



Subject Centre for
History, Classics
and Archaeology

RETHINKING AND IMPROVING LECTURING IN HISTORY

RESEARCH PROJECT, 2001-07

FINAL REPORT: APRIL 2007

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1. Aims and Note of Institutions Involved

1. This project originated in the recognition of a paradox. Firstly, lecturing is the central teaching format in most HE courses. As well as providing a central spine for courses, History lectures aim firstly to distil accumulated wisdom on a subject and secondly to help students understand how different perspectives on that subject have developed and how they might be evaluated. Properly delivered, the lecture should provide HE students with important insights not only into particular themes and topics but also into the mind of the historian. They should, therefore, be a crucial element in the education of history undergraduates. As the revised (2007) statement of the History Benchmarking Statement puts it: 'Presentations by lecturers stamp the course or subject with the imprint of personality and enable students to reflect on and respond to an individual's particular interpretative approach. Lectures provide a broad framework which helps define the course, while also introducing students to its main themes, debates and interpretations.'

2. Against this, lectures tend to receive a bad press from educationists. Lectures, it is often held, represent a passive learning experience for students. Although lectures may be enjoyable – partly because many represent 'good theatre' - students retain little information for long and are not sufficiently stimulated by lectures to think for themselves. Some even argue that lectures encourage students to believe that they represent 'the answers', thus inhibiting the process of critical reflection which is central to the learning process at a high level. Lectures might even be travestied as a combination of ego trip for the 'sage on the stage' and a short-term, short-cut but ultimately unsatisfying experience for the student.

3. This research project was funded by the UK's Learning and Teaching Support Network (now subsumed into the Higher Education Academy) in order to evaluate the validity of perceptions about lecturing in History and to clarify the purpose of lectures and to make suggestions for making lectures of long-term value to history students.

4. The intended outcome of the research was a deeper understanding not only of what, but of how, students learn from lectures and how their perceptions about the value of lectures may be empirically tested.

5. The research was undertaken in four HE institutions in the north of England: Huddersfield, Lancaster, Manchester and Sheffield Hallam. These Institutions, two pre-1992 research-intensive institutions and two post-1992 institutions with a strong teaching-and-learning ethos, were deliberately chosen to provide a variety of experiences.

2. Note of work undertaken by participating Institutions

6. By agreement, the four Institutions all made use of questionnaires with both History staff and students. However, they concentrated on different aspects of the research. Manchester and Sheffield Hallam concentrated on questionnaire analysis. In Manchester, this incorporated the views of students reading Classics, Ancient History and Archaeology as well as History. Sheffield Hallam additionally organised student buzz groups and a Lecturers' Focus Group. In Huddersfield, questionnaire analysis linked to earlier research in the institution on student perceptions of their learning experiences and on refining a publication designed for internal use: 'How to get the best out of Lectures'. In Lancaster, although some quantitative analysis was undertaken, the predominant focus of the research was on qualitative issues resulting from questionnaires and in-depth interviews with students and staff conducted in 2002 and 2004.

3. Methodology

7. It was agreed at Project Team meetings that the research would be carried out separately with discrete groups of staff and students at the participating Institutions. They would produce their own findings in the form of reports. These would feed into the wider Project.

8. Findings would be reported at meetings of the Project Team so that analyses of similarities and differences in approaches and findings could be undertaken.

9. The participating Institutions agreed that, although questionnaire analysis would form a central part of the Project's work, qualitative issues were equally important since these would enable a range of staff and student views on the utility of lectures to emerge.

10. The Research, therefore, focused on questionnaires designed to elicit student perceptions about the value of lectures and on in-depth interviews both with History undergraduates and staff.

LANCASTER RESEARCH

4. Interviews with Staff

11. Taped interviews were held with twenty-five History staff in Lancaster. The interviewees comprised staff at all levels of seniority in the profession and with varying levels of experience both in Lancaster and elsewhere in Higher

Education. Interviews were conducted by a post-doctoral Teaching Assistant and a Postgraduate Research student also with teaching experience. It was a deliberate choice to use postgraduate/postdoctoral interviewers partly because they were not members of the project team and partly because it was felt that lecturers might feel more comfortable talking in a relaxed way to people who were not their institutional academic peers. We wished to avoid any risk that staff were being 'judged' on their answers.

12. The interviews began with questions designed to elicit staff perceptions of the purpose of lectures. Staff were asked: what role lectures play in their teaching; what they think students look for in an effective lecture; what methods and devices they use in lecturing; and how they think they can gauge what students take from the lectures they give.

13. Lecturers in general saw the purpose of lectures at both introductory and expository. Most thought that providing an introduction and effective overview were of central importance. They also valued the opportunity lectures gave to make more familiar and, in some cases, more intelligible complex ideas, concepts or subject matter. A number believed that the opportunity to provide an individual stamp, or particular angle, was important. Overall, staff believed the key purposes of lecturing were to provide 'orientation, information and interpretation'. As part of this last objective, lectures should aim to foster critical thinking. Several respondents also noted that lectures had equally important, if less directly instrumental, purposes. They gave lecturers an opportunity to exhibit passion for their subject which they hoped would be communicated to their students and stimulate their enthusiasm. Some also highlighted the importance of lectures as part of a wider and complex inter-relationship between staff and students which influenced work elsewhere in the course and beyond that into the overall programme of study.

14. Staff perceptions of student expectations of lectures tended to stress student preference for information delivery within a clear structure and, at need, rendering difficult ideas etc accessible. Some suggested that students come to university expecting to see a subject expert imparting his/her specialist expertise. The lecture was seen almost as a ritual: important as much for what it symbolised as for what it imparted or stimulated. A number reflected on the student perception that the lecture afforded an opportunity to listen to an authoritative discourse. When staff moved on to critical reflection about student expectation and engagement, there was frank acknowledgement that students expected, one way or another, to be entertained and that visual aids could be a means of entertainment (or could at least provide some variety) as well as enlightenment. A number also reflected on what they saw as a tension between staff desire to engage students in a process of critical interaction and the student preference for 'passive learning'. As one put it: 'What they want is to be let off the hook'.

15. Staff use a wide variety of methods and devices in their lecturing. The use of handouts, lecture shells and the like is now almost ubiquitous. OHP has increasingly given place to PowerPoint presentation, although some respondents criticise the latter as deflecting the audience from the key

purposes of the lecture. The fear of technology/use-of-technology failure is also an inhibition. A minority of lecturers now make consistent, critical use of visual material in lecture courses but more frequently its use is illustrative. Some staff stress the importance of lecture as 'theatre' and of the importance of putting on a performance in order to engage the audience and perhaps also to meet expectations of 'the sage on the stage'. An increasing number of lecturers recognize that the standard lecture span of 50 minutes represents a substantial challenge for listeners. Some break up sessions in a variety of ways: asking for questions; encouraging brief periods of discussion among students; asking for informal feedback on accessibility, pace etc; leaving students to reflect for a short period on key issues or questions thrown up by the lecture to that point etc. It is clear that the model (which many students have when they enter University) of the lecture as an unsupported 50-minute monologue designed to convey authoritative information is now virtually extinct.

16. Staff offered a wide range of responses to the question asking how they know what students take from lectures. Many interpreted it as an invitation to reflect on how they knew when a lecture was not working. They are alert to indications of inattention – looking out of the window, lack of eye contact, few notes being taken etc. Conversely, they take evidence of engagement – picking up on jokes, an atmosphere of concentration etc – as powerful indicators that the lecture is going down well and that students will therefore be benefited from it. The use of lecture information, or lecture notes, in essays and seminar presentations was seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it indicated that students found the lecture useful in helping to prepare assessed work and, when lecture material was used appositely, as evidence that key points had been comprehended as intended. On the other, many lecturers saw the use of lecture notes in an essay as evidence of misdirected effort if not downright bad practice. Staff tended to want lectures to act as stimuli to further research, taking students to the library to find supporting material, alternative hypotheses and the like. Too often, staff asserted, the use of lecture notes in essays was evidence that students saw the lecture as 'an authority' to be quoted rather than as a stimulus to thought, reflection and further work. Few students, staff consider, saw the lecture as an opportunity to hear new, if still provisional views or even (as it certainly was for some) as a provocation to disagreement and, through that, to critical engagement. Many history lecturers believe that students invest the lecture with greater authority than the lecturer intends. They have a, perhaps understandable, horror of being seen as the expert who gives students 'the answer'.

5. Interviews with Students at induction

17. Lancaster students in two successive years (2002 and 2003) responded to a questionnaire at Registration. This was designed to elicit information about any prior experience of lecturing and also the initial perceptions of lecturing and lecturers held by new students. Students were specifically asked about what they considered lectures at Lancaster would be like, what they considered the purpose of lectures was, what image they had of a history lecturer and what they think made for a good lecture.

18. Most students had not experienced a formal history lecture before beginning their courses. Those with some experience had mostly gained it through attending commercially run sixth-form lecture day. A few had heard lectures, or presentations, given by lecturers who had visited their school, either by invitation or as part of an admissions presentation.

19. Since the great majority of students had little or no experience of attending lectures, responses provided information about assumptions. The most striking finding was that most new students assumed that the lectures they would be hearing would be given by men. This appeared to reflect more than the standard (if now somewhat less common) assumption in speech that 'when he or she is meant, say he'. As paragraph 21 below indicates, lectures were often assumed to be given by authority figures and authority figures are apparently more often assumed to be male.

20. Students felt that lectures would be a formal experience, delivered in a lecture theatre with a large number of other students present. No students mentioned any of the devices lecturers used to break up the standard 50-minute slot (see para 15). The lecture was seen as a predominantly passive experience. Students received valuable information and took notes. Few students anticipated that lectures would be accompanied by handouts, lecture shells and the like.

21. New students considered that the main purpose of giving lectures was to impart information related to a given course. The assumption made by some was that this information was specialist in nature and might not easily be gained from textbooks. Only a few students suggested that one important function of the lecture was to have a fresh, new or individual point of view developed by a subject expert.

22. The image of the lecturer, as well as sexist (see para 19), was also predominantly 'ageist'. Students had the image of lecturers as predominantly bespectacled, middle-aged and wearing unfashionable, or even worn-out, clothes. Leather patches were frequently mentioned and some students believed that their lecturers would be either scruffy, or at least not stylish in appearance. It is not entirely clear how this image has become fixed but it may derive from representations of 'the learned' in popular culture which strongly emphasize 'otherness', even 'other-worldliness'. Certainly, students did not expect lecturers to be like them!

23. Students provided a diverse variety of views on what they considered would make for a good lecturer. Many mentioned the importance of being knowledgeable and authoritative. Some talked of the importance of engaging with the audience and some also valued enthusiasm and commitment. The emphasis in these responses was on knowledge, personality and engagement rather than with the development of historical skills.

6. Interviews with Years 2 and 3 students

24. Postgraduate teaching assistants conducted more detailed 'buzz-group' sessions with Lancaster undergraduates entering Years 2 and 3. These followed up some of the questions asked of students at the beginning of their course (experience, purpose, image etc) and also asked for reflections, based on experience, on: what they wished they had known about lecturing before coming to university; the purpose of the lecture; the characteristics of a good lecture and a good lecturer; and how the experience of lectures in the year just finished might influence the student's approach to learning in the next.

25. Many students expressed surprise at the relative formality of lectures and also at the amount of information which they believed lecturers were trying to get across. Some talked about lectures suffering from 'information overload'. Students also wished that they had been given more information about how to take effective notes and how to manage problems caused by rapid delivery. Students also noted a wider diversity of lecturing approaches than they had anticipated.

26. More experienced students tended to have many of the same perceptions of the purpose of lectures as those identified by staff (see para 13). They mentioned the importance of lectures in setting up courses and in identifying the key themes which would be given detailed treatment. Some considered that good lecturers could act as a spur to wider reading. Others believed that lectures supported tutorial understanding and essay work. A few mentioned the value of the lecture which attempted to draw contemporary parallels with historical experience. Such parallels would be difficult to make, and especially to keep up to date, in a textbook. Few students, however, mentioned the historiographical value of the lecture.

27. Student perceptions of what makes for a good lecture predominantly turned organisation. Students wanted to be aware of the direction of travel and to follow that direction at a pace which was manageable. Some believed that the lecturer should reiterate what are the key themes and explain why these were considered to be specially important. Words like 'focus', 'clarity' and 'relevance' were frequently encountered. However, the characteristics of a good lecture were not totally instrumental. Some respondents appreciated the lecture as performance and saw the entertainment value in a presentation which had a more serious purpose but which attempted to achieve that purpose by lightening the tone.

28. Students recognised that 'good lecturers' could be good in different ways. They appreciated that different personalities could produce equally satisfying lectures by playing to strengths. Not all are equally gifted as public speakers, yet those lacking demotic gifts could nevertheless deliver effective lectures. Most emphasized the prime importance of organisation. Equally important was sustaining interest and, if possible, generating excitement about the subject matter being covered. In this, pacing, gaps (for questions or even for taking breath) and variations in delivery were all considered to be important. *Sine qua non* for most overall was that the lecturer should demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject. It was unlikely that a student would take up a

subject for further enquiry if the lecturer her or himself had not demonstrated enthusiasm for, and effective engagement with, it.

29. Students offered a wide range of views on the extent to which the lecturing experience in the present year might affect approaches to learning. A number indicated that the experience of listening to lectures had persuaded them of the need to concentrate more and to make effective use of the notes they had taken. Some regretted not having attended more frequently since they often perceived that lectures were conceived, and intended to be delivered, as an unfolding series and not merely as a means of dealing with one topic in isolation. Students at the end of Year 2 were much more likely to appreciate the interpretative function of lectures than were those who just entering University.

30. Overall, although perceptions clearly changed over time, students continued to find lectures a valuable element in their learning experience. Lectures are not compulsory and some students in retrospect regretted missed the opportunities they had lost by frequent 'opt-outs'. Students did not always stress the same advantages to be gained from attending lectures as did staff. However, fewer students than staff were inclined to emphasize the negative aspects of lecturing as part of a teaching programme.

7. The 30-Second Test

31. The Lancaster team also attempted to evaluate the immediate impact of a lecture. To do this, three lecturers asked students attending Year 2 lectures in three different courses to indicate what they found most memorable or noteworthy in the lecture they had just heard. Students were given only thirty seconds to complete the task, hence the title of the exercise 'Taking 30 Seconds to remember a History lecture: an Investigation'. The aim was not to get reflective or developed comments (and students were told not to attempt these) but to find out what students found most memorable. The test was conducted twice, firstly immediately after the lecture they had heard and then three weeks later. The intention was to discover what was considered immediately memorable and/or important and what remained in the mind after a reasonable distance of time.

32. Responses varied widely, both immediately after the lecture and three weeks later. However, some broad generalisations are possible. The tutors participating in the investigation all reported that students were more likely to offer quick 'factual recall' rather than evaluative comment. 'Immediacy' responses were considerably more likely to make reference to a key intellectual point or what was considered to be a significant interpretative observation, although many picked out jokes or pertinent contemporary analogies. Critically, also, a clear theme in all returns was the power of the visual image. Occasionally, a key phrase which students might have encountered but which had not been fully understood before was selected. The effect in some cases was like the switching on of a light. Responses three weeks later were much more likely to refer to things coming 'out of the mind's eye'. If the lecture had been supported with visual material, then one or other of the images was more likely to be remembered than a key argument. Visual

images 'with point' (*i.e.* those selected in order to introduce, substantiate or sum-up a key point) were likely to remain longer in the memory than those which were merely, or largely, illustrative. Sometimes, these later responses drew on experiences from their daily lives in the interim which provoked an analogous reference or otherwise caused some reflection back to the lecture. Dramatic or gory details – such as the Plague, examples of colonial savagery and water torture – were also likely to be readily recalled. Students almost never referred at this point to information which had been provided, or ideas developed, on the relevant lecture handout.

33. On one level, both what students remember immediately from a lecture and how little of 'intellectual substance' seems to be retained less than a month later might be considered matters of trivial importance. The notes taken during a lecture, together with the presented handouts, are likely to provide an effective overall structure and indications of a line of argument which can be studied at leisure and drawn up in producing assessed work or in contributing to seminar discussion. On another level, however, lecturers might be more aware of the law of unintended consequences. It is unrealistic to expect much of a lecture to be precisely recalled and the intention in giving a lecture is not that it should be. The evidence of this exercise did indicate how arresting images, the effective use of humour, contemporary analogies (particularly, perhaps, affording resonance with popular culture) and a lecturer's personal reminiscence or pertinent anecdote act as triggers to effective learning. It is important not to draw the simple conclusion that students remember visual material just because it *is* visual material. They may, of course. Equally, however, because setting it up may involve a change of lecture 'pace'. The Powerpoint might need to be switched on (and warm up!) or the OHP properly focussed. Any transition might be accompanied by a personal comment, anecdote or joke and this 'break', rather than the 'message' of the visual can be what stimulates recall. If a particular lecture is remembered for a particular purpose, however apparently trivial, then it can provide the stimulus to visit the lecture notes and the handouts with more probing questions in mind. Above all, it becomes much less likely that the whole experience will either be forgotten or merge into a generalised awareness which can inhibit, rather than promote, critical engagement with the subject matter and its conceptual implications.

MANCHESTER RESEARCH

34. The Manchester cohort of students was less heterogeneous than that of Lancaster. The sub-report (a copy of which is attached with the main report) provides a statistical analysis of the intakes at different levels. This research was able to make comparisons between History students, who were admitted with relatively high A-level entry scores, and a smaller number of students reading Classics & Ancient History and Archaeology, who had lower scores. Although the numbers in Classics and Archaeology were relatively small, the Lecturing Research Project was able to take note of the experiences of students in all three subject areas covered by the HCA subject centre of the Higher Education Academy.

35. The findings of questionnaire research revealed some differences between the experiences of students in the three subject areas. Overall, however, the same emphases and preferences were revealed in questionnaire responses and in follow-up interviews.

History

36. Overwhelmingly, students considered Lectures an important element of the learning experience. The questionnaire asked Level 2 and 3 History students to rank various benefits of attending lectures on a 1-5 scale, where 1 was rated the most important. These were: motivation; guidance; facts; the lecturer's perspective & ideas on how to handle topics; assessment value; help with subject methodology; and 'other'. The questionnaire produced 126 responses. More students rated 'facts' the most important, followed by the views of the lecturer. Assessment and Motivation were ranked first by few students.

37. When students were asked which of these benefits they would most *like* to obtain from lectures, 'facts' again appeared in first place. However, 'motivation' was valued much more highly, which suggested that lectures failed to give students as much incentive to study topics more deeply than they wished. Students also wished to gain more guidance from lectures than it seems they did.

38. Students also appreciate support for lectures, most notably via handouts and WebCT, although the research indicated that the value of WebCT polarized student opinion more than any other form of support. This is most likely because the extent to which students are web-literate, although increasing each year, does still vary substantially. Students who are uneasy with the web medium are unlikely to find it such a useful support as those who are.

39. Handouts are considered to provide the most substantial support for lectures, although OHPs (rather more than PowerPoint presentations) are considered valuable, especially in clarifying the lecture's structure and intended direction. The fact that few students seem to find pictorial aids particularly useful may reflect a lack of overall visual literacy but also, perhaps, a propensity in many lecturers to provide visual material primarily as illustrative – as in portraits of key figures.

40. It is noticeable that some students could find handouts an immediate distraction when faced with a lecturer who was enthusiastic, knowledgeable and able both to impart information and offer stimulating ideas within a coherent overall framework.

41. The main adverse comment on the lecture concerned speed of delivery. Consonant with the perspective that lectures were important as a learning device, a number of students felt that many lecturers attempted to cover too much material in the available time, leading to confusion and mental indigestion.

Archaeology:

42. The questionnaire was answered by 99 students – 42 in Level 1, 24 in Level 2 and 23 in Level 3. All but one considered lectures important.

43. Three main reasons lay behind the judgment on importance. These were: to provide background information enabling the student to understand the nature and function of the course; providing a basic spine and structure for the course; and as a guide and stimulus to further study. Responses across the Levels did not vary to any great extent, although Level 3 students seemed to find the provision of a basic course structure of less importance than did those in Levels 1 and 2.

44. There was greater divergence of view across the Levels in the questions which asked what students got out of lectures. At Level 1, guidance on reading was rated much more highly than at Level 2 (especially) and at Level 3. An understanding of the lecturer's perspective and ideas seems to have been obtained by more students in Level 3 than Level 2 and, especially, Level 1, perhaps reflecting not only the orientation and demand of courses but also the differential maturity of the students.

45. Some divergences across levels were also noted in response to questions on what students wished to get from lectures. Guidance on reading was rated more important by Level 1 students than by Levels 2 and 3. Rather surprisingly, the acquisition of detailed factual knowledge was given higher priority by Level 2 and 3 students than by Level 1.

46. Archaeology students were asked what might be done to improve the quality of lectures overall. Answers varied considerably across the Levels but in Levels 1 and 2, among the most important factors were 'charisma' or enthusiasm on the part of the lecturer. Level 1 students wished for more detailed handouts.

Classics and Ancient History

47. Answers from this cohort of students revealed a very similar pattern from those in the other two subject areas. Across the Levels students felt that they gained most in lectures from the factual detail they were given. They did, however, wish for rather more specific information than they received. Only at Level 2, did expectation in this area match performance.

48. Across all three Levels, in respect of motivation for the subject and for further study a substantial mismatch was noted. Students wished to be enthused by lectures to further study but only rarely were. This suggested that lectures were, in general, failing to inspire. This finding contrasted with more developed comments on lectures overall, since these received favourable overall ratings.

49. Desire to receive effective support for lectures via handouts, presentation materials and OHTs etc was almost universal. Of these, handouts which clarified the key themes of the lecture were much the most valued. In general, and across all three levels, OHTs were more highly valued than PowerPoint

presentation. Some students considered that PowerPoint sacrificed content and structure for 'flashy presentation'. Some clearly resented what they considered to be an inappropriate triumph of form over substance.

50. As in History (see Para 38), opinion on the value of specific forms of support for the lecture was most sharply divided over the value of IT and the web and for much the same reasons.

51. Students rated highly lectures which were clearly organised, which proceeded at a pace which they could follow and which aided effective note-taking. Students looked to lectures to impart knowledge in an effective way. More students in this subject drew attention to problems encountered when lecturers appeared to be making uncritical use of resources which were already known to the students.

52. Students also expressed a desire for lectures to challenge them in some way. As elsewhere, lectures which prompted a desire to find out more were singled out for particular praise.

SHEFFIELD HALLAM RESEARCH

53. Research at Sheffield Hallam was primarily focused on student perceptions of the lecture process at Levels 1-3 of the undergraduate History programme and, in particular, to gauge student views about the relative value of lectures in the learning experience as compared with seminars. Staff were also interested to evaluate student perceptions of the changing format of lectures across the three levels. Evaluation was by student questionnaire and the use of buzz groups. A detailed report on the findings has been produced by the Sheffield Hallam team and is included with the main report

54. The University has a diverse entry pattern, including a number of mature students. The main emphasis in teaching is on modern history, with a strong commitment to understanding the process of creating history. This includes emphasis on historiography.

55. The lecture slots for Level 1 students at Sheffield Hallam – at two hours - are longer than in the other Institutions which participated in the project. At Levels 2 and 3, lectures are scheduled to last the normal 50 minutes to one hour. Staff used the extra hour available in Level 1 to break up sessions and involve students in the process. The great majority of Level 1 students reported that they had been involved in audience-participation activities of various types, while about 40 per cent had been part of question-and-answer sessions.

56. All Level 1 students responding to the questionnaire considered lectures to be an important element in the teaching and learning experience. More than half considered them as having equal importance with seminars, while nearly forty per cent thought them more useful. As in the other Institutions, the imparting of factual knowledge was considered to be a key element in what students got from their Level 1 lectures. There was, however, a significant difference from the other Institutions in that students believed that the most

important attribute of the lectures they heard was 'historiographical outlines'. This reflected the specific priorities in Level 1 teaching. Students seem to have felt that their grasp of the importance of historical interpretations was limited on entry and that the lectures addressed this issue successfully.

57. As in the other Institutions, Level 1 students rated motivation and inspiration for further study rather low as benefits they obtained from lectures. When asked what they would *wish* to receive from lectures, motivation and inspiration scored significantly more highly. Level 1 students, however, also wished to receive even more factual knowledge than they did.

58. As elsewhere, too, students valued presentational material of various types. Lecture handouts were particularly appreciated as providing a helpful structure to support verbal presentation.

59. Staff at Sheffield Hallam also asked students whether the purpose of lectures had been adequately explained to them. The great majority of students replied that explanation of the value of lectures had been 'reasonably clearly' or 'very clearly' explained to them.

60. No significant change in perception of the value of lectures was discernible in students working at Levels 2 and 3. Historiographical outlines and detailed factual knowledge were both still rated highest. When differences were noted, they mostly concerned lectures as a source of motivation and inspiration. At Level 2, lectures were rather less likely to inspire than at Level 1. However, the motivational qualities of lectures were more highly rated at Level 3, when students had a larger choice of topics which they studied in depth.

61. At Level 2, more students considered lectures rather more important than seminars than did Level 1 students. At Level 3, however, the relative value of lectures was rated considerably lower than at either Levels 1 or 2.

62. Level 3 students, who had most experience of lectures of various types, were asked what might be done to improve the usefulness of lectures. It needs to be noted that this question was asked of students who, overall, evinced considerable satisfaction with the lectures they had experienced. In this context, answers were predictable enough. The most 'popular' response was that lectures might be lengthened. Then, in descending order, the 'wish-list' produced: more handouts; more presentational aids; more structured lectures; improved lecturing skills and more audience participation. That improved lecturing skills rated relatively low may reflect generally high levels of satisfaction overall. That 'more audience participation' was put at the bottom of the list is, perhaps, more interesting. Those who believe lecturing to be a 'passive learning experience' could cite this evidence in support of their case: students do not *wish* for active participation in a process whose primary purpose, in their view, is to listen to a subject expert providing specialist knowledge and interpretative angles. On the other hand, students may compartmentalise their learning in efficient ways, using lectures as a

springboard to more effective participation in seminars and as providing them with a historiographical slant which they might wish to address in their essays.

63. The questionnaires gave a solid base of evidence on student attitudes across the three levels. However, in focus-group discussions, the Sheffield Hallam team also investigated the extent to which student perceptions of lectures changes across the various levels of the History programme. The differences were not huge. Lectures were considered to have a central place in learning throughout the undergraduate programme and were considered important in setting out debates and arguments by leading scholars. It was noticeable, however, that Level 3 students showed a keener appreciation of the relationship between lectures and seminars than did those in Levels 1 and 2.

64. It is possible to summarize key issues and concerns which receive emphasis at the different levels. The most important, perhaps, is that students consider lectures an essential part of the learning process throughout the undergraduate programme. Beyond that, and unsurprisingly, Level 1 students tended to be more exercised by technical issues such as how to take notes from a lecture without missing important points and, indeed, determining what *were* the important elements. At Level 2, lectures were in general felt to be more valuable than were seminars, although an increased awareness of how the two forms should inter-mesh was apparent. At Level 3, lectures were seen to have greater motivational effects, although this probably reflected the more detailed nature of the subject material and the fact that students had a wide choice of topics which they were required to study in depth. Level 3 students were more likely to give priority to the way in which arguments presented during a lecture could help frame responses to examination and essay questions. They were also particularly appreciative of lecture handouts.

HUDDERSFIELD RESEARCH

65. The main focus of research at Huddersfield was on supporting students in their engagement with lectures. The team used Project research funding further to develop work which had been ongoing over a number of years. The exercise was heavily student-focused, concentrating on interviews with students in buzz groups and otherwise. Unlike that of the other Institutions contributing to the project, the Huddersfield work was designed primarily for the benefit of students at, or shortly after, induction.

66. The end product was a Booklet 'How to get the best out of Lectures'. This derives from work, particularly with Level 1 students, which explains what lectures are, why (although not compulsory) students should find it beneficial to attend them and what historical and generic skills lecture attendance is designed to develop. With support from the Project, the booklet is now made available electronically.

67. History staff at Huddersfield report that, since the booklet has been used systematically in either electronic or hard-copy form, attendance at lectures has increased significantly. Formal evaluation of the reasons for this still

remains to be undertaken but the Booklet brings together a number of factors which might provide an explanation.

68. The Booklet is divided into three sections: Lectures as a Teaching Tool; Skills and Student Behaviour. Each section includes key questions and student responses, often highlighted as 'Student Vox Pop'

69. The first section provides much qualitative evidence that students find lectures essential and, in many cases, more valuable than seminars. The section presents a warning against the perception, widespread among students interviewed for this Project, that lectures should be valued primarily for the factual information they convey. 'The emphasis should be...on reading and gathering information and insights from a variety of sources – with lectures being just one of these available sources...Lectures are about debate and discussion'.

70. Similarly, students are informed that, although handouts are designed to be useful, they should act as a reference point. They support a lecture whose primary purpose is to inform and enthuse. Lectures are not a collection point for handout material. A similarly cautionary note is entered against excessive reliance on lecture notes as authoritative sources for assessment work.

71. The booklet also contains advice on how to listen to a lecture, especially how to recognize 'signals' from a lecturer when moving from one theme to another, and how to make best use of the lecture by re-reading notes a day or two after it was delivered in order to reflect on the overall significance of the issues raised.

72. Advice is also given on lecture protocols – including asking permission to make a recording of the lecture, the need to observe silence when the lecturer is speaking, and how to ask questions.

73. Student perception of what makes for a bad lecture closely mirrors comments made in other institutions. Not surprisingly, students feel aggrieved if a lecturer has tried to cram too much into a fifty-minute lecture, especially if the lecturer speaks too fast or if the lecture is not well structured. Students appreciate variation of pace and also of 'register' in the lecturer's voice. They are quick to criticise also when lecturers' use time in going through material on a projector when it is not developed and anyway available on a lecture handout which students can refer to at their leisure.

DISSEMINATION

74. The work of the Project has so far been disseminated through Conference papers. In January 2003 Drs Barber and Peniston-Bird (Lancaster) presented a paper *Rethinking and Improving Lecturing* to the International Conference of the Social Sciences in Hawaii. Drawing largely on research done in Lancaster in 2001 and 2002, this discussed differences of perception (referred to above in this Report) between staff and student expectations of the value of the lecture. Using evidence from the '30 Second Test' (see paras 31-33 above),

the presentation discussed the importance of short-term memory on the perceptions of a lecture. The presentation also offered views on how to see the lecture within the context of the overall student experience.

75. All four Institutions participated in a plenary session - *Approaches to Improving History Lecturing* - of the annual International Conference of the History Subject Centre held in Oxford in April 2004. The overall theme of that Conference was 'Developing Teaching and Learning in History'. A further presentation, *Students' Expectations of Lecturing*, was made, using research largely undertaken in Lancaster, at the April 2005 International Conference. All presentations covered the key areas referred to in this Report, particularly research evidence on how students perceive Lectures and why they are considered such a central part of the learning experience. The provisional findings offered at that Conference largely reflect the Key Findings indicated below.

76. Key Findings will be posted on the HEA Subject Centre website, together with links to specific project work and the main contributors to the Project.

77. Discussions are on-going about the most appropriate way of disseminating findings in publications.

KEY FINDINGS & SUGGESTIONS:

78. The following findings and suggestions derive from the research undertaken in the four Institutions identified above. It is stressed that these derive from student and staff perceptions about both the positives and the negatives. In making specific suggestions, we have reflected on the messages given to us in this section of the History community. We have not sought to impose an 'ideal structure' or suggest what makes for a model lecture. Clearly, lectures have different purposes and lecturers differ in their approaches, as in their presentational and analytical strengths and weaknesses. We are more prescriptive (when at all) in urging lecturers to reflect on what they wish to achieve than we are in suggesting which specific methods they should use.

79. We believe that those who argue that lectures are of limited value to students, and that they represent a passive learning experience, are wrong. Students in all four Institutions consistently believe lectures to be central to their learning. They also considered most lectures they experienced to be effective, although their criteria for what is considered 'an effective lecture' may differ from those of the staff who teach them.

80. We note that in many Institutions, lectures are optional whereas seminars/tutorials are compulsory. We understand why this distinction is made. After all, assessed work tends to be generated via seminars and tutorials rather than in lectures. Many staff also believe that more effective interaction is generated in small-group situations than in the lecture hall, where students can easily seem mere faces in a crowd. Against this, it is difficult to contest the proposition that labelling one form of learning opportunity compulsory and another optional conveys a message to students

about relative importance which is highly contestable. Indeed, the evidence of student questionnaires suggests that students themselves contest it. For these, and other reasons identified below, we believe that Departments would find it helpful to revisit this distinction and, where it obtains, debate whether it remains appropriate.

81. We also note that students – and not necessarily just those at Level 1 in HE – generally believe that the primary purpose of lectures is to impart factual information relevant to a given course. The researchers found greater variation of response between staff and students on this than on anything else. We believe that factual information is readily available in a variety of places, not least these days via ICT. Lecturers and course organisers would do well to stress that only rarely is it the main function of a lecture to provide information. It is important that students be guided on where to find that information and a well-designed course handbook will normally find space for such guidance. However, the lecture has different objectives.

82. This is not to say that lectures should not include factual information. Most must do so in order to make coherent sense. It is also valuable to introduce a course – particularly one which covers territory unfamiliar to students – with a *tour d'horizon*. This might explain, in outline, what the course is intended to cover, what the key issues it throws up are and why the lecturer him or herself finds those issues interesting and challenging. This might lead into the explanation that the lecture series will engage with those issues and that the primary purpose of the lecture is to stimulate, challenge and engage. It might also be appropriate to explain to students that some lectures have a different purpose from others. The initial, 'sighting' lecture will obviously emphasize range and breadth. Others might primarily be concerned with explaining the complex inter-relation of factors which help explain causation in a key event or development. There is also likely to be room for lectures which operate as case studies of central individuals, important events or perhaps the course of a historical controversy. At, or near, the end of a course, reflections on importance and significance might provide the main focus of a lecture. Lecturers will wish to reflect on the balance which is appropriate for a given course and consider the extent to which the organisation and delivery of a lecture with one focus might need to be different from one with another. It will be useful for the lecturer to ask two guiding questions: 'Why am I devising a lecture course with these foci? How can I explain to students why I am doing what I am doing so that they can follow the leads I am hoping to put in their way?'

83. Few staff seem to disagree with the proposition that key objectives of a lecture include engaging students by presenting arguments stimulated by consideration of evidence, explaining why different positions are taken up and how disagreements between historians both develop and are resolved. Relatively few students, at least before Level 3, recognise these as more than fringe or ancillary issues unless the set-up of a course is defined by historiographical, among other, considerations (see para 56 above).

84. Paragraphs 81-83 above support the proposition that lecturers (or, as appropriate, a lecturing team) might find it helpful to reflect on the key messages they intend their lecture course to put across, both in terms of skills to be developed and evidence to be considered. Students are more likely to appreciate the purpose of a lecture if its main focus, is highlighted at the outset. Similarly, a personal exposition by the lecturer of the orientation of a course supported by regular lectures can help to avoid misunderstandings. The evidence of this research project strongly suggests that the purpose of a lecture is *not* self-evident and that, without explanation, students are likely to default to what is frequently the misleading conclusion that it is mainly about an 'expert' imparting information which is not readily available elsewhere.

85. The evidence of student evaluations also suggests that, although lectures are in general valued, they are relatively weak at motivating students to further study. There may be a number of reasons for this. A given lecture may be 'dull'. It may seem to be effective at imparting information and thus seem to require little or nothing in the way of student engagement or follow-up. Instrumentally, students may make the decision that they are not going to write an essay, or be required to make a presentation, on the subject matter and so have no need of further enquiry. More generally, if students believe that lectures are about an expert telling neophytes what they need to know (the model of 'the sage on the stage'), then they will not understand why further enquiry is encouraged. Lecturers might like to consider strategies designed to provoke students into further enquiry. These might include: deliberately leaving a key, but easily researchable, gap and asking students to fill it; exaggerating one side of an argument and urging students to consider why, and how, it might be considered an exaggeration; explaining precisely what further reading is needed to provide a corrective, fill a key gap or whatever. These are engagement strategies and, it might be argued, even beyond the specific issue in a lecture, help students to appreciate that lectures need to be linked to other learning opportunities – via further reading, discussion and research – to have their full value. Reflection and critical engagement should be key elements in effective learning. Students need to understand how lectures can play an essential part in this process.

86. Students were almost unanimous in their belief that the value of lectures is enhanced by support materials. Naturally, they differed in their judgment about which types were most valuable. Nevertheless, the support material most regularly identified is the 'lecture handout' or 'lecture shell' which identifies the key themes the lecture will discuss. Students suggest that almost all lecture courses are supported by such materials and that they are effective. They help students appreciate the structure of what will follow and how the lecturer has chosen to organise the material. Staff seem increasingly warm towards lecture handouts, not least because, although they recognise the need to follow the structure, such handouts do not provide students with a script. Students need to know that lecture shells are designed to support a lecture and never to be a substitute for it, still less an excuse for absence. Lecturers will have good reasons for rejecting apparently innocent students requests to have a copy of a lecture shell relating to a lecture they have 'missed'. The shell can also give the lecturer more liberty to develop key

points, and even apparently to move away temporarily from the structure in order to crack a joke, make a contemporary parallel or analogy etc, in the knowledge that the overall objective remains clear. Producing an effective lecture handout is also part of the valuable self-reflection about 'direction of travel' and organisation which helps to clarify the lecturer's own perception of what it trying to be achieved.

87. Although there are many exceptions, students in general encountered less in the way of visual and oral, than of written, support material. Visuals in History lectures were often restricted to portraits or representations of leading figures. These, of course, are far from valueless but students did sometimes express irritation when visuals produced via PowerPoint took too long to load, were in the wrong order or seemed to interrupt the flow or the pace of delivery. No lecturer can guard against unforeseen circumstances when giving a lecture but students do expect that support materials work as intended and a number clearly feel that the risk that the 'get in the way' is too great. It was interesting to note that students tended to prefer OHTs to PowerPoint as effective support material.

88. Against this, lecturers might wish to reflect that students live in a much more 'visual' and 'oral' culture than was common when most of their lecturers were themselves students. This presents opportunities for greater variety in presentation and delivery and for using visual material as historical evidence to be critically assessed. Effectively used, both visual and oral material can enhance the lecture, especially by stimulating further enquiry. The Lancaster '30-second test' (see paras 31-33) revealed how regularly arresting visual images could be.

89. Students tend to rate enthusiasm in a lecturer v highly. Buzz group conversations indicated how frequently students recognised that lectures can have elements of theatricality about them and that they appreciate a good performance. They also often take the view that showing engagement and enthusiasm is an essential pre-requisite for stimulating a like response in students. There are, of course, drawbacks in excessive attention to the theatrical aspects of lecturing. Form can displace both content and organisation. Lecturers can inadvertently find that the 'wrong' things stay in the memory, thus either inhibiting effective follow up. A balance needs to be struck. Nevertheless, students are aware that 50 minutes is a very long time in which to concentrate and strategies for breaking up the time are well worth considering.

90. Students did encounter a number of strategies for avoiding monochrome delivery. Some lecturers found it helpful to introduce very brief breaks (although strategies are needed to ensure that what are planned as 5-minute breaks remain no more than that), to break up a lecture with a short video-presentation or slide show, to introduce a brief question-and-answer session, to encourage informal feedback ('Are my points getting across? Am I speaking too quickly? etc.). There is clearly no one route to preserving concentration. It is probably sufficient to note that students do need some support in retaining their concentration and that this suggests that lecturers should reflect on how

best to make use of the time available without assuming that students have the same concentration powers in respect of the topic in hand that they presumably (and usually!) have.

91. Students tended to be not only tolerant of diversity in their lecturers; they actually welcomed diverse approaches. They know that not all lecturers are natural stage performers (just as they perceive that some wrongly consider themselves to be so) and they recognize both integrity and expertise in a variety of methods and contexts. They also recognise that some historical topics are more difficult to 'sell' than others. Lecturers need feel under no pressure to conform to a particular pattern of lecture delivery. They should, however, seek – via peer observation, self-reflection, heeding student feedback and otherwise – to discover what their own most effective strategies are.

92. The most common perceived deficiencies in a lecture seem to be unvarying, monochrome delivery, which tests powers of concentration, and the attempt to cover too much ground in the time available, leading to students not being able to 'keep up' or take effective notes. In many cases, the latter problem can be effectively addressed by reflecting on the balance between factual information and consideration of what the key arguments or debating points are. Inexperienced lecturers have a tendency to try to cram too much in. The case for inserting breaks of some sort (see para 90) may be an effective way of addressing deficiencies in delivery, although it is usually possible, with practice, to vary pitch and register – not least when moving from one section of a lecture to another. Just a very brief break between key sections may be all that is needed.

93. One of the most common adverse student criticisms was of the 'mere' reading-out of lectures. Students tend to see this as a distancing strategy. If a lecturer is reading out more than, say, the odd quotation then the risk exists that students will feel that no effective engagement is being made. The lecturer will find it difficult to maintain eye contact and thus risks losing a sense of how the lecture is 'going down' with the audience. Lecturers rely on a greater or lesser weight of notes to support them. In general, as lecturers become more experienced and/or the lecture course more embedded, then they use fewer. There is no evidence that students worry about this. However, they do expect to be engaged with and too close attention to a written text usually inhibits this.

94. We understand why some should consider the lecture as a form of passive – and therefore (although the reasons why are rarely developed) inappropriate – learning. We also understand that a large number of students begin a course with the belief that there are 'right answers' to every historical question and that success in their courses lies in their finding those answers and repeating them in the essay or the examination. We can further well understand why historians should consider this approach anathema. We are convinced, however, that there is no reason why lectures should have this function or should support this misguided approach.

95. This research strongly supports the belief that lectures are not normally adjuncts to passive learning. Still less should they be so. In summary, lectures should be:

- In essence, a stimulus to further thought and enquiry and not an end-point
- Properly integrated into a course, linking as appropriate with seminar and tutorial work and with assessment opportunities both formative and summative
- Linked explicitly also appropriate additional learning resources
- Conceived as opportunities for engagement with students, prompting in them critical reflection about themes, issues and debates. For this to happen lecturers should reflect on what they are attempting to achieve both in a given lecture and across an entire lecture course
- Presented with a clear an analytical focus, the purpose of which should be explained to students
- Designed to stimulate students to find out more, rather than being entirely self-contained
- Pitched at an appropriate level, recognising the prior attainment and experience of the target audience, aiming to engage and to stretch without assuming too much in the way of prior knowledge or range of relevant skills