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Progression in higher education history programmes: the conceptual dimension

by Dr Geoff Timmins
University of Central Lancashire

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Introduction

Under QAA benchmarking recommendations, History departments in British higher education institutions are urged to demonstrate how they achieve progression; that is, how their students gain in insight, competence and performance so as to reach higher standards at the end of their degree studies than at the beginning. No particular means of implementing progression are specified, though it is noted that both quantitative and qualitative dimensions may be incorporated. As far as the former is concerned, the implication is that merely increasing the amount of work expected of students as they proceed through their programmes of study will not in itself provide a sufficient means by which progression can be achieved. Concerning the latter, two approaches are suggested. One involves students undertaking the same type of activities, but with different as they proceed through their programmes of study. The other is to attach differing characteristics to particular course units and to prescribe how students move through them. The point is made that, as long as progression can be demonstrated, there is no particular order in which specific types of course units should be made available, so that, for instance, survey units might feature as strongly beyond year 1 as within year 1.[1]

Since issues relating to progression form a major component in the History Benchmarking Statement, they are accorded a central role in curriculum development terms. Yet they are only briefly discussed in the Statement and, for that matter, in the higher educational literature more generally.[2] Moreover, as Peters, Peterkin and Williams point out, with the introduction of modular degree courses, where choice of modules is wide and students from different year groups are allowed to take the same modules, the notion of structured progression can lose out to an appreciable extent.[3] Much scope exists, therefore, to consider how progression may be effectively achieved in history degree programmes, bearing in mind benchmarking recommendations. And this is so in conceptual terms as well as in practice and with regard to programmes offered at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels.

In contributing to discussion on these matters, the focus of this paper is on the conceptual dimension of progression. Three fundamental considerations are addressed. The first concerns why schemes of progression need to be implemented in higher education history programmes, taking into account the perspectives of both teacher and taught. The second considers the forms that schemes of progression might take, bearing in mind the need to address not only the nature of change from level to level, but also the degree to which this change occurs between levels. The third deals with the extent to which the notion of progression should permeate history

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[1]Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *History Benchmarking Statement* (2000), pp. 6-7.

[2]The notion of progression has occupied a good deal of attention in developing the history element of the National Curriculum in British schools, however. See, for example, R. Watts and I. Grosvenor, *Crossing the Key Stages in History* (1995), especially chapter 2.

[3]J. Peters, C. Peterkin and C. Williams, 'Progression within modular history degrees' in in A. Booth and P. Hyland (eds), *The Practice of University History Teaching* (Manchester, 2000), p. 138. The suggestion is made, however, that student-centred profiling, in which students are encouraged to take responsibility for devising their own progression, can provide a solution to this problem.

programmes, taking as a context the other major curricular dimensions discussed in the History Benchmarking Statement, namely content, skills, learning and teaching and assessment.

Why implement progression?

Arguments in favour of implementing frameworks of progression in higher education courses, including those in history, are essentially concerned with value added. As students move through their programmes of study, both within undergraduate courses and between undergraduate and post-graduate courses, they plainly need to be presented with more demanding challenges to enhance their understanding and capabilities. Such challenges are concerned both with gaining competence in familiar areas - such as evaluating the reliability of primary evidence - and with undertaking new experiences - such as participating in group work for purposes of summative assessment. At the same time, there is need to articulate with some precision the ways in which greater challenge is deemed to arise from level to level and the extent to which it does so. The notion of progression goes hand in hand with that of differentiation.[4]

But in trying to meet these desiderata, why are frameworks of progression and differentiation necessary? After all, they can be seen as an unwarranted intrusion on the freedom and competence of higher education lecturers in deciding how best to plan their own teaching programme. Surely they are in the best position to find ways of making the modules they offer in the final stages of study more demanding on students than those they offer at the outset. Without doubt, such an argument has substance if too tight a degree of control is sought. Yet without a measure of constraint, dangers arise in planning history curricula both in relation to articulating the levels of attainment that are expected of students and the types of provision it is thought they should experience. With regard to the former, members of course teams acting as individuals may have quite different expectations as to what their students should be achieving in moving through each stage of their programmes. It may be, for example, that some course units offered to the programme are out of line with the general expectations regarding attainment for any particular level of provision, the value added that is expected being too high or too low. With regard to the latter, the issue is whether course units made available at particular levels enable students to work in ways that will extend them to a sufficient degree as they progress. In the case of history provision, an example might be the requirement to use primary material to a much greater extent as a means of informing seminar discussion at Level 2 compared with Level 1. Unless such requirements are heeded, to a greater or lesser extent the collective efforts of the course team in meeting level expectations will be weakened and some students within a programme may be less well prepared than others in proceeding to the next level of provision.

The benefits arising from frameworks of progression and differentiation need also to be considered from a student perspective. Of particular importance is the need for students to know what is expected of them when they move from provision made at one stage to that at the next, as well as appreciating the nature and degree of the incremental steps they take. Again, issues concerning levels of attainment and types of experience arise. If students are to be encouraged to achieve higher levels of competence, they need to be clear as to what is involved in the process and of the stages through which they will pass. It is all too easy to assume that they will appreciate how programmes encourage them to develop expertise in relation both to familiar and unfamiliar types of task, but whether they do so or not is another matter. Without clearly articulated guidance, the risk is that they will continue to operate in ways that characterise early stages of provision. Furthermore, unless students can expect a reasonable degree of consistency with regard to requirements made at particular levels of subject provision, they will lack general direction and be less able to benefit from the re-inforcement arising through the formative assessment that a collective approach at each level can engender.

Forms of progression

Any scheme of progression must clearly take account of where students are at when they commence degree level study and where it is felt they should be when they finish. But such a consideration at once raises fundamental problems. Students entering history programmes are by no means a homogeneous group in terms of the types and amount of history they have studied, whilst their attainment as historians can also show marked variation within and between cohorts. Equally, the level and nature of understanding they might acquire at the end of their studies is not set down in tablets of stone and will

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[4]Differentiation also features in the history element of the National Curriculum, though more in terms of assessment issues. See, for example, The Department of Education and Science, *History for Ages 5-16* (1990), p. 199 and the 'statements of attainment', pp. 119-165. Instructive, too, is The Department of Education and Science, *History in the Primary and Secondary Years* (1985), ch. 6.

anyway vary according to the proportion of history that their programmes of study contain. And there is the additional complication that schemes of progression and differentiation will commonly have to extend into the post-graduate area, with the need to take account of the capabilities of students who enter the programme at that stage having completed their undergraduate studies in other institutions.

In dealing with these matters, introductory course units have a crucial role to play. At both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, a key function they can be given is to ensure that students entering taught history programmes acquire a common grounding in terms of content coverage and skills development of the type they will need if they are to progress satisfactorily and confidently through subsequent stages.[5] Issues arising from this approach are the level at which such units should be pitched, how many of them there should be and whether or not they should be confined to the first term or semester. In progression terms, there may be much to be said for seeing this period as one where, to a marked degree, compulsion reigns in order to achieve the required common grounding. As is often the case in undergraduate history programmes, units providing wide coverage of content both temporally and geographically might be offered as a prelude to more specialised study, the emphasis being on broadening rather than deepening understanding. The same type of argument might be advanced with regard to skills-orientated course units, perhaps aimed at ensuring students are familiar with the use and limitations of various types of historical source - documentary, oral, physical and visual - that they will encounter in more demanding contexts at later stages.[6] Opportunity to achieve a further element of progression might be taken to complete the first stage of the programme, perhaps by providing a choice of more focused course units. At post-graduate level, the common grounding might well be seen as having much more to do with appreciating the nature of history as a subject discipline and with promoting historical skills than with enhancing historical knowledge. Such a stance will reflect the expectation that graduates should be able to draw on a substantial body of historical knowledge and the awareness that they will often be required to prepare a more substantial dissertation than at undergraduate level.

The types of approach outlined above enable progression and differentiation to be achieved both within and between programme levels as students move into either undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. Theoretically, if extended beyond first-level study, the approaches can be developed to create several levels of differentiation. Thus in the example shown below (where B units are given attributes which make them more demanding than A units, C units are given attributes that make them more demanding than B units and so on) progression is designed to take account of the need to add value in relation to pre-degree provision and to offer six levels of differentiation within a three-year undergraduate programme, students taking six modules each year. Plainly, even more levels can be derived when the concept

Semester	Pre-degree	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
One	A units	3 B units	3 D units	3 F units
Two	A units	3 C units	3 E units	3 G units

is extended to four year programmes and to post-graduate provision. Whether so many levels are necessary or desirable in practice seems doubtful however, not least because of the problems that arise in defining them. Yet the question remains as to the number of levels that should be distinguished. One approach is to argue that a clear differentiation is required for each year or level in a programme, not least with a view to demonstrating to students precisely what is required of them as they move from one key stage of their programme to the next. On this plan, the above example could be reformulated so that three levels are distinguished, as shown in the table below, perhaps designated as introductory, intermediate and advanced. In content terms, coverage might move from general, long-period studies through to shorter-period thematic studies and finally to short-period in-depth studies. In

Semester	Pre-degree	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
One	A units	3 B units	3 C units	3 D units
Two	A units	3 B units	3 C units	3 D units

[5] As Alan Booth points out, those new to history undergraduate programmes need to develop 'a clear sense of progression in learning objectives and tasks …'. See A. Booth, 'Creating a context to enhance student learning in history' in Booth and Hyland, *History Teaching*, p. 39

[6] Or progression might be achieved by broadening the types of primary material students use as they move towards more advanced work.

skills terms, coverage might start with units focusing on an appreciation of the value and limitations of primary source material before moving to its use in small-scale, tutor-devised projects and eventually to student-designed research essays and dissertations.[7]

Other formulations of the progression are possible, of course, including those that maintain the level differentiations but, as far as full-time students are concerned, permit some flexibility with regard to the year of study in which course units of a particular level are taken. The example shown below features the inclusion of a limited amount of more advanced work as part of the second semester provision and of lower level work as part of first semester provision. Such an 'overlap and move on' approach, which might occur between either or both Levels 1 and 2, may be seen as having advantage in facilitating the transition from one level to the next, as well as in easing timetable constraints. Equally it might be found wanting in that it could be seen to move students forward at too swift a rate, especially, perhaps, at Level 1.

Semester	Pre-degree	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
One	A units	3 B units	1 B unit 2 C units	1 C units 2 D units
Two	A units	2 B units 1 C unit	2 C units 1 D unit	3 D units

In considering the number of levels at which provision might be made, the problem arises of accommodating taught master's level courses. One fairly obvious approach is to see provision at this level as being far more research orientated than at undergraduate level, not least with progression to research degree work in mind. As indicated above, such a distinction might be partly achieved in relation to the nature of the introductory unit and the length of dissertation required. But the quality of the dissertation might also be seen to be more demanding. It could be the case, for example, that a stronger emphasis is required concerning the use of primary evidence in critically evaluating historiographical perspectives. More generally, an ability to appreciate varying approaches to research activity and to demonstrate a high degree of self-direction in undertaking original research might be thought appropriate. Notions of this type are certainly in line with the master's level descriptors in the QAA's *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* and might well be seen to be essential foundations for research degree work.[8]

Extent of progression

Discussion so far has centred on devising schemes of progression and differentiation in relation to content and skills. But the question also arises as to how far these schemes should extend to teaching and learning approaches and to assessing students' work. To suggest such an idea might be seen as a step too far in terms of interfering with lecturers' freedom of choice, especially if a framework of progression and differentiation has been devised dealing with content understanding and skills acquisition. Yet to dismiss the matter summarily is at best to overlook opportunities that might assist student progression and at worst to engage in practices that might not be in students' best interests.

Turning first to learning and teaching, theoretical possibilities in relation to the notion of independent learning can be considered. The theme is a familiar one, the aim being to ensure undergraduates become more able to take responsibility for their own learning as they progress, a capacity they will need to acquire with both the world of work and of post-graduate study in mind. Thus the QAA Classics and Ancient History Benchmarking Statement observes:

'The principal specific desideratum for any honours degree programme is that at least in their final year students will have the opportunity to *engage independently in learning* and research with limited guidance and within a broad structure of courses, using and further developing the skills and abilities fostered in previous years.'[9]

In exploring the theme in a little more detail, it may be noted that Moxley, Najor-Durak and Dumbrigue suggest that student development is facilitated by focusing on promoting academic maturity, a process they see as moving students through three stages of provision, namely academic foundations, purposeful learning and autonomous learning. The features they distinguish for each stage, which have strong resonance in the type of activities that characterise

[7]For further comment on using projects as an element in progression, see K. Cuthbert, 'Independent Study and Project Work: Continuities or Discontinuities', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6 (2001), pp. 80-2 and G. Light and R. Cox, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (2001), p. 94.

[8]Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (2001).

[9]Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Classics and Ancient History Benchmarking Statement* (2001), p. 9.

undergraduate history programmes, are set out below.[10]

Academic foundations	Purposeful learning	Autonomous learning
Getting organised Attending Completing requirements	Participation and involvement Engaging material Using material	Creating own academic agenda Acting on own agenda Self-directed learning

Major considerations that arise with regard to developing independent learning approaches of this type concern the pace, degree and means of their implementation. The Classics and Ancient History Benchmarking Statement may be seen as adopting a minimalist position, arguing only that the opportunity for independent learning should be made available at least during the final year of undergraduate study. But maybe more should be attempted at earlier stages, with a high expectation that much of final year programmes should be geared towards independent forms of learning. Alternatively, high measures of independent learning might be seen to be more the province of post-graduate provision. In either case however, as is evident from the Moxley, *et.al.* stage approach to independent learning, thought and action are required as to how programmes might be designed to help students become independent learners. The clear implication is that opportunities to undertake 'purposeful learning' need to be incorporated into undergraduate programmes prior to the final year, even if the academic agenda at that stage is still being set largely by teacher rather than by taught.

Aside from independence of learning, a further aspect of progression concerning teaching and learning approaches to which consideration might be given is that of switching emphasis from lectures towards seminars and tutorials. Such a move might be considered particularly appropriate in relation to final-year tuition, especially, but not exclusively, with dissertations in mind. The potential advantages arising from seminar and tutorial work (especially being able to involve students more actively in the learning process than is usually thought possible with lectures) may well underpin progressions of this type.

But there are also issues to consider in relation to the growing emphasis that should be placed on promoting independent learning and the high-level academic challenges with which it is associated. Thus, at the final level of study, some lecturing might be foregone to allow more time for individual discussion with students concerning the self-designed coursework assignments required of them in each module they take.

Turning finally to the issue of assessment progression in History degree courses, three approaches can be briefly considered. The first is that of requiring increasing amounts of assessment as students proceed from one level to the next. It may be that the approach is used to provide differentiation when students at varying stages of their programme are taught together. Equally, the view may be held that students are able to cope with increasing amounts of assessment as they gain in experience and confidence. In either case however, questions arise as to precisely what the added burden should be at each stage and why it is set at a particular level. The rationale will plainly need to be set in terms of the educational advantage that students will derive. For instance, it might be argued that to set essays of above, say, 2,000 words at Level 1 would represent too great a step compared with previous experience. However, the inclusion of longer essays at Level 2, perhaps in part to accommodate findings from the investigation of primary evidence, might well prove useful with regard to dissertation work at Level 3.

As to the qualitative dimensions of assessment progression, one possibility concerns the move towards assessing students on their ability to utilise primary evidence, not least with skills acquisition in mind. Again, the final-year dissertation can play a crucial role, as can the inclusion of other final year modules that are particularly concerned with the appreciation and application of primary evidence, the special subject modules popular in British higher-education institutions providing an example. However, it might be thought more desirable to assess students on their ability to use primary evidence in every final-year module that they take or perhaps to introduce such a policy at master's level. Much will depend on how far assessment at previous levels has been geared towards the use of primary evidence and on the degree of differentiation that is required in assessment of this type as students move from level to level. But whatever decisions are made on these matters, assessing students on their understanding and use of primary evidence can enable growing and substantially greater demands to be made on them as they proceed through their programmes of study.

[10] D. Moxley, A. Najor Durak and C. Dumbrigue, *Keeping Students* in *Higher Education* (2001), pp. 93-5

A further and closely related qualitative dimension that might be included in assessment progression is that of moving towards a stronger dependence on coursework at the expense of examinations. The rationale for so doing might be couched in terms of the notion of training students to work increasingly as research historians, demonstrating their ability to inform historiographical issues using the evidence they obtain from investigating primary sources.

Such training will be most strongly represented at master's level, where examinations are unlikely to feature. But the question arises as to how far examinations should be abandoned at each stage of undergraduate programmes, bearing in mind the requirement for research training. Of course, the inclusion of third-level dissertations helps to achieve a transition towards coursework assessment that is research orientated, but the opportunity to strengthen provision of this type at earlier stages also needs consideration. How far, for instance, should students be assessed on research projects they undertake at Level 2? Such projects might be tutor-designed and much shorter than dissertations, but might be seen as an essential element in enhancing students' confidence and capabilities with regard to their understanding of the research process.

Conclusion

In planning higher education history curricula, determining how progression is to be achieved is a matter of fundamental concern. So, too, is articulation of the extent to which value is added from level to level, perhaps involving greater differentiation in moving between intermediate and final levels than between early and intermediate levels. The solutions adopted will be strongly influenced by perceptions of the intended outcomes of the programmes as a whole, a matter on which the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* provides useful guidance at both graduate and undergraduate levels. And, with a view to maximising their impact, the solutions adopted will also need to take account of how widely the notions of progression and differentiation should permeate, and help to integrate, the various curricular dimensions. It may be that planning and implementing schemes of progression will be seen as an unwelcome challenge to academic freedom. However, a more compelling argument is that devising such schemes will enable students to understand the changing nature of the challenges they face as they move from one stage of their studies to the next.

Dr Geoff Timmins
University of Central Lancashire