Why discussion tends to be overlooked on an issue that the history benchmarking statement sees as being of high importance is hard to determine. Maybe the view prevails that enhancing students' understanding and competency as they proceed through their programmes of study essentially arises by giving them advice on an individual rather than a collective basis. In this way, students are assisted by starting from the varying positions they have reached, whatever point they are at in the programme. Additionally, the need to debate progression issues may not seem all that necessary in subjects where, unlike history, sequential forms of learning are seen to be strongly embedded. Perhaps, too, there is concern that implementing progression frameworks, even those that are loosely formulated, restricts academic freedom, taking staff too far beyond their comfort zones in terms of the teaching requirements made. Yet such arguments do not negate the value of debating the practices and principles that can be adopted in achieving progression, especially given the growing importance attached to implementing student-centred approaches.

The first part of this section outlines overall approaches to achieving progression in history courses that have been noted in the literature, offering comment on them. The second part considers elements of progression that relate to the main curricular dimensions covered in the history benchmarking statement and to the issue of students progressing into higher education.

Overall approaches

The two- and three-level approaches

The growing volume of literature dealing with undergraduate history teaching that has emerged since the 1990s has begun to analyse the issue of progression in some detail. A useful starting point is the contribution made by Alex Cowen in 1996, which identifies two major patterns of progression then prevailing in English universities:

The three-level approach

Based on the traditional three-year degree course, the requirement here is that 'successive levels should confront students with educational experiences of growing complexity'. The requirement might be met either through enhancing skills or introducing additional approaches deemed to be appropriate at a higher level.

The two-level approach

Influenced by established practice in the 'old' universities, this approach distinguished between an introductory first-level course, which prepares students from varying backgrounds for 'serious undergraduate work', and advanced course units, which are offered at any point thereafter.

See Alex Cowan, '*Planning a History Curriculum*' in Alan Booth and Paul Hyland (eds.), *History in Higher Education: New Directions in Teaching and Learning* (1996), pp.21-38.

Points arising:

1. The two-level approach has advantage over the three-level approach in giving students a wider range of module choices at each level of provision.
2. Particularly with student understanding in mind, the three-level approach has advantage over the two-level approach in enabling the more complex expectations arising at each level of provision to be articulated.
3. With either approach, the challenge of determining the differentiation between levels arises, demonstrating to students the nature of the more complex demands being made on them as they progress.

Other approaches

A further contribution to the discussion was made by Tim Hitchcock, Robert B. Shoemaker and John Tosh in 2000. Based on survey responses from sixty-six of HE institutions in England, they identified three approaches to progression.

The research training model

In what might be termed its purest form, this model featured outline survey units in year 1, which were designed to give a grounding in medieval, early modern and modern history; further survey units with optional units in year 2 and a special subject and dissertation in year 3. This approach was found to be the commonest.

The 'a la carte' approach

The course units offered relate to staff specialisms and students choose freely from them. Each course unit aids progress progression by promoting a range of aptitudes. In common with the research training model, this approach is a traditional one being seen as preparing students for a public service career.

Putting skills at the core

This approach, the syllabus is largely organised around methodological and theoretical skills. A comparatively narrow range of subject matter tends to be offered, which is studied from varying perspectives (methodological, thematic, philosophical and historiographical) that become progressively more sophisticated.

Points arising:

1. With the research training model, the rationale for progression is seen to rest on the notion of students acquiring knowledge and elementary skills in the first two years and the engaging in documentary analysis in year 3, the special subject and dissertation enabling carefully-focused research activity to take place,
2. There is a need to define the precise nature of the survey, optional and special subject course units and to explain why the special subject is seen as being more demanding than option course units and option units as more demanding than survey course units.
3. The 'a la carte' and core skills approaches raise questions about how that range of aptitudes identified are developed to more sophisticated levels as students progress through their programmes of study.
4. The 'a la carte' approach has advantage in allowing staff to offer course units that reflect their specialist interests. However, it provides less opportunity to design history curricula from the student perspective, as, for example, in requiring all students to take a dissertation preparation course unit prior to the final year of their course.
5. The authors note instances of the approaches being modified from their pure forms. Thus, in the research training model, course units may have quite limited temporal coverage with regard to survey modules, not going back beyond the early modern period.

Elements of progression

The Bangor survey

The Hitchcock, Shoemaker and Tosh essay was contemporaneous with the first edition of the History Benchmarking Statement (2000), thereby providing timely insights into the sort of response that could be made to its recommendations. And the same can be said of the survey made in the following year by Wil Griffith of the University of Wales, Bangor. Drawing on questionnaire responses obtained from thirty-seven UK history departments, almost equally split between 'old' and 'new' universities, this survey produced the following information about progression:

The great majority of departments (92 per cent) distinguished between an introductory year (level 1) and subsequent provision (levels 2 & 3).

A lesser majority (70 per cent) stated that they distinguished clearly between level 2 and level 3 courses. However, when more detailed responses were obtained, it transpired that differentiation between levels 2 and 3 was not hard and fast, often applying only to certain courses or course units.

An almost even division was found between those departments that taught their second- and third-level (in Scotland third- and fourth-level) students together, though a clear majority (71 per cent) of the old universities did so.

In response to the question of whether instruction and delivery methods differed between levels 1 and 2, 59 per cent answered in the affirmative. Again, however, qualifications were made. The types of differentiation mentioned included the introduction of more or longer seminars and greater emphasis on research. Yet no department stated outright that their provision at level 3 was more difficult.

In terms of differentiating assessment at level 3 from that at level 2, only 12 departments (32 per cent) made use of the dissertation. Half the new universities claimed that their assessment at level 3 was more demanding, and another quarter that greater depth of source material study was required. Two in five of the old universities mentioned the use of gobblet work and special subjects at level 3.

Points arising

1. The sample institutions appear generally to have conformed to the two-level pattern of progression that Alex Cowen noted, with the differentiation occurring mainly between level 1 and subsequent provision. .
2. Differentiation occurring beyond level 1 tended to be patchy. One in three institutions achieved a clear progression by requiring a final-level dissertation to be submitted and other ways of achieving elements of differentiation were mentioned. But the conclusion that no department made an outright statement about level 3 provision being more difficult is striking.
3. With regard to types of differentiation that were distinguished, questions arise about the precise form they take and the nature of the additional demands that make on students, especially in qualitative terms.

Conceptualising progression elements

Also in the wake of the first History Benchmarking Statement, Geoff Timmins extended his research into progression and differentiation in higher education history courses, an issue with which he had long been concerned in relation to primary and secondary school history teaching. His approach was to analyse how progression and differentiation were being achieved in each of the key curricular dimensions considered in the Benchmarking Statement, namely content selection, the development of skills and qualities of mind; approaches to teaching; and assessment techniques. In 2003, he used some of his early findings to contribute to the History, Classics and Archaeology Subject Centre's Briefing Paper series. The paper begins with a brief consideration of why establishing frameworks of progression and differentiation are important, raising two main considerations:

Teaching coherence

At issue here is the need for course teams to have reasonably consistent expectations of students' attainments, and of the experience they encounter, as they proceed from level to level in their programmes of study. Unless this is the case, individual team members may have widely differing expectations of their students at each level, with the demands made on them being either too limited or too high.

Student understanding

To achieve growing levels of levels of competence, students need to understand what is required of them as they pass from one stage of their course to the next. Without clear guidance in this respect, they may well continue to operate in ways that characterise early stages of provision. Moreover, they will benefit from the reinforcement arising from the advice given by the team as a whole.

The paper can be viewed on-line at:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/resources/detail/briefing_papers/progression_in_higher_education_history_programmes

Progression

The paper continues with a section on the forms progression can take. The importance of including introductory course units that are compulsory at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is stressed, especially in helping students to acquire a common grounding with regard to the content coverage and skills development they will need in progressing with insight and confidence through subsequent stages. Discussion follows on the number of levels of differentiation that are needed in history degree programmes – introductory, intermediate and advanced provides one possibility – and on the issue of allowing some overlap of level provision, so that, say, final-level students might take some course units that are drawn from earlier stages of their programme.

The final section of the paper extends discussion into consideration of progression in teaching and learning approaches and means of assessment. The former raises the issue of promoting independent forms of learning at and before the final stages of programmes, as well as moving increasingly towards tutorials and seminars at the expense of lectures, not least with a view to providing support on an individual basis for students as they take greater control over their own learning agendas. The latter considers the greater demands that assessment might make on students both in quantitative and qualitative terms, including the possibility of longer essays being used in the final year of study so that students have more opportunity to use primary evidence, perhaps at the expense of examinations.

The University of Central Lancashire survey

Along with his colleagues Keith Vernon and Christine Kinealy, Geoff Timmins contributed further to the progression discussion, drawing on a survey of thirty-one higher education institutions in the UK. Again, progression was examined in relation to each of the four main curricular areas covered in the history benchmarking statement and the findings were discussed in relation to examples of practice in both Britain and overseas, with attempts being made to draw out the underpinning rationale. Major findings are summarised below.

Content selection

In over eighty per cent of cases, content was organised so that students moved from breadth to depth and from compulsory to optional course units as they progressed through their programmes of study.

Skills development

All the institutions surveyed offered students the opportunity to undertake a final-year dissertation, though in some cases this was not compulsory, nor was the use of primary evidence always required. In nearly half the institutions, a pre-dissertation unit was offered before the final year to help students prepare for their dissertation work. Some 60 per cent of the programmes surveyed made greater use of primary evidence at level 2 than at level 1 and in more than 70 per cent of the programmes there was more emphasis on using primary evidence generally at level three than previously, usually with regard to dissertations and special subjects, but also in a majority of cases more generally.

Learning and teaching

In 71 per cent of the responses, there was a change from a lecture to a seminar emphasis as students progressed, a finding which may strongly reflect the inclusion of final-year course units in their programmes that are strongly rooted in the use of primary evidence. Additionally, 65 per cent of the responses noted that increased opportunity was made available for more independent learning to take place, other than through a dissertation requirement.

Assessment approaches

A marked shift was reported in moving towards assessing students according to their ability to deploy/analyse primary evidence. The shift tended to be most marked in the final year, when dissertation and special subject requirements had to be met. In fewer than thirty per cent of cases was a move towards coursework assessment used as a means of achieving progression, though considerable differences were reported between institutions in this respect.

For further details, see G. Timmins, K. Vernon & C. Kinealy, *Teaching and Learning History in Higher Education* (2005), ch.2.

Points arising

1. The survey revealed a considerable degree of commonality with regard to general practices concerning progression matters, though most strongly as far as content is concerned.

2. Progression was least evident as far as moving to a greater emphasis on coursework is concerned, even though coursework allows students a great deal of scope to engage increasing with primary evidence. Evidently examinations are seen to offer appreciable advantage at each level of provision.

The Manchester University and Oxford University survey

Entitled Progression and undergraduate learning and teaching in history and undertaken by Dr. Hannah Barker and Dr. Monica McLean, this project had three objectives:

1. to explore what constructions of progression through a degree can be found in history departments in the UK;
2. to search pedagogic literature for evidence about intellectual progression at university level
3. to develop models or taxonomies of history degree progression that incorporate findings from literature and practices in History departments.

Using semi-structured interviews conducted with twelve historians, eight of whom taught in pre-1992 universities and the other four in post-1992 universities, responses were obtained to three main questions:

1. What do you understand by 'progression'?

Responses concerned the honing of basic skills (eg writing and oral) and higher-order cognitive skills (eg analysis and synthesis). Respondents placed varying emphasis on both these sets of skills, and on individual skills, some focusing on 'learning to select, assimilate, organise and communicate large amounts of materials that must be read' and others 'on a wider range of "skills" that can be transferred for use in contexts other than learning history'.

2. What is the difference between a first and third year student (in reality/ideally)?

Some interviewees emphasised growing capacities, such as critical understanding of accounts of the past and analysis and interpretation of sources. Others highlighted more concrete skills, such as giving presentations, improving note-taking and writing and becoming more confident generally.

3. How does a first year become a third year?

Most interviewees perceived that a 'developmental leap' occurred between years 2 and 3, though a few thought the leap occurred between years 1 and 2. The use by interviewees of such terms as 'sophistication' and 'efficiency' suggested that they see their students gradually developing an ability to better manipulate the same subject matter. In some cases, developing such 'craftsmanship' capacities as critical understanding of accounts the past was emphasised; in others, more concrete skills, such as giving presentations, were highlighted.

Other findings of the project are:

- Confirmation that the key vehicles for promoting progression in history are reading writing and discussion, but wide variations were found in terms of the requirements made of students. Three main factors were seen as being influential here, namely

academics' perceptions of how skilful students are when they arrive at university; the constraints on teaching imposed by resources and the environment; and, personal philosophies about what it means to teach history.

- In some cases, the means of achieving progression put forward by the interviewees defined the precise nature of the more demanding challenges they set for students. These include requiring extended essays; offering negotiated assessment; and including more student-led seminars.
- Barriers to progression are analysed in relation to the attributes of students and of the learning and teaching environment in which they operate. Those mentioned most often were student effort, student writing and curriculum structure/content. Interviewees were concerned that such barriers mean that students are not getting the attention they need to succeed to the level of attainment of which they are capable.
- Two models of progression, in the sense of an 'ideal type', are identified, though, in practice, interviewees operated a hybrid of both types. Both models centralize analysis and argument, with the approaches and emphases differing. The models are:
 1. Learning the discipline – students learn to become practicing academic historians, who, through analysis and synthesis they undertake, form their own well-informed opinions about historians' concerns.
 2. Acquiring transferable skills – progression here tends to be seen as gaining increasing sophistication in the skills of a 'general arts' student, including written and oral communication, group work and critical analysis.
- In discussion arising from the literature searches, note is made of Prosser and Trigwell's concept of 'nested hierarchy', advanced in their 1999 book *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience of Higher Education*. The concept can be seen to have particular relevance in discussions on progression matters, since it is concerned with students' varying levels of perception about learning. Thus, at the lower end of the hierarchy, students see learning as being about knowledge accumulation and at the upper end as being about the search for meaning and the implications learning has for themselves.

The project's findings can be viewed on-line at

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/hca/resources/detail/progression_and_undergraduate_learning

Points arising

1. As the project's authors note, although their findings are based mainly on the views of just twelve academics, they raise key issues that are worthy of further investigation and discussion. A number of these are noted in their conclusion, including whether or not the two progression models identified have descriptive and explanatory value.

2. The issue of barriers to achieving progression is one such issue, especially to gain the student perspective.
3. The Prosser and Trigwell reference serves as a useful reminder that students need to be made aware of how the work they undertake is made more demanding as they progress. The barriers to achievement may prevent attainment being achieved, but so, too, will a lack of appreciation about what higher level attainment involves.

Prior learning and progression

Two recent contributions to the literature on higher education history teaching, one relating to the United States and the other to Britain, are highly instructive in appreciating the differing perspectives that tutors and students hold about the nature and requirements of historical study at undergraduate level.

The USA perspective

This perspective is provided by Robert J. Gough, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Assuming responsibility within his department for teacher education, he undertook almost 300 observations of students teaching history and social studies in local middle and high schools. From the insights he gained, he sought to align more closely the content and practices adopted in his department with his students' previous experience. He did so in relation to instructional practice; methods of evaluation; modes of critical thinking; and the loci of learning. Thus, with regard to critical thinking, he remarks that school students have been introduced to primary sources, are aware that history is more than a 'factual recitation' and that research is an important part of studying history. Even so, he suggests, their understanding of research is likely to differ from that of their college professor, so that the need arises to provide guidance on how to do research using primary resources in order to produce original historical narratives and to develop their own interpretations.

See Robert. J. Clough, 'What we Should Know and Precollegiate Learning', *Perspectives*, (January, 2004). The article can be viewed at:

<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2004/0401/0401tea1.cfm>

The UK perspective

In this perspective, Alan Booth of Nottingham University offers a summary of recent contributions made on the transition to studying history at undergraduate level, focusing on the perceptions that students and university staff commonly hold. Highlighting such fundamental issues as skills' levels, historical thinking, the role of teachers, teaching methods and assessment, he notes the divergent views that arise between students and tutors. For example, with regard to skills, students tend to be fairly confident about their ability to perform key historical tasks, though less so where ICT, numeracy and oral presentations are required, whilst tutors express concern about such matters as students' critical thinking abilities, researching in libraries and preparing coursework essays.

See A.Booth, 'Worlds in collision: university tutor and student perspectives on the transition to degree level history', paper given at the *History in Schools and Higher Education: Issues of Common Concern* conference (2005). The paper can be viewed at

<http://www.history.ac.uk/education/sept/booth.html>

Points arising

1. Undergraduate tutors clearly have a responsibility to understand the extent of historical skills and understanding that new students are likely to have about the nature and requirements of historical study at degree level and to find ways of helping them to find appropriate ways forward in order to develop their understanding of the requirements that degree-level study makes..
2. The process of developing this understanding feeds into the more general means of achieving progression that are devised for undergraduate history programmes. In part this is because the transition for some students may be lengthy, not least because entrenched perspectives may take time to alter. But the need also arises to both reinforce and enhance students' understanding as they move through their programmes of study.