



# International Students in History:

A Comparative Study of First-Year Transition, 2009-2010

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The landscape of UK Higher Education is shifting. More accurately, it has shifted and will continue to shift. This is partly the result of changing business models and economic realities. Yet, it is also the result of the growing feeling among educators that learning is augmented by diverse experiences and intercultural interactions, regardless of disciplinary field.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the vast majority of literature on the experiences of international students in Higher Education focuses upon business, technical and social science disciplines, such as accountancy and engineering. This is hardly surprising as these students make up over 54% of international students in UK universities.<sup>2</sup>

Comparing student experiences in such disparate disciplines as engineering and history, however, is not always appropriate.<sup>3</sup> History education at university level, like most subjects, relies up on specialised conventions and assumptions regarding contact, assessment and student responsibilities. Time clocked in a laboratory is replaced by late nights or early mornings in the university library. The prominence of independent research and the importance of peer discussion are in sharp contrast to regular collaborative assessment or frequent practical application. This preliminary report, therefore, aims to provide history lecturers, tutors and pastoral staff new disciplinary perspectives on the first year experience of international undergraduates and new avenues for discussion with their peers and students.

Moreover, it aims not only to illuminate some of the challenges experienced by international students, but also to point to possible commonalities of experience regardless of nationality, age or gender. In the past, international students have been thought of as “canaries in a coal mine”, suggesting that they are the particularly vulnerable to transitional difficulties and that the extra consideration they are given when designing modules would improve not only their experience, but the transition of all students<sup>4</sup>. By sampling a wide variety of student types, this project hopes to suggest some of the shared trials and tribulations of first year students and identify possible steps to improve first year transition throughout. A similar project was undertaken, on a cross-disciplinary sample, by Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock within three Australian universities. According to the authors, their study showed “that the problems encountered by local and international students are, for the most part, shared. Hence, it is appropriate to adopt strategies to alleviate students’ learning problems through actions which will reach all students.”<sup>5</sup> This study, spread across a larger number of universities but focused upon a single disciplinary group, aims to provide a preliminary assessment of the applicability of their results upon 21<sup>st</sup> century UK history cohorts.

It will look at first-year transition from a variety of perspectives, including previous experiences, expectations of university, adjustment to novel teaching, learning and assessment methods, diversity and perceptions of employability. Despite the small sample size of this initial study, the testimonials provided by both international and home students strongly suggests that many of the transitional difficulties faced by international history students are shared, to varying degrees, by subsections of the home student population. Therefore, although the experiences of international student will be highlighted, there were no areas covered in this study in which providing additional aid to international students would not provide a degree of benefit to home students as well. Although this study does not aim to be prescriptive in nature, it is hoped that readers will find commonalities between the following and their own teaching experiences, and that this will provide them with fresh perspectives from which to open new dialogues within their own departments. It is further hoped that additional work will be initiated to refine these tentative conclusions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Invitations to take part in the study were sent by email on 12 October 2009 to all UK higher education institutions that offered undergraduate history programmes. It requested that the invitation be forwarded to all home and international first year students studying history. Students were invited to take part in an initial web-based survey, 6 monthly follow-up surveys and 2 face-to-face or phone interview sessions. In return, all participants were entered into a draw for a £50 book token. During the 10-day acceptance window, the Subject Centre received 202 individual responses. The sample was entirely self-selected and no selection criteria were imposed by researchers other than respondents were first year history undergraduates at a UCAS-recognised university. It is unclear what effect self-selection had on the composition of the students in terms of academic ability, but the relatively low monthly retention rate perhaps suggests that high achievement or an interest in student advocacy were common characteristics of those who continued through the end of the project.

<sup>1</sup> D. Bourn, A. McKenzie and C. Shiel “The Global University: The Role of the Curriculum” (London: Development Education Association, 2006) available online at [http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/dea/documents/dea\\_global\\_university\\_curriculum.pdf](http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/dea/documents/dea_global_university_curriculum.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “UKCISA: Statistics on HE” UK Council for International Student Affairs [http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics\\_he.php#table6](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/statistics_he.php#table6)

<sup>3</sup> R. Neumann “Disciplinary Differences and University Teaching” *Studies in Higher Education* 26: 2 (2001), 136.

<sup>4</sup> J. Carroll and J. Ryan ‘Canaries in the coalmine’: International students in Western universities. In J. Carroll & J. Ryan. (Eds.), *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. (London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

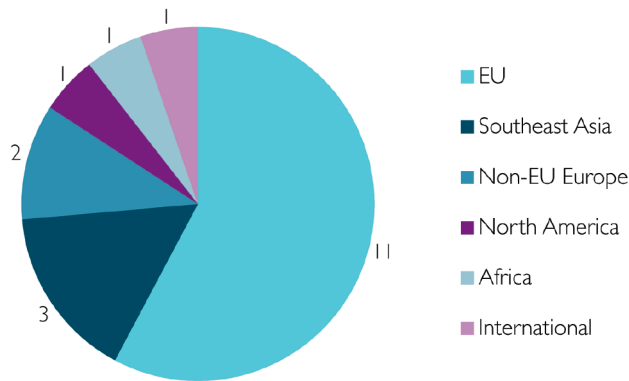
<sup>5</sup> G. Mullins, N. Quintrell and L. Hancock. “The Experiences of International and Local Students at Three Australian Universities” *Higher Education Research & Development* 14:2 (1995), 230.

## Demographics

Of the respondents, 74 identified themselves as male, 127 as female and 1 declined to state. 183 were between the ages of 17-25, 15 were over the age of 26 and 4 chose not to state. As these numbers are not proportional to the actual demographic composition of HE history students, evidence gained from the survey remains solely qualitative in nature. However, as will be seen below, trends do emerge that warrant further enquiry in the future.

In terms of nationality, 183 respondents stated that they had spent the majority of their secondary education within the United Kingdom, with 18 having attended secondary school outside the UK and 1 attending an international secondary school within the UK. Although this ratio is similar to the overall percentage of non-UK students in HE history programmes, the small sample size and the actual distribution of home nations means that the effect of specific home cultures cannot be inferred with any certainty. Instead, this report will focus on those difficulties that were explicitly or implicitly related to the student's international status.

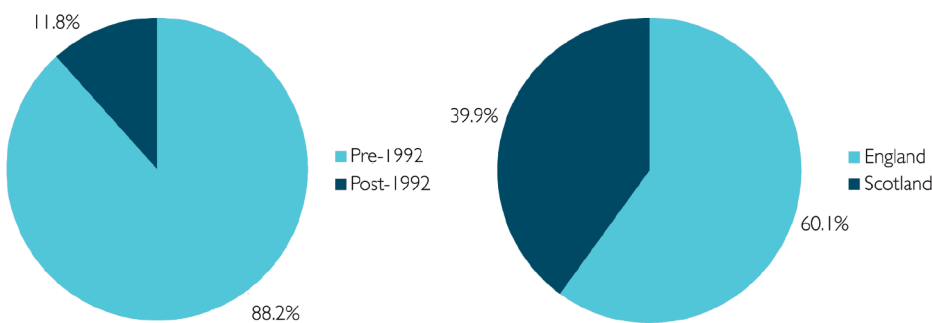
### Distribution of International Respondents



## University Affiliation

The respondents were affiliated with 22 different universities; 141 students were enrolled in an English degree programme, whereas 60 were enrolled in a Scottish university and 1 declined to state. There were no Welsh or Northern Irish universities represented. Because of the practice within Scottish universities for students to undertake three disciplines before proceeding into honours, a minority of Scottish respondents were unlikely to pursue History to degree level, colouring their responses in regard to value and interest. However, this was only made explicit by one student, who had initially had no interest in the subject but now intends to continue with it into honours.

Another key aspect of university affiliation was the proportion of students within new universities. In this sample group, the vast majority of respondents, 178, were from pre-1992 universities. Because of this, concrete differences between university mission groups remains clouded and warrant separate study beyond the scope of this project.





## Initial Survey

The goal of the initial web-survey was to discover baseline indicators of preparation for and expectations of first year HE history in the United Kingdom. The survey consisted of four main subsections:

- perceptions of secondary history curriculum, including teaching and learning methods
- perceptions of secondary history assessment
- language and cultural competencies
- university expectations, with explicit comparisons to secondary teaching and learning

When visiting the initial survey website, respondents were asked to divide into two groups based on where they had had the majority of their secondary education:

- those who had attended secondary school within the UK were designated home students
- those who had attended secondary school elsewhere were designated international students

Moreover, all students were asked to indicate the specific country in which they had been born and in which they had spent the majority of their secondary education, in order to realign any students who had mistakenly self-identified as home or international based on fees-status. Arguably, only 1 student had done so, having attended an international school within the UK.

Both home and international students were asked the same questions regarding secondary education and university expectations. Questions regarding language and cultural competencies, however, were dependent upon home or international status, though comparable in nature.

## Monthly Surveys

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month, students were sent an e-mail reminder to return to the project website to complete a monthly survey. These surveys focused more narrowly upon short-term observations, namely within the past 4 weeks, on specific aspects of their university experience. Respondents were asked to describe:

- factors which had encouraged and discouraged them
- the extent to which their expectations had been disappointed, met or exceeded
- the relative academic abilities of their peers
- any instances when background differences became apparent and their reaction to this
- any times in which language, including regional and disciplinary terminology, presented difficulties
- any disagreements or frustrations they felt with their course or university

Although both home and international students completed the same questionnaire, students were asked to provide a unique numerical identifier, which had been given to them after the completion of their initial survey. This allowed for their responses to be anonymously cross-referenced with their demographic information.

## Monthly Retention

Following the initial October survey, there was an average monthly retention rate of 14% of the original respondents, peaking in November at 20% and dipping in February at 11%. 4 responses in November and 1 in December could not be attached to a unique individual owing to incorrect entry of their unique numerical identifier. Excluding those which could not be identified, 9 of the original 19 international students took part in at least one of the monthly surveys.

Number of individuals who completed a survey in:		Number of individuals who completed at least:		Individuals who completed their final survey in:	
October	202	1 Survey	202	October	124
November	40	2 Survey	79	November	12
December	29	3 Survey	43	December	7
January	29	4 Survey	21	January	12
February	27	5 Survey	14	February	9
March	23	6 Survey	9	March	13
April	26	7 Survey	5	April	25

## Interviews

The third form of data collection in the study was recorded phone interviews. After the initial survey, all those who had indicated a willingness to take part in interviews were contacted by the researcher. In total, 10 phone interviews were conducted, over a three-and-a-half week period between 23 October 2009 and 17 November 2009. The students were heterogeneous in composition, allowing for questions to be posed to a variety of genders, ages, nationalities and university affiliations.

University Descriptors		Student Descriptors	
England	6	Male	6
Scotland	4	Female	4
Pre-1992	7	Home	8
Post-1992	3	International	2
		Under 26	6
		26+	4

The interview had several set questions and topics to cover. Students were asked to elaborate on:

- their previous work and education experiences
- the level of support they had received from the university
- how university life was meeting or disappointing their expectations
- their relationships with staff and their peers

In May 2010, invitations were sent to the original interviewees to participate in end-of-term interviews. 5 of the original 10 agreed. These interviews asked the students a set of questions regarding their experiences over the past year and what if any changes had taken place in their opinions since their original interview. No reference was made by the interviewer to monthly online surveys, though the students themselves often referenced their earlier responses with the prefaces *as I wrote* or *as I said before*.

## Compilation of results

The surveys contained a combination of tick box and open-ended questions. Those questions that prompted respondents to choose from a list of answers were analysed quantitatively with *other* responses coded into groupings where possible. Open-ended responses were coded on a variety of levels, noting expressions of frequency (some, a lot, never), emotional connotations (positive, negative, neutral) and content. Although sample size precludes definite conclusions based on statistical analysis, student responses did suggest certain trends that hint at wider truths yet to be explored. For those questions where responses were extremely individualised or showed no trends, a more impressionistic analysis will be given. In all cases, the anonymity of the respondents has been paramount and all references that may identify the individual, course or university have been removed from this report.

This report is not framed to be a singular narrative of student experience in first year history, nor can it claim to be so owing to demographic variations within the sample. Instead, it intends to provide a collection of snap-shots that can be referenced by lecturers when delving into departmental dialogues with students and staff or as act prompts to further research into specific aspects of the transitions of international students.

# PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION

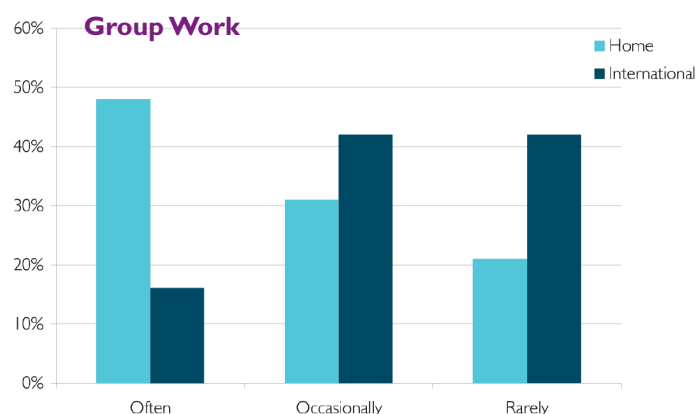
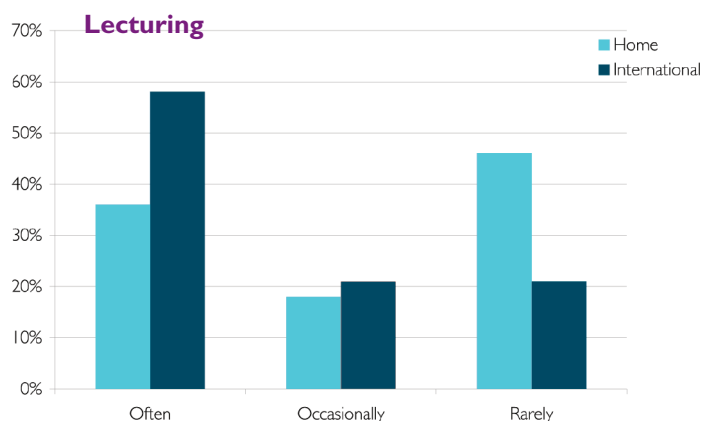
## Distribution of Secondary Education

In order to provide the study with a base-line of comparison, the initial survey asked all respondents a series of questions on their previous educational experiences including their modes of learning and assessment. Among international students, secondary education took place in the following nations: Estonia, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malawi, Norway, Sweden, Singapore, Spain, Sweden and the United States. Of those students who had attended the majority of their secondary education in the United Kingdom, 132 attended schools in England, 45 attended schools in Scotland, 4 had attended schools in Wales and 2 had attended school in another UK region (not including Northern Ireland). Veterans of A-level and Highers history, therefore, are well represented within the home student cohort. 192 respondents indicated that history had been one of their primary subjects during secondary school with only 1 international student and 9 home students indicating that it had not been.

## Learning

Students were asked to evaluate how often they had taken part in a variety of learning situations during their secondary education. Although highly subjective, and by no means a definitive analysis of their actual secondary experience, it does provide a good baseline for their perceptions of what their experience had been and how they had classified these experiences. Among home students, lectures were thought to be relatively uncommon. This is in contrast to the high proportion of students who, under other, described teacher-led lessons and class discussions. Conversely, the majority of international students felt they had had lectures often.

The opposite trend is apparent when discussing group work. Nearly half of home students felt they frequently engaged in group projects whereas only 3 of the international students felt the same. The relative frequency of individual research, direct study of the course textbook and engagement with primary sources were roughly similar between home and international cohorts.



## Assessment

In a testament to the standardisation of national curriculum, home students were remarkably consistent in their appraisal of their experience with different forms of assessment. Generally speaking, students felt that the majority of their assessment was in the form of national exams followed by assessed essays; only a small proportion of the mark had been derived from in-class examinations, group work, presentations or coursework. Results from international students were less clear cut, but they were primarily assessed by in-class and national examinations and essays. From this, it appears that the majority of students, regardless of national background, were previously expected to prepare overwhelmingly for a testing environment with relatively less focus on long-term assessed writing projects and little focus on collaborative research or a periodic appraisal of their learning through assessed coursework.

## Language

The primary language of the international respondents varied considerably. However, 11 of the students had been taught in an English-language secondary school. To what extent this is representative of wider trends with international history undergraduates is unclear; however, it has greatly reduced the prevalence of language as a transitional difficulty within this survey group. Conversely, only 12 of home students had taken history in a foreign language, either within a language course or during a period of study abroad. When asked about their confidence in studying in a foreign language, however, 27 felt fairly or very confident that they would be able to so do, with a further 79 noting that they were unsure but willing to try.



## Perceptions of Secondary Education

When asked to provide their views on their secondary education, respondents provided a wide variety of critiques and praises of their history instruction. International students, in general, were more negative in their appraisal of their secondary curriculum, with 7 of the 19 complaining of passive-learning or an overly-nationalistic content.

When it came solely to teaching methodology, however, international and home students were comparable in their responses. Overall, 113 students noted explicitly that history had been well taught and enjoyable while only 4 noted the opposite. Particularly appreciated was the variety of teaching methods that had been used and the perceived similarity to university study. A minority also acknowledged that their enjoyment of the subject had been the direct result of their teacher's enthusiasm and personality. In terms of learning, students made several comments regarding their personal feelings toward rote learning, independent research, lectures and group discussion but there were no overall trends in these areas. Nonetheless, in both groups a significant minority felt that it had been taught too narrowly, with little diversity in the modules. Likewise, several students felt that they had been spoon-fed, that the module had been too exam-focused and too repetitive in content.

There were no universal topics covered in the final years of secondary education, though a number of groupings were evident. International students within this survey group had generally undertaken modern (post-1800) histories of their own nations, or continents, alongside overarching world history surveys. Similarly, British history (1800-Present) and European history (1914-1945) were the most commonly studied periods for home students, though a sizable minority had concentrated on medieval European history.

## Major Periods of History Covered during Secondary Education:

### British History

- The Norman Conquest
- Medieval England
- Medieval Scotland
- Tudor England
- Stuart Scotland
- The English Civil War
- 17th Century British History
- 18th Century British History
- 19th Century British History
- 19th Century Irish History
- The Industrial Revolution
- The British Welfare state
- 20th Century British History

### North American History

- Native American History
- 19th Century American History
- 20th Century American History

### European History

- History of the Roman Empire
- Medieval European History
- The Crusades
- The Enlightenment
- 18th Century French History
- 19th Century French History
- 19th Century German History
- 20th Century German History
- 19th Century Italian History
- 20th Century Italian History
- 18th Century Russian History
- 20th Century Russian History
- 20th Century Spanish History

### Asian History

- 19th Century Japanese History

### Thematic History

- History of Art
- History of Medicine
- History of the Media

I think they tried to teach too much in the lectures, because the teaching system forced the schools to teach so much information.

I very much liked history, but sometimes I wished it would be more varied.

It was one of the best departments in the school, with engaging teachers. However, information was sometimes a little spoon-fed and has not really prepared me for the demands of university research.

I really enjoyed history at secondary school, and it was taught very well by most of the teachers in the department, interactive and engaging lessons were standard and work was given constructive feedback on how to improve.

I preferred GCSE history, as the subject matter was drawn from a wide variety of historical periods and used more interactive study methods.

Probably too focused on Nazis and communists. Should teach more about British heroes.

It's brilliant. I am only fortunate enough to be at such a great university due to the enthusiasm of my former history teacher motivating me to the fullest extent.

Very textbook based, not a lot of research work. I think there should be more independent study in order to prepare students for work and university.

# CHOICES AND EXPECTATIONS OF UNIVERSITY

## Choice

Respondents were asked a number of questions about their choice of course. First, they were offered the open-ended question *Why did you choose this course?* This was interpreted by students to include both *Why are you studying history?* and *Why are you studying at this University?* Respondents were highly individualistic in their responses to this question, but four major themes developed, which were apparent in both international and home student groups:

- **educational background** – the majority of students had chosen their degree programme primarily because they had greatly enjoyed studying the subject in the past or had achieved high marks in history in secondary school and therefore felt confident in this subject.
- **reputation** – a fifth of students indicated that they had heard positive things about the university, department or city; reputation was noted more often by home students under 26 than mature or international students.
- **course structure** – the majority of those discussing structure appreciated the variety of module themes, teaching styles and assessment models available within their course. A smaller number of students praised the opposite—that the course focused precisely on the period, theme or methodology they wished to undertake. Demographically, home students, female students and those under 26 were slightly more likely to appreciate variety. The affinity of the first and third groups may be the result of increased specialisation and modular teaching in UK secondary schools.
- **employability** – nearly a third of respondents, both home and international, indicated that their choice was influenced by future employment prospects. Just under half of these students had already chosen a specific career goal (historical research, military, politics or teaching) that they felt necessitated a history degree. The remainder noted that history offered transferable skills, a variety of employment prospects and a more complex view of the world, which would assist them throughout their life.

## Format

Entering university, most students were aware of the structural division between lectures and seminars—though this knowledge may be the result of orientation and initial classes. Particular emphasis, however, was placed on the expected prominence of peer discussion groups. This suggests that students believed that the majority of their university experience would be seminar based. This was in contrast to a smaller number of students who expected that university would involve significantly reduced contact with staff and a majority of their time being spent in independent study.

Nonetheless, in contrast to their UK counterparts, international students made few references to teaching format. Instead, their expectations focused on the importance of independent study and the opportunity to learn about history in a more detailed and in-depth manner. Although many home students also spoke about independent study, this disparity between expectations of teaching and learning may warrant further enquiry.

## Difficulty

Across demographic lines, there appears to be general belief that higher education would be more difficult than secondary school. How students perceived this increase, however, varied considerably. Some respondents answered simply that the course would be more difficult. Others choose to frame the change more positively, utilizing terms such as challenging, intensive, professional and academic and fulfilling. This suggests that students were aware that expectations would be more stringent, but that this increase was usually welcomed.

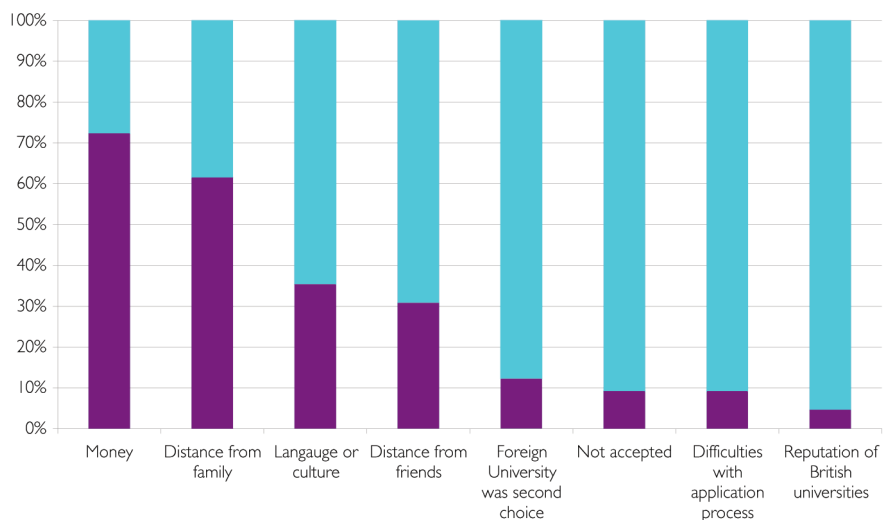
It was also believed that this increase in standards would be as much the result of peer expectations as those of the staff. One international student felt that “everyone will care about the subject” and will therefore demand more of each other. Likewise, a home student noted that there will be “a genuine enjoyment of the subject” and you would not “be dragging your heels on the way to your next lesson.”

As a sub-category of increased difficulty, there was a significant use of the term spoon-feeding by respondents. Most believed that university would be a departure from the perceived tendency of secondary schools to teach for the test. Importantly, home students were more likely to use the term spoon-feeding than simply describe the phenomenon, although one student raised in Hong Kong also used the expression. This strongly suggests that British media portrayals have significantly affected perceptions of secondary education and expectations of university teaching. One home student explicated noted that his expectations had come from media portrayals. “I’m the first member of my entire family that’s actually went into university, so I honestly had no clue what it would be like, so I was quite reliant actually on the media and films and TV and stuff. I didn’t really have any other kind of thing to go on.”

## Study Abroad

When asked specifically about studying abroad—why had international students done so and why had home students decided against it—clear trends are apparent. 64 home students, just over one-third, had contemplated obtaining a degree at a foreign university, but decided against the move.

### Reasons for not attending a foreign university



Interestingly, those who had considered time abroad were generally less confident about their language abilities than those who had always intended to remain in the UK.

In terms of course content, the vast majority of home students, 167, had felt confident that they could have taken a similar or identical course at another university within the UK. International students, however, were split 11-8 as to whether they could or could not have found a similar course in their home country. There was no significant relation between region of origin and the answer to this question—in several cases two students from the same country responded in opposite ways.

In general, physical distance from home was only mentioned by a small number of home and international students and was rarely described as a key reason for their choice. On the other hand, the desire to experience a new cultural or regional environment was occasionally referenced by both groups.

The teaching style is more inspiring, and I feel confident this will continue. Extra-curricular reading is obviously massively important and necessary. University is also about independent study and the boundaries aren't as flexible as they are at secondary school, so this will push me to be more organised and punctual.

I understand one of the fundamental aspects of university is not to be spoon fed information, but at times I feel like I have been thrown in at the deep end and unable to swim.

Classes will be more open ended and every student will be expected to contribute to the class discussion. There will also be a more relaxed atmosphere at university. Detailed preparation will need to be done beforehand to do this.

Lectures will be much bigger in numbers and the chance for qualification or clarification won't be there to the degree it was at school.

#### More Reading, Less "Spoon Feeding"

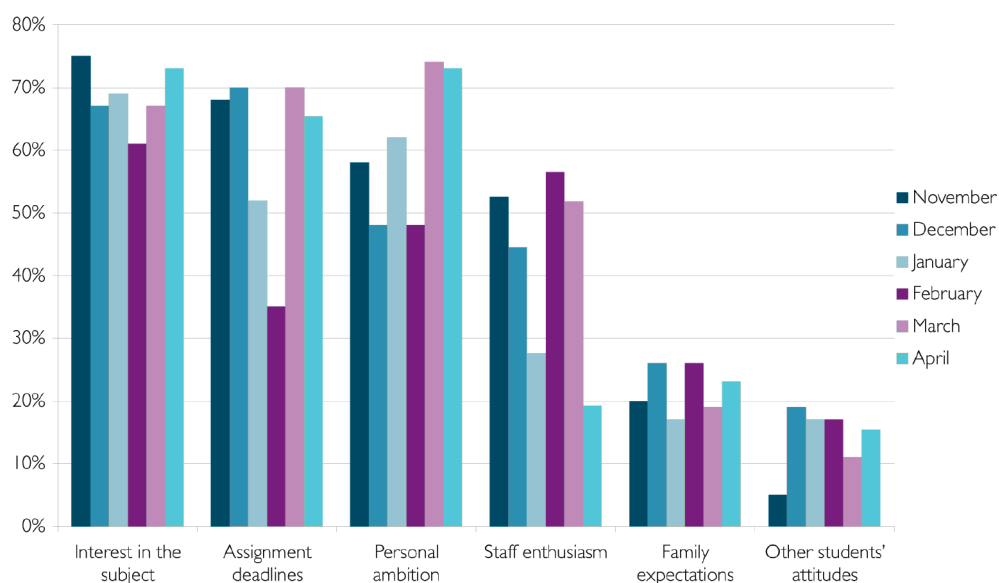
Lectures will be much more formal, with a lot more students and no interaction with the lecturer. Seminars would be more similar to the classes, however, you will not be taught but be expected to arrive having learnt the information and be ready to put forward your views.

# PERCEPTIONS OF TRANSITION

## Encouragements and Setbacks

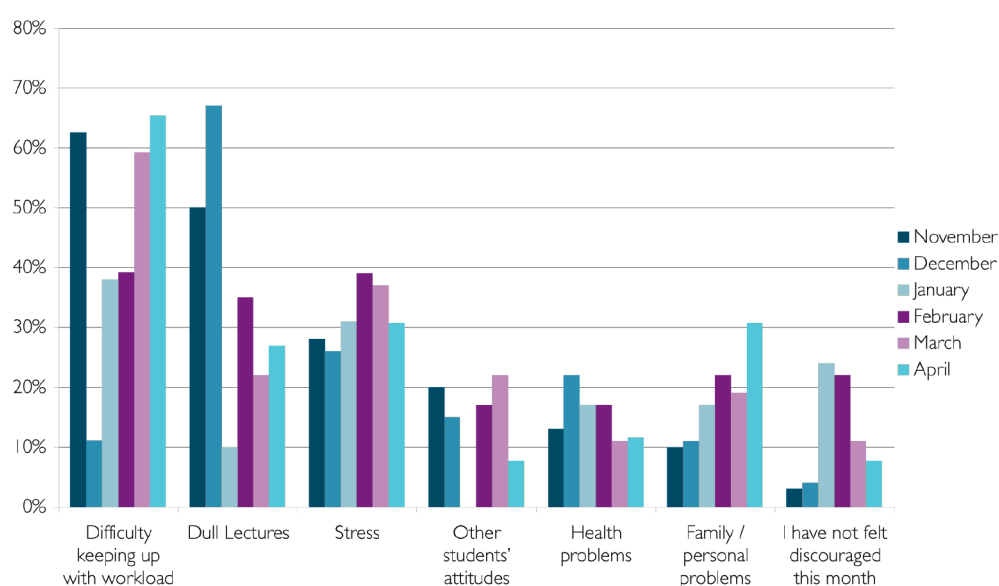
Over the course of their first year at university, the students were asked to indicate what aspects of university and their personal life had encouraged or discouraged them during the previous month. Encouragements remained fairly constant throughout the year, with *Interest in the Subject*, *Deadlines* and *Personal Ambition* being the primary motivators for the majority of students throughout the year.

Percentage of students who mentioned various encouragements each month



*Keeping up with the workload*, including reading and assessed work, was the primary discouragement throughout the year, although these percentages did dip in December.

Percentage of students who mentioned various discouragements each month



Demographically, there was no significant difference between age, gender or national groups except that international students were **less** likely to note difficulties with accents or homesickness than their UK counterparts. Owing to the primary language of international secondary schools within this survey group, this result is not surprising, but it may not be an accurate reflection of first year history students as a whole. The reason for the distribution of *homesickness* is less clear. Besides being more prevalent in home students, homesickness did not fluctuate throughout the year, except for a very small rise in December and a very small dip in April. In all other respects it remained constant. It may be that this aspect of transition is individualised to the point that only individual lectures, tutors and pastoral staff can address it with any precision.

## Departures from Previous Study

The respondents were also asked to describe the ways in which their university modules had been taught differently from secondary history. The most common responses for all students were

- the frequency of lectures
- the sharp increase in independent research
- the importance of peer discussion

Although a popular response by home students, none of the international students surveyed chose to comment upon discussion or seminar groups. Instead, their responses were much more focused upon lecturing and assessment.

When discussing new modes of learning, students gave very specific answers regarding the use of different source materials, including economic data, newspapers, art, photographs, films, maps and a wide variety of secondary material. Whether speaking generally or more specifically, discussion of primary sources made up half of all these responses. Historiography also appeared frequently, though usually under the more general headings of independent study and obtaining contextual information to support primary research.

Descriptions of their study habits showed little variation based on age, gender or international background. Part of this was the wide variety of tasks mentioned, making the numbers in each category very small. Even when grouped into the more manageable categories of *primary source work*, *secondary reading* and *other learning activities*, it became clear that similar differences between secondary and HE history are evident to students regardless of demographic background.

## Preparation for University

When asked directly, the majority of home students stated that they had felt well prepared for the university experience; all 3 international students taking part in the final survey felt fully prepared. Nevertheless, some home students

- had difficulties moving from an environment where they had been above average to a more equitable starting position.
- felt unprepared for the skill-based aspects of university life, such as time management, essay writing and exam preparation
- felt disadvantaged compared to their peers when unfamiliar terminology or concepts were not fully explained by staff

One mature student suggested that additional preparatory material be offered to students before the start of term, so they could do reading in advance of the main start of term. Another felt that some transitions simply take time: "I don't think you can be fully prepared. It's only in the second semester that you begin to feel you can actually do this course."

I had an assignment to do [over the winter break]. However, I left this almost until the last minute. When I got back I found it very difficult to get back into the swing of things and I feel that I am still not there yet! Something to be learned here for the following years.

I didn't really know what to expect. I thought everyone would be working all the time, and it looks like it has really only been me that's like that! No, there are lots of really strong points to university that I might not have ever realised are part of university; the social life, the different types and ages of people, the amount there is to do and get involved in and that there is always help there if needed.

Some people in my course had better education than me so seemed more trained. Things I struggled with a little, such as essay writing and time management, came much more naturally to others.

I was aware that it was going to be hard. However, I did expect a little more than 8 contact hours a week!

I thought that university should be somewhere where the information is given to us in lectures and that is all that would be needed to improve my overall understanding of the subject. However, I have realised that it is mostly through independent study that I further my understanding.



## Readjustment Period

It was expected that January and February would be particularly difficult months for the students because of their disconnection from newly made friends and colleagues during the winter break. However, the vast majority of respondents reported no difficulty in restarting their studies. On the contrary, several noted that they felt refreshed after the break and were excited to return. A small number noted that readjusting to university life was difficult, but gave few details. Interestingly, despite almost none of the students having any contact with the university staff over the break, about half the respondents noted that they had continued their studies, to varying levels of success. The 4 international students who responded to this question did so along similar lines to home students. Only one explicitly mentioned her international status: She felt that the winter break "was time for being with the family, especially when you are abroad for so long".

## Staff-Student Relationships

Relationships between the students and university staff hint at some trends that may warrant further study. The final question of each survey asked if the student had disagreed with the way history was being taught that month. Although relatively few comments were made in November, the number of students who responded yes noticeably increased in December before returning to a relatively low level at the start of the second term.

This implies that their frustrations spiked because of exams and other assessments. However, there were only three mentions of assessment throughout the entire year, and no respondents used this section to vent frustration with marking practices. Instead, they were primarily concerned with:

- Turn-around time for assessed written work.
- Alignment between lecture topics and assessment questions

Nor was the section monopolised by a few vocal respondents repeating a single complaint; 50% of comments were single incidents. Those who did make multiple observations discussed a variety of issues and in other months signified that they had not disagreed with the teaching in recent weeks.

In terms of demography there were several noticeable trends. However, owing to the contentious nature of the question, the results can only be considered impressionistic:

- international students were more likely to be frustrated by choice of content than by logistics
- mature students were more likely to be frustrated by course organisation and contact hours than content
- mature students were more likely to express frustration than younger students
- male students were more likely to express frustration than female students
- female students were more likely to commiserate with their fellow students or take no action at all
- male students were more likely to approach staff to redress their grievances

## Student Advice to Staff

During the first term, interviewees were asked if they had any advice for history staff to improve future students' transition into the first year. Overall, the students felt that staff had done the best they could with limited time, resources and huge numbers of incoming first year students. Nonetheless, some very simple transitional aids were mentioned.

First, the idea of personal, one-on-one contact with personal tutors and advisors was crucial, especially to home students. Being able to have frequent contact with a single individual during the first month, even if only for 10 to 15 minutes a week, would have been greatly appreciated. Some felt their personal tutors had no real concept of who they were or what individual difficulties they were facing. Others felt that this was simply not possible because of the sheer number of students being accepted each year, and, until the staff-student ratio was improved, this sort of contact was out of their reach.

The other main piece of advice was for lecturers, and tutors especially, to take more care in getting to know their students. Part-time students, for example, were often left without crucial information because tutors assumed all their students were taking identical core courses. Information given in one module was assumed to reach all students, which simply was not the case. Likewise, international students were sometimes taken aback by staff expectations of previous knowledge. Staff teaching on introductory modules still assumed a level of historical knowledge based on typical UK secondary study. This was even apparent in modules that had been described as requiring no previous study. By taking stock of students' previous educational experiences, within and prior to university, staff would be able to avoid both repetition and exclusion. General assumptions based on age, gender and nationality served little purpose within a seminar group and a few minutes spent to get to know student at the start would reap huge dividends in the end.

## Retrospective Perceptions of the Course

In the final survey, students were asked to consider how well their expectations had been met throughout the year. Students touched upon many themes, but focused primarily upon course content, organisation and pacing.

There were, however, few clear answers as to what students had expected out of their first year modules and no clear divisions between home and international cohorts. Some felt their lectures were very general, others felt they were highly focused and detailed. In both cases, students were satisfied that they had met their expectations. On the other hand, in modules which were arranged thematically rather than chronologically, some students found the transition difficult while others felt it was only natural for university history to be taught differently from secondary schools. The most commonly mentioned difficulties by both home and international students were

- the unexpectedly steep rise of difficulty
- the level of background reading required
- the cost of tuition compared to the number of contact hours
- misleading module titles and descriptions
- modules that were poorly organised

## The role of HE

At the end of the study, respondents were asked if their perception of what university should be like had changed. Most felt that their perceptions had remained constant over the past year. A few, however, said changes had occurred.

One theme that developed was the growing perception of student-as-consumer. One home student was concerned by the lack of acknowledgement their views had received by university staff, especially in regard to the cost and suitability of their accommodation and learning spaces. Likewise, an international student complained of the high cost compared to the relatively few contact hours received.

Interaction between staff and students was also a concern of commuter and mature home students, who felt that sufficient support structures had not been in place to help their transition; off-campus obligations had simply not been sufficiently taken into account.

On the other hand, several of the respondents felt that it was their perceptions of their own role in the university experience that had changed. Originally they had believed that university would be a controlled environment wherein lectures would be the primary source of knowledge transfer. The importance of personal responsibility for learning was now much more apparent. Others, home and international, acknowledged that they had not previously appreciated the social benefits of the university experience and the value attached to extracurricular activities.

I had never used economic data in such a precise way or economic formulas when studying history.

We watched part of a Black Adder episode as a source. This was a bit difficult for me because it's always harder to understand jokes in a different language and humour is slightly different to what I'm used to.

Almost every seminar and lecture is different to how history was taught in sixth form, though the presence of PowerPoint does add a nice touch of continuity.

You cannot stop and ask a question in the middle of the lecture.

The only feedback we get is from essays, whereas in secondary school our homework is graded so we know how well we are doing the whole way through.

There have been a couple of trips to museums, where we have been left to our own devices. [Other times] the teacher has just not turned up, so the lesson was cancelled.

The facts are no longer important, except when using them in arguments.

A lot of the time the lecturers talk about things outside our course period, and say that we would not get any marks if we spoke about it in the exam. I don't really understand why we dedicate a lecture to something we won't get tested on [but] I did not know who to speak to about this.

# LECTURES

## Transition from Secondary School Lessons

There were several aspects of university lecturing that students noted as particular departures from secondary education. Previously, lessons had focused upon “hard facts” whereas lectures were “all about different approaches and interpretations.” Similarly, contact hours were spent providing students with signposts rather than direct knowledge transfer. Others commented favourably on the novel inclusion of social and economic history.

The actual format of lectures, however, did cause some difficulties. Many students noted that they could not ask questions in university lectures, as they had been able to in school, and that there was in general very little interaction. Pacing was also an issue. Students often felt that the lecturer was speaking too quickly and there was no mechanism to signal them to slow down. This was especially important to students who felt that the opinions being expressed were controversial and wished to question the lecturer at the time, rather than during seminars or office hours. Only a few respondents felt that lecturers “made us get involved”, despite this being the preferred format.

## Content

The specific content of lectures also played an important role in transition. Less than half of respondents felt that their modules had covered the themes and subjects they had expected. A third of responses thought that the material had been unexpectedly broad, whereas small number described an unnecessary separation of political, social and economic history or a general paucity of political history and international context. Others noted that the thematic approach was unfamiliar and confusing. One international student “found the extreme thematic approach of one course too difficult to get the big picture. Perhaps it will come later, but now it is so fragmented that I cannot see too many connections between them.”

Background knowledge clearly played a large role in student perceptions of lectures. Throughout the year, many students described those times when the topics they had studied in secondary school had been revisited, allowing them to use and update previous learning. Others, however, felt that the lecture series moved too quickly from topic to topic and that too little background information was provided for those who had not studied these themes previously. This was especially the case with international students who consistently felt unprepared for British history lectures compared with British peers. This suggests that many students expected lectures, rather than reading, to be their primary source of contextual information. Likewise, many students felt that lecture attendance was sufficient to maintain equal footing in seminar discussion unless prior study at A-levels had occurred.

Nonetheless, international students were far more likely than home students to state that they were less knowledgeable than their peers despite having done significant reading. Several international students also commented on perceived differences in historical perspective. Although one student had studied WWI in detail at secondary school, doing so from the British point of view added significantly to her understanding. Conversely, another student found that descriptions of his country's literature were extremely basic, classifying them as “stuff that almost every child knows”.

In general, the level of detail covered was difficult to pitch to the satisfaction of all. Some students questioned the depth of lectures, feeling they were too generic and that all their knowledge had to be obtained through readings. Others experienced the opposite, feeling that the lectures were “incredibly detailed and maybe a bit over-the-top for 1st year.”

## Connections to other aspects of the course

The relationship between lectures and assessment was of particular importance to many of the respondents. Students from several universities complained that there was no clear link between much of the lecture content and essay and exam questions. Either there was no question that could be attached to a specific lecture or it was unclear as to which sections of the lecture were relevant to future assessment. Because of this, many felt that these lectures had been a waste of time. Others felt that the lecture and seminar series were entirely separate, with few topical or thematic links between them. At times, seminar tutors and lecturers seemed at odds, countermending reading lists or readjusting the focus of that the week's discussion, leading to confusion if not frustration. Lastly, although the idea of independent study was understood, students did not know how to obtain or make effective use of the required reading. Signposts in lectures offered insufficient support.

## Practical Issues

Practical problems with lectures appeared only in a minority of comments, but were perceived a severe shortcoming by the department, damaging their view of the module. Frequent absenteeism by lecturers without notice and reading directly from the PowerPoint were chief among the complaints. Difficulties with timetabling also came into play when seminars, lectures and office hours were held on the same day; there was little time to review the material in order to make a meaningful contribution in seminars or ask appropriate questions of staff.

Internationalisation also caused some issues. Although diversity among students was considered a positive part of the university experience, diversity among staff members had practical issues. Accents, whether regional or international, were often commented upon by both home and international students. Diversity was also an issue with team-taught modules. Some enjoyed the variety of specialisation while others felt the module lost cohesion.

## Unfamiliar Language

Each month, respondents were asked to detail times when a lecturer had used unfamiliar words or terminology. Most students felt that this had only occurred once or twice in any given month, but some admitted to it occurring regularly. In November, over two-thirds admitted this had occurred at least once.

Respondents were also asked how they queried the word or expression. In the first term, the majority used either a dictionary, searched for the word online or simply estimated the word from the context. On the other hand, only a small number asked another student or approached their tutor or lecturer. As the year progressed, most students no longer felt they had come across any unknown terminology; the percentage of those who queried friends or staff remained roughly similar. In the March survey, the last one to ask this question, there was a sharp rise in the number of students who asked their tutor or lecturer for a definition rather than rely upon dictionaries or context.

When examining the specific words with which students had difficulty, some could be easily queried based on their standard definitions, such as *nuance*, *teleology* or *hagiography*. Others, however, have disciplinary connotations and the use of a basic dictionary or general context may have been insufficient. Examples of these were *popular revolution*, *romanticism* and *sham constitutionalism*. Interestingly, international students were less likely to indicate they had come across an unfamiliar term in course, though some indicated that either the lecturer explained all new terms explicitly or that they had gathered the meaning from the context of the discussion. It is unclear, within this specific group, whether this was the result of their secondary education or the language coping mechanisms they had already developed. Regardless, no international students mentioned a non-technical term in response to this question.

## Enjoyment

Despite difficulties, the majority of students felt that their lectures had been enjoyable overall and only a small minority noted dissatisfaction with the topics or their presentation. Many who did not enjoy them had expected not to, being placed in core modules in which they had little interest.

One of my lecturers speaks too fast but I feel embarrassed to ask him to repeat.

I expected it to be more class-based with seminars, but actually it's been a combination of general lectures dealing with set themes, more basic skills with less emphasis on specific seminars. Basically a lot of emphasis on reading, I didn't expect that.

The lecturers were enthusiastic and helpful.

[I didn't expect] the amount which the lecturers skim through things...we have to read immensely around the subject. Also, lectures are merely bullet points that we are told, with only a small amount of information, so we have to find things out properly.

Some of the lectures are given in a manner where someone talks at you for an hour there's not enough innovative or interesting ways of providing the information.

Lecturers seem very stuck in their own opinions

One of the lecturers writes a lot on the PowerPoint slides and then just reads of them. Seems like there is no point taking notes as you can just read the PowerPoint back, then I switched off and wasted the lecture.

# SEMINARS

## Format

Most students expected that their university would contain a seminar component. The actual format, however, came as a shock to many. The level of discussion and the relatively unobtrusive role tutors played in the dialogue were often noted, as was the concept of there being no right answer. According to home respondents, successful engagement with seminar discussion relied upon a variety of factors including personal confidence, comfort with group discussion, preparedness and raw knowledge. In addition, one Norwegian student felt that his international status hindered his ability to engage fully with the discussion group. Across several monthly interviews he noted that "I generally feel that, being an international student, I am inferior to the easy natural way British students discuss subjects. I struggle to, at the same time, formulate appropriately my sentences, present idea, argue about them and reflect on them. I feel to an extent impaired to contribute, but it is getting better. I gather it is a question of being used to it." In terms of content, although most seminars worked with primary texts and secondary readings, many were also exposed to modern media, including documentaries and film, for which they felt relatively unprepared.

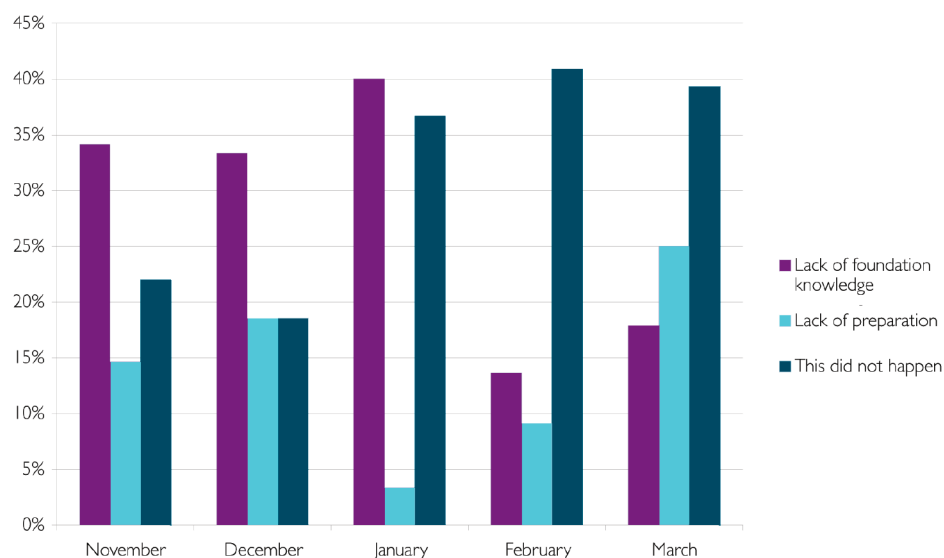
## Learning Activities

The use of innovative seminar activities had mixed results. Two home students, seemingly on the same course, described a seminar in two very different ways. One noted that "The role play in my Viking seminars are really interesting and get everyone involved." Conversely, another simply noted having taken part in a "strange Viking role play." Moreover, whereas some longed for the group activities used in secondary school, others found it off-putting. Their seminars were very similar to classrooms rather than the open atmospheres for discussion that they had expected. Likewise, there was not enough trust in the students (earned or not) to discuss the material themselves. In those cases where students had been very quiet, tutors had evidently filled that silence with ramblings that seemed to waste valuable contact hours. Notably, international students made very few references to learning activities outside standard lecturing and group discussions, either positive or negative.

## Peer Comparisons

Each month, the students were asked to describe those times when they felt they were more knowledgeable than their peers and those times when they felt behind. Predictably, students were more likely to feel behind in the first months of university than during second term or semester. The reasons for this varied but the most prevalent were lack of foundation knowledge and preparation.

### Reasons why students felt less able than their peers



The percentage of students feeling disadvantaged in their previous knowledge dropped sharply after January, suggesting that the advantages associated with having studied a specific topic in secondary school had a limited lifespan. That the percentage of those who admitted to a lack of preparation dropped significantly in January only to rise again suggests that students initially felt refreshed after the holidays but later suffered from assessment deadlines or from end of year fatigue.

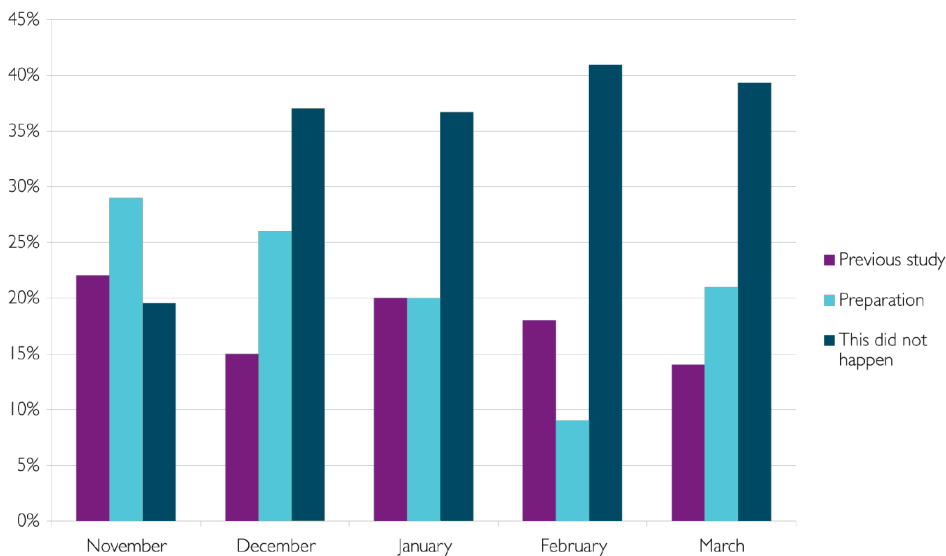


Demographically:

- international students were more likely to cite a lack of foundation knowledge than home students
- those under 26 usually cited lack of foundation knowledge for their feelings of inferiority
- male students were about twice as likely as female students to state that they had never felt less knowledgeable than their peers
- those over 26 were unlikely to feel they knew less than their counterparts

In terms of being more knowledgeable than their peers, confidence appears to have waned as the year progressed. This was not, however, owing to rising feelings of inferiority. Most students conceded that although they might know more about a particular point, owing to preparation or previous study, their peers had equal strengths in other areas.

### Reasons why students felt more able than their peers



Demographically:

- international students were more likely to feel that they knew more than their classmates because of their different secondary background
- female students were more likely to cite previous study as their primary reason for being more knowledgeable
- those over 26 were more likely to cite preparation than those under 26

### Value

When asked at the end of the study to describe the best part of their course so far, nearly all respondents, including international students, mentioned the seminars, wishing for additional time spent in this manner. This was partly because seminar discussion was considered the most intuitive part of their course. It was only when students were not adequately prepared or not encouraged to debate by the tutor that seminars were seen in a less favourable light. These students felt that university would be a more open, collaborative environment and were disappointed by the lack of discussion in classes.

The importance of contact hours with peers, rather than with staff, was also recognised by a number of interviewees. One home student wished that he had had "more contact hours with my peers, because although the reading is going fine, I kind of like listening to other people's ideas and trying them in my mind and formulate them and see where they are going with it, seeing if they are plausible. Or to see what kind of ideas they'd come up with in comparison with me; to see if I can take it from another angle. Otherwise, you're only getting one idea across."

I really liked the seminars as a chance to not only develop your confidence and give your opinion and findings on a certain subject but to have debates or academic discussions about history was always fun and very interesting.

I think, so far, everyone's a little bit nervous in seminars, to argue their own thoughts through.

The best parts of my course were seminars which were relaxed, but the students know their stuff. But the hour long seminar isn't long enough because by the time everyone has gone to the toilet and got a drink and had a banana or whatever it is they're doing, half the time's gone.

I would say about 85% of the group just don't prepare. So you have a relatively short seminar period, and half it is spent getting everyone else up to speed. Even to the point where they don't even know where the material is. And it's all posted on the learning platform. It's not complicated.

I enjoyed the seminars where I could discuss certain aspects of the course with the lecturer and with other students and they became interesting when debates began to arise.

# INDEPENDENT STUDY

## Expectations v. Reality

When contrasting the initial and monthly surveys, it is clear that many students went into the programme not fully understanding the concept of independent study. Although most of the initial survey respondents had explicitly stated that they expected university to require individual study, their monthly surveys consistently indicated that they were unprepared for what it actually entailed. One international student, for example, noted that “I was aware of the amount of reading and work to be done, even though it overwhelmed me.” As the year progressed, many felt that history was more reliant upon independent study than other courses at their university because essay writing was the primary method of assessment. This relative isolation was very difficult for some students; the proportion of time spent being taught was very different from previous experience.

## The Role of Staff in Transition

Student perceptions regarding the role of staff in their learning experience were fairly consistent between international and home students, though they may have clashed greatly with the perceptions of staff themselves. Whenever respondents discussed the role of staff, or difficulties they had encountered on the course, there was a basic expectation that the staff were meant to be actively, even pre-emptively, helpful to students and provide clear, direct guidance. Instead, many felt that their modules and courses were disorganised, the lectures and seminars unfocused and the staff unhelpful in clearing up confusion. Interviewees made it clear they wished for more individualised contact with at least one member of staff. Perhaps unsurprisingly, international interviewees were more likely to mention having received specialised pastoral care. Moreover, the one interviewee who felt that she had received superb pastoral care was part of a distance learning program. Efforts to develop peer support and rapid electronic communication with students had been much appreciated.

## Previous Study v. Independent Study

Most students, but especially international students, felt that staff assumed they had a higher level of background knowledge than was actually the case. This may be a result of staff expecting a high level of preparation whereas students often relied upon previous study as a basis for their work. International students, for example, generally felt they simply lacked the standard background information given to British students during secondary education. Several home students, on the other hand, noted that the concept of doing background research before a lecture or seminar was wholly new to them. From their language, it is evident that preparation made a significant difference to their self-confidence in seminars. Yet, they generally felt that background reading was in some ways exceptional. When and if they had done research beyond the required weekly text it was usually in preparation for a presentation or essay on that topic. No respondents indicated that they consistently felt as if they were better prepared than their fellow students.

## Workload

To many respondents, home and international, the course was simply not what they had expected.

- Over half of the respondents found their workload to be more arduous than they had originally anticipated
- the majority felt it was heavy; only a small number felt it was light
- no international students felt the workload was lighter than expected
- students who described their workload as light had expected a heavier one
- a sizable minority of home students were disappointed that their university work was so similar to what they had done at secondary school

Most students often noted that despite being aware that university work would be more time consuming, they had not had a precise picture of what more entailed. Yet, despite independent study being very difficult for some students, and a new experience to most, many of the respondents found it the most rewarding part of their time at university. Engrossing oneself in a wide range of reading and learning to absorb text quickly, especially for assessed essays, was considered one of the most useful skills gained in the first year.

## Skills Development

An important aspect of a university history course is the development of research and reading skills. These include the ability to efficiently read secondary literature on a topic, to develop a research question and to identify and obtain appropriate primary and secondary sources to answer that question. Although most students recognised that they were meant to be undertaking research beyond what they were expected to do in secondary school, their language indicates a lack of certainty as to staff and library resources.

Students felt they were expected to “look for the answer yourself, rather than just be given it.” In many cases this meant not only answers to historical questions, but also how to approach the research itself. Several students, home and international, noted that they were given few direct instructions regarding their assessed work during lectures and seminars, especially regarding staff expectations. To many, HE History meant “researching data yourself, trying to find it without assistance.”

Yet, in their reaction to this general perception of a lack of information, there was a very important divide between traditional students and mature and international students. One interviewee, a mature student, noted that she had been very concerned about her lack of research skills and therefore attended most of the faculty and university workshops on academic writing and library use. She found the experience extremely useful, academically and socially. At her institution, relatively few of the younger home students had attended these courses and thus the international and mature students were given a special opportunity to bond and form friendships outside lectures and seminars.

It is not clear whether integrating these courses in history modules would be effective. Many home students were also nervous about essay writing and noted that they would have appreciated exemplars of essays at different marks. Yet, at those universities where students were given skills lectures that explicitly explained how to write a history essay, some respondents found them somewhat insulting: “I think the main thing for me is that I’ve been a bit frustrated at the feeling that I’ve been bit condescended to. We know how to write sentences. Obviously people need to be told how to reference properly and things like that but sometimes I felt like it’s a bit patronising. We were given a sheet a paper with no punctuations and got told to put the full stops in. That kind of stuff is not needed. It was an insult to our intelligence.”

Those who had joined the universities from further education institutions and access courses, in particular, found many of the skills they had been taught previously were being repeated for the benefit of those coming straight from secondary education. This took up contact hours that they wish had been spent on course content. Likewise, modules that attempted to teach research skills through a sampling of historical themes and periods were often unsatisfying as students were not able to explore any of the topics in depth. Moreover, several interviewees felt that a voluntary workshop within the history department would have given students extra support in their academic writing, but not taken up lectures and seminars, which should concentrate on historical content. “I would have gone quite happily, given up that spare time to go and learn. And the other courses have done stuff like that but history hasn’t really. And I would have gone along.”

I have struggled to adjust to the amount of time I have and how to organise myself and remain motivated.

More contact hours!

I've found that it is a lot more independent than at secondary school, which is a big leap in the way we learn.

It's more difficult than I originally expected. A lot of reading to be done, which is hard to find the time to do, and is difficult trying to improve my grade.

University has been largely centred around the student doing much of the work off their own bat

The workload is less than I expected, however I suppose I haven't been doing as much outside reading as I could have done.

The module is more in depth and wide ranging than I expected but this is a positive thing

I don't remember what all of my expectations were, but there is a lot more reading involved than I imagined.

Independent work has become good, and library was very useful.

I just think school doesn't properly prepare you for the way it is required to work in university, such as the level of independence, the deadlines and hand-ins, etc. Even the way we get taught—seminars, lectures— But I don't know what else the schools could do to ease this jump.

The tutors don't make sure you have done it but are aware if you haven't.

# ASSESSMENT

## Summative v. Formative

Because of the relative shock university assessment practices give undergraduate students, respondents were asked each month if they had received any of their assessed work back and if they had received the mark they expected. Students were generally very open in responding to this question, often acknowledging their own failings in conjunctions with typical transitional difficulties. Suggestions of unfair marking practices were rare.

One of the key difficulties with this question, however, was the definition of assessed work. Many modules had students engage in formative assessment throughout the year with only one or two summative assessments at the end of the module or term. By the monthly distribution of not applicable responses, it is clear most students only considered the latter assignments as their assessed work. When interviewees were explicitly asked whether they had had any formative assessment, most referenced modules they were taking in other disciplines, namely English and Cultural Studies, rather than history.

When asked if they would like their history modules to have formative or non-assessed essays, in order to practice academic writing, feelings were mixed. On the one hand, students felt they were already overloaded with work for their modules and additional work which “didn’t count” was unappealing. On the other, one student noted that, having had a chance to practice essay writing in an English module, “I feel a bit more confident about writing this essay because I’ve been given a chance to practice one that was marked and said ‘This is what you’ve done okay’ and ‘this is what you need to work on.’”

## Expectations of Self and Staff

The disconnect between formative and summative assessment notwithstanding, student responses to their marks did highlight several issues. International students were more likely to get the mark they expected than home students, who often noted that they had received a better one. This may indicate a tendency among home students to fear the worst. When students received a poorer mark than they had expected, the reasons for this varied considerably with no noticeable trends from nationality, gender or age. In terms of change over time, the only significant variation was a sharp drop off of *unsure how to write an essay* midway through the first term.

Despite being only anecdotal, the issues raised by these students were commonly felt throughout the UK and often appear in discussions of student satisfaction. The main four points made by students in this study were:

- deadlines were either unclear or unevenly spaced throughout the year
- feedback was infrequent, absent or unclear
- there was an overall lack of clarity on what was expected of students in class and in assessed work
- there was no direct correlation between topics covered in lectures and assessment questions

That students felt lectures were not directly relevant to essay and exam questions or that relevant information was not clearly identified by lecturers, highlights the fact that students still expect to be firmly directed toward right or correct answers on which they will be assessed later.

As mentioned above, staff guidance on research and writing skills was often highlighted as a key transitional issue. One home interviewee noted that “I’ve not really had a huge amount of guidance on [writing at university level] and although there is information on the website, I’d like exemplar essays. Just the reasonable standard I’m going to be [expected to be] writing at. Because I don’t know what level to pitch my essay at, which is a bit of a problem.” Another home student felt that, if there had been fewer people on the course, “maybe they could have taken us aside and put us in groups and said this is how we expect you to reference and this is the work we’re expecting. These are all the different places in the library that’ll help you with essays and stuff. But, you know, they didn’t really do anything like that. And I think I would have liked to be told this is what we’re doing this is what the examinations will be like. Do you have any questions? But, really they just gave out a hand-out. Which, it kind of had like basic information but I didn’t really get anything from that at all.” International interviewees, conversely, usually mentioned that they had attended academic writing workshops or done independent research on what was expected of them.

Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, assessment turned up frequently when asked about the worst and least useful aspects of their course. An individual presentation, for example, was described in a single word: “Scary!” In general, however, the assessed work students were given was not unexpected. Rather, they were frustrated by the feeling that they were constantly receiving mixed or weak signals from lecturers, tutors and other staff members. Standards for referencing were rarely

consistent among tutors (many countermending student handbooks) and there was a general lack of instruction on how to go about researching and crafting the paper. Examinations were also contentious, as many felt their skills and knowledge were not being properly reflected in a timed examination. Essays, even if this meant additional essays, would be preferable to a number of the respondents.

## Group Assessment

Alternative assessments were rarely addressed by students. Group work, for example, is prevalent in many first-year modules throughout the UK but was very rarely considered assessed work by respondents. Instead, students discussed these aspects of their course as being part of seminar discussions. The one survey respondent who did identify it as assessment also noted that he had not been expecting to have to do collaborative work.

Group work was more apparent in the interviews than in the online surveys. Although some enjoyed working in groups, and were looking forward to their upcoming group projects, some were already incredibly frustrated by it. When speaking about assessment, one home student interjected "But I have to tell you the group work is a nightmare." She went on to describe her own situation, in which she had been placed in a group with five other students. She lamented that, as with all groups, there are "always one or two people who are not really committed to it." She had offered to collate the group's research and deliver it to the tutor. Out of six, she only received three sections on time. One was several hours late and another two days. The sixth never materialized at all.

This feeling of inequity in group work has been well documented in other studies and is one of the key difficulties faced by lecturers attempting to encourage collaborative learning.<sup>1</sup> Although students appear to have greatly enjoyed working with their peers in small groups during seminars, or in social environments within the department, respondents generally preferred independent assessed work. "I think I would like [group work] to be, just one or two assignments. Because you know I do quite enjoy independent study, so I think it is important to keep doing that." Importantly, despite very different secondary backgrounds, international students were neither more nor less likely to prefer group work at university level.

Despite the reluctance of many to engage in frequent assessed group work, a large number of students mentioned the ability to work as part of a team and the ability to create group presentations as key skills they would develop during their degree which would assist them in obtaining employment after graduation.

## Preparedness for University Assessment

When asked whether they had felt prepared for university assessment, the vast majority of students had responded yes. Nonetheless, the observations of one mature student may ring true with a surprising number of tutors and students alike:

"Any advice I'd give is going to be coloured or flavoured by my own experience but I would recommend that students get some life experience before they go to university, and if the university had the opportunity to arrange work-related and access courses...especially for 16, 17 year olds, I think it would help them so much. It would give them a great leg up and prepare them for the long haul at university...Some of these kids look absolutely lost like rabbits in the headlights. It's a shame, cause they are obviously very smart, but the enormity of what they've taken on, especially, now when their first essay is due and they are worrying themselves to death over...I just think that something that would give them an educational and work-related, real life experience before they come to the big school might be worth considering."

<sup>1</sup> Pieterse, Vreda and Lisa Thompson. "Academic alignment to reduce the presence of 'social loafers' and 'diligent isolates' in student teams." *Teaching in Higher Education*. 15:4 (2010): 355-367.

There is much less support prior to essays and exams than at school, and this threw me off a bit.

My mark was less than I expected due to me not using historiography in the essay. Also for waffling in the text.

I thought I would have more freedom with the essays.

Exams I hate exams! They just stress me out and I tend to go completely blank. I wish more weight was placed on the marks from my coursework or we were given more course work.

I got an average mark on my essay. I was only disappointed because everyone did better than me and I worked so hard for it.

I was very nervous about this essay writing, and the university does a whole set of weekly lectures on how to go about studying and making notes, essays and things like that. And I went to them. And a lot of the international students went as well. I've made quite a lot of friends amongst the international students.

I was aware that the essay was not up to my own high standards but I felt like with more guidance it could have reached a higher grade.

I'm still not quite sure how we're being assessed, what the examination at the end of the course will be like.



# DIVERSITY

## Self-identifications

Direct discussions of diversity, the main focus of this study, highlighted several unexpected results. Each month, students were asked if they felt their background was different from that of their peers and did this bother them. Although the study was clearly labelled as “International Students in History” no further instruction regarding what background meant was given. Because of this, both home and international students defined background in a wide variety of ways including class, age, experience, ability, language and culture. In fact, international students were in some respects hesitant to discuss their nationality. In contrast, certain home students felt that the international diversity of their campus was an important, and highly beneficial, part of their university experience.

## Monthly Considerations

Although direct references to nationality were rare, comments by international students did reflect a cultural dimension to their transition. Most prominent were

- the perception that lecturers relied too heavily on British source work
- difficulties in expressing opinions during seminars
- the possession of a different world view from their peers

Several international students also cited non-descriptive feelings of otherness, but felt that these had to be dealt with personally and were not the responsibility of the university staff. In all, only one student felt that they had actively been discriminated against because of their nationality. Though emotionally severe for the student in question, it appears to have taken place predominantly off campus and beyond the control of university staff.

On the other hand, certain international students had been very pleased with their integration with home students. “For me it’s been a good mix, because I live on campus in the residence halls. But I know that some other international students think it’s quite hard to really get to know the British people, because they only meet international students. But for me it’s worked out quite well.” This was confirmed by several home students, who felt that international students were often somewhat segregated because of housing and the tendency for universities to offer local tours and weekend breaks directly to international student rather than first year students as a whole.

Home students, on the other hand, usually cited differences in age, family responsibilities, educational background and regional origin. Only a few home students mentioned international students in the online surveys and interviewees usually had to be directly prompted to consider whether they had any international student in their modules. A small number of students noted that they did feel different, but gave no details and generally discounted the importance of this difference to their life and studies.

As to whether differences bothered them, only two international students said that it had. As noted above, one had felt discriminated against whereas the other was annoyed by the perceived Anglo-centrism of the module. Of home students, 50% of monthly respondents saw no particular difference in their background compared with their peers and another 30% noted that the difference did not bother them or that they saw diversity as a positive aspect of their course. Of those who did feel their background caused difficulties, discussions of class (financial guilt as well as financial stress), age and family responsibilities were the most prominent.

Interestingly, those home students who felt their background was different on the basis of regional identity—English/Scottish, Northern/Southern, Rural/Urban—were far more likely to comment on negative stereotypes and cultural difficulties than their international counterparts. Although these made up only small fraction of responses, and the majority noted that it did not—or did not really—bother them, the trend is disconcerting.

## Class v. Nationality

Despite not being the original intention of this study, its prevalence amongst open-ended responses necessitates a closer look at the idea of otherness and class. During the course of the year, 20 of the original respondents mentioned class as a distinguishing feature in their background at some point in the year, including one international student.

- 2 considered themselves more affluent than their peers
- 2 considered themselves middleclass and equal to their peers
- 3 considered themselves middleclass, but felt many of their peers were arrogant or over-reliant on their parents for money
- 2 had gone to state schools, in contrast to their peers
- 9 considered themselves less well off than their peers
- 2 felt that their economic background was simply "different"

Except for the second group, class was considered a noticeable difference. Educational background, for example, was thought to affect world view. Likewise, one student felt that their university had an irritatingly large number of "posh people" who did not understand the financial realities of the world. However, she chose to look on the bright side, noting that their attitude brought the more sensible students closer together. Likewise, another student felt that his poorer background was becoming increasingly apparent and joked that he had "found myself some nice working class people to slum with." Others were more serious, noting how financial issues made their studies more difficult. Generally speaking, however, most of these students stated that they did not let these differences bother them: "We're all on the dole really."

Month to month, many more home than international students noted that financial difficulties had discouraged their studies. Financial background, therefore, appeared more likely to negatively affect university experience than international background within this data set. Further studies into the effect of work and income on reading-intensive degrees, is therefore warranted.

## Retrospective Feelings of Otherness

At the end of the year, students were asked to consider the entire first year and describe the ways in which they were different or similar to their peers. For both questions, class, age and educational background were again the more prominent, even among international students; very few students mentioned nationality, though regional origin was occasionally expressed.

Most noteworthy, however, was a purposeful subversion of the second question by certain individuals. Many cited their backgrounds were similar in that they shared interests, attitudes and aspirations for life after university. Others refused to answer the question at all, noting that they had no background similarities with their peers or that such similarities were not important to them in developing friendships.

It's been a great experience and glad to have made the switch from work to study, even at the age of 38.

Considering that I am from a different country, I was raised differently than most of the people here, but I do not have any problem about this.

I think they need to provide more help for mature students and those with children. More understanding of the difficulties with getting to library before everyone else, the timing of coursework, etc.

We are all similar in our attitude in terms of future aspirations, work ethic and attitude towards history.

Everyone on my course seems to have different backgrounds. It doesn't bother me, in fact I find it very useful when discussing reading from different perspectives.

I'm an old git!

I am northern, which is very different to a lot of the people at this university. It only bothered me as far as I felt people look down on you.

Most of my friends on the course are internationals, so we have very different backgrounds, but it didn't make much difference to me.

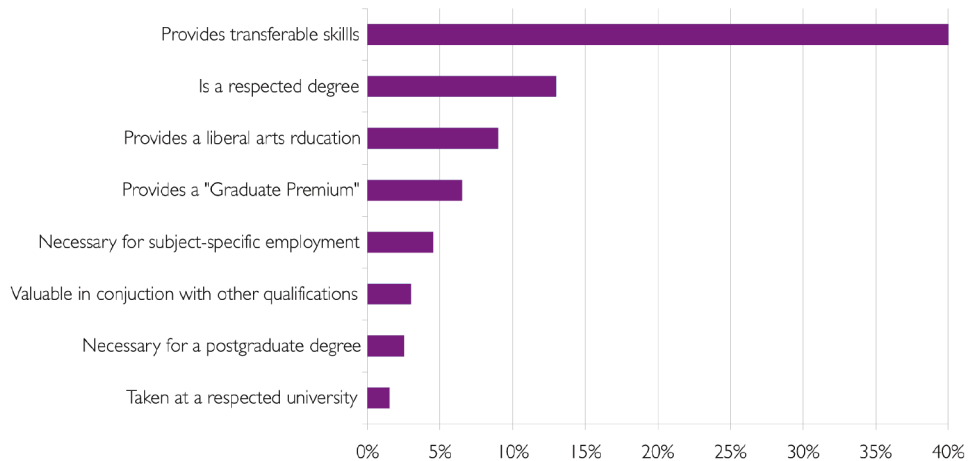
# EMPLOYABILITY

## The Indirect Value of a History Degree

In the initial survey, students were asked about whether or not their history degree would assist them in obtaining employment after graduation, either indirectly or directly. Their open-ended responses do provide several insights into the perceptions of incoming students.

Indirect effects of a history degree were less clear to students. Although 157 of the 202 respondents felt that the degree would benefit their employment prospects, their reasons for believing so were vague at best. The most common response was that history provided important transferable skills followed by the fact that history was a respected degree, that a wide liberal arts education was intrinsically beneficial, and that any degree offered an advantage over secondary qualifications.

### Indirect effects of a history degree on employability



These figures, however, hide significant differences between home and international students. Home students were far more likely to cite the reputation of the degree and transferable skills as the primary benefits of studying history. International students, conversely, were more likely to describe history as being crucial to a well-rounded view of the world. This may indicate a crucial difference in how history courses are “sold” to secondary students, either by university recruiters, secondary educators or the media.

Interestingly, only one international respondent noted that a British degree would demonstrate competency in English and only one other mentioned acquiring knowledge of another culture. In the latter case, he was referring to culture he was studying rather than that of Britain. Although obtaining a wider understanding of the world was often mentioned elsewhere, they did not readily associate cultural competencies with future employment.

## First Year Perceptions of Transferable Skills

### Skills

- Analytical Skills
- Group Presentation Skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Interpretation Skills
- Investigative Skills
- Oral Communication Skills
- Presentation Skills
- Public Speaking Skills
- Time-keeping Skills
- Written Communication Skills

### Attributes

- Has a Broad Perspective
- Focused
- Committed
- Dedicated
- Detailed oriented
- Conscientious
- Discursive
- Organized
- Intelligent

### Key Abilities

- Creating reports
- Creating written applications
- Expressing oneself in interviews
- Making evidence-informed judgments
- Self-motivation
- Working as part of a team
- Working individually
- Working with large amounts of information

## The Direct Value of a History Degree

The second question posed particular difficulties for the respondents, as few appeared to understand what the term “directly” implied, and therefore took a wider view of the question than had originally been intended by the researcher. Nonetheless, several trends are apparent.

First, when one includes optimistic uncertainty—terms such as “hopefully” and “likely”—nearly two-thirds of respondents felt that their history degree would assist them in obtaining work after graduation. By far the most common responses for why it would assist them were that history provided:

- transferable skills
- direct experience for a history-related career
- a respected degree

Often, the first and third reasons were given in conjunction with each other. Moreover, a small number of respondents who felt the degree would not directly help them also mentioned transferable skills—deeming these indirect benefits of a history degree. Interestingly, there was a tendency among under-26s to actually use the stock phrases transferable skills and respected degree in their answers. In the case of the former, a full third of younger respondents used the term, contrasted with only 2 mature students. More tellingly, not a single student over the age of 30 used either phrase. Likewise, students who had attended secondary school in the United Kingdom were far more likely to use the phrases than those who had studied elsewhere. As with the term *spoon-feeding*, this suggests that students have heard these terms used by secondary school staff or the media and have therefore placed particular value on obtaining them.

Reasons why the degree would not directly aid employment were more varied than reasons why it would. They included:

- not wishing to pursue a history related career
- the degree not being vocational in nature
- an anti-arts bias in the job market
- the need to combine the degree with vocational courses or a postgraduate degree first

There were a number of demographic trends in these results in regard to age, gender and nationality:

- international students were far less likely to feel that their history degree would directly aid their job prospects
- a comparable proportion of home and international students indicated that they were pursuing a career directly related to history
- nearly twice the proportion of international students explicitly noted that they would not be pursuing a history career
- those over 26 years old were more likely to be taking the degree either purely for the enjoyment of the subject or as a gateway to postgraduate study
- female students were slightly more inclined to respond positively to the question than male students
- female students were 5 times more likely to express an intention to pursue a career directly related to history, usually primary or secondary education

I feel that in university there is an over-inflated emphasis on academia, which, in the long term need for jobs, is largely not very useful.

A better understanding of the world in which we are today is helpful for every job you can apply for.

No, because you must show other skills aside from being adept at history to be employable.

I think it provides a good degree with broad employment opportunities either with conversion courses or training whilst on a job.

To be honest, I am not sure whether it will [help] or not.

Yes, because History gives transferable skills and is a valued and respected academic subject.

Yes, because I plan to teach and history teachers (particular with a speciality in medieval history) are few and far between (in quality as well as quantity).

Personally, I don't believe that a history degree will directly help me get a job after graduation

It's more the reputation of the university that will help, unless I wanted to follow an academic career, which I do not.

Yes, definitely, as it is well respected within the job community.

# POSSIBLE AVENUES FOR DISCUSSION WITH FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

It was originally hypothesised that the majority of difficulties faced by international students entering UK Higher Education would be also be faced by British students as they transitioned from secondary education, further education, employment or family responsibilities. This has been to some extent reinforced by the qualitative evidence presented above. The most common difficulties attributed to international students—unfamiliarity with the expectations of written work, difficulty with expressing critical analysis in group discussions, social isolation and dramatically unequal staff-student relationships—were all present in certain subsets of home students as well. Moreover, overlapping experiences between traditional and mature students, mature and international students and international and traditional students have suggested several trends.

- **Academic support aimed at international students is desired by, but not widely given to, home students** – Although most if not all UK universities offer additional support for academic writing and research through independent learning centres, only a small number of students appear to have been properly aware of these. Whereas international and mature students, who are often targeted for additional support, were likely to attend these workshops, a large number of traditional home students complained that no such support was readily available.
- **Differing regional and economic backgrounds often result in severe culture shock** – Pastoral support and counselling services are generally available to students regardless of national background. However, both home and international students were often unsure who to approach regarding different aspects of their pastoral care, including their emotional needs, financial difficulties and basic administrative support. As most students cited their tutors as their most frequent and trusted source of information, these staff members may wish to pre-emptively make university services known to their students during contact hours.
- **Perceptions of HE are often influenced by the media and this can lead to a difficult transition** – The common use of terminology such as *spoon-feeding* and *transferable skills* suggests that there is a common external factor in the formation of student perceptions and this includes a sub-section of the international student population. Moreover, interviews with home and international students indicated that movies and television, rather than news broadcasts, were primary factors in shaping their perceptions of university life. This was especially true of first generation students. Managing these expectations earlier may have soothed the culture shock experienced by many.
- **The true balance of teaching, discussion and independent study is not fully appreciated by incoming students** – Students, regardless of age, gender or nationality, understood that university work would be more difficult than their previous studies. However, because the precise nature of this increase was ambiguous, many students were disappointed or overwhelmed with the actual level of independent study required. Again, verbally managing expectations of all students, while taking care not to become patronising, may prevent the frustrations expressed by this sample group.
- **Internationalisation is appreciated but rarely recognised by home students** – Within their own discipline, most home students did not feel there was a large percentage of international students. However, most noticed and explicitly appreciated the diversity which could be found on the wider campus. Likewise, international students usually formed social connections with home students through their residency halls or other extra-curricular activities. Although the percentage of international students is relatively low in history programmes, efforts to create multi-cultural environments within the department may reap dividends for the entire cohort.
- **The concept of employability is misunderstood by many students, especially in regard to acquired skills** – Although a large number of students ostensibly understood which skills were considered desirable by employers, their responses regarding assessment, seminars and independent study suggest that the route to developing these skills is not explicit. Many appear to believe that obtaining the degree will prove they possess these skills to employers, rather than provide them with the opportunity to develop these skills independently; certification v. competency. As history is not a vocational degree, these assumptions may lead to students having difficulties in obtaining employment after graduation.

Although all these may not be applicable to every department, dialogues with staff and students on these topics are likely to yield positive results throughout the first year cohort. It is hoped that these initial results will prompt further investigations of internationalisation and first-year transition in HE history. If you would like to be involved in future work by History at the Higher Education Academy in these areas, please contact [heahistorysubjectcentre@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:heahistorysubjectcentre@warwick.ac.uk).



# FINAL THOUGHTS ON FIRST YEAR

**Thinking back on your entire first year, did you make the right decision in taking up a history course?**

Maybe, I enjoy history and my course, but fear I picked a too specific period.

I was extremely happy with the broad basis of subjects; it has allowed me to find out exactly what I like and what I dislike

Yes. The course fits well together for what I want to do in the future.

Yes  
I want to say how accommodating the history department has been over my disabilities they have met all my requirements and have gone above and beyond what was needed.

Still unsure. I have concerns about future prospects.

Not entirely, as some of the courses weren't entirely what I thought they were going to be.

Yes. There was a point where I considered dropping history altogether in favour of international politics, mostly because of the amount of reading. However, history is the only subject where I actually enjoy writing an essay for it, and I have begun to get on top of the work required.

Yes, I have really enjoyed this year because the topics are interesting.

Just studying at University is fulfilling but joining other activities turns it into a pleasure.

No. One module was a complete bore and an organisational disaster.

I do wish I had chosen a different degree which was more specific such as medicine or law, because history is too broad a degree to help me know which career to go into. But because I don't enjoy anything else, there was no way I would've done a different degree.

Yes, definitely, I love my course. Wasn't exactly what I was expecting, but I enjoy all areas of the course.

Yes, overall, I think I have, I wouldn't have known what else to choose if I had not.

Yes,  
I have always enjoyed history and there was no real choice in the matter.

# Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Good morning,

History at the Higher Education Academy (<http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk>) is currently undertaking research into the **past educational experiences** and **future expectations** of home and international first-year history students.

We would therefore be grateful if you could forward this invitation to your incoming first-year, undergraduate history students.

More information on the survey can be found at <http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/firstyearsurvey> or by contacting Melodee Beals at [m.beals@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:m.beals@warwick.ac.uk)

Best wishes,  
Dr Melodee Beals  
Academic Coordinator for History

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Dear first-year student,

This year, History at the Higher Education Academy, an organisation dedicated to improving teaching and learning in Higher Education throughout the UK, is working to provide more support to undergraduate students. We are therefore working to create new resources for students and lecturers to improve your university experience.

However, in order to provide this support to both **home** and **international students**, we need to understand everyone's previous history knowledge and learning experiences. By taking part in our short, **anonymous** survey, you will be helping us to create website resources, events, and publications that will provide you with the support you want. **Plus, by taking part you will be entered into a draw for a £50 Book token, a gift certificate which can be redeemed at major booksellers throughout the UK.**

After you complete this survey, we will ask you to fill in short online questionnaire about once a month during your first year. These surveys will ask you how you feel you are doing in the course and how well the university is meeting your expectations. Your answers will not be shared with your university and your name will never be attached to any of your responses.

For each monthly survey you complete, you will receive an additional entry into our draw. The draw will be held 01 May 2010.

**You can fill-out the survey at <http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/firstyearsurvey>**

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at [m.beals@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:m.beals@warwick.ac.uk)

Best wishes,  
Dr Melodee Beals  
Academic Coordinator for History

## Appendix B: Initial Survey

**These details are for statistical purposes only. They will not be attached to your name or other identifying information.**

Year of Birth  
Country of Birth  
Gender (*Female, Male, Prefer not to state*)  
Name of University  
City of Secondary School  
Country of Secondary School (*England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Other UK Region*)

**The following questions will ask you about your time at secondary school.**

1. Was history one of your main subjects in secondary school?  
(Yes, No )

2. How was history taught in your secondary school?

(Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Every Day)

*Lectures*

*Research projects*

*Group work*

*Assigned reading from the textbook*

*Work with primary sources*

*Other*

3. What was your grade based upon?  
(Not at all, A little, A fair amount, A lot ,My entire grade)

*In-class exams*

*National exams*

*Essays*

*Group work*

*Presentations*

*Homework*

*Other*

4. Did you take any national exams in history?  
(Yes, No)

5. How well did you do?  
(Very well, Well enough, Poorly)

6. Please tell us what sort of history courses you took in secondary school, starting with your most recent or highest level. For example, WWII history or Medieval history.

7. What is your opinion about history and how it was taught while you were in secondary school?

### **The following questions will ask you about your expectations for university.**

8. How did you hear about this course?  
(Family, Friend, Secondary School, Internet, General Reputation, Other)
9. Why did you choose this course?
10. How much did you know about the University when you applied?  
(Nothing, A little, A fair amount, A lot)
11. How much did you know about the city when you applied?  
(Nothing, A little, A fair amount, A lot)
12. How much did you know about the history course when you applied?  
(Nothing, A little, A fair amount, A lot)
13. In which ways do you expect the classes to be different from those you took in secondary school?
14. Do you think a degree in history will directly help you get a job after graduation? Why?
15. Do you think a degree in history will indirectly help you get a job after graduation? Why?

### **Additional Questions for Home Students**

- Were you ever taught history in a language other than your primary one (such as in a language class or an exchange programme)? (Yes, No)
- Could you have taken a similar course at another university? (Yes, No)
- Did you ever consider attending university in another country? (Yes, No)
- If yes, why did you decide not to? (Select all that apply)  
(Money, Distance from family, Distance from friends, Language / Culture, Other)
- How confident would you be about studying a foreign language at university or taking some history classes in a foreign language?  
(Not at all, Unsure but willing to try, Fairly confident, Very confident)

### **Additional Questions for International Students**

- Which language(s) were most of your classes taught in?
- Which language(s) were your history classes taught in?
- How much of your history reading was in English?  
(None of it, A small amount of it, About half of it, Most of it, All of it )
- Could you have taken a similar course in your own country?  
(Yes, No)
- What do you think were your main reasons for attending university in the United Kingdom?  
(To improve English, To live in another culture, To increase chances of employment, To increase chances of a quality education, Other)
- How confident are you about studying in English?  
(Not at all, Unsure but willing to try, Fairly confident, Very confident)

# Appendix C: Monthly Survey

Thank you for continuing with the History at the Higher Education Academy's First Year Survey. Please answer all the questions below, referring particularly to your history courses. If you feel that a question does not apply to you this month, please write "Does not apply."

- 1.** What has encouraged you this month? (Please check one or more)  
*Assignment deadlines, Lecturer's enthusiasm, Tutor's enthusiasm, Other students' attitudes, Personal ambition  
Interest in the subject, Family expectations, Financial Considerations, Feedback received, Extra Curricular Activities, I have not felt  
encouraged this month, Other*
- 2.** What has discouraged you this month? (Please tick one or more)  
*Difficulty with the reading, Difficulty with the coursework, Difficulty with the lectures (Dull), Difficulty with the lectures (Could not  
understand accent / language), Difficulty with the seminars, Difficulty keeping up with workload  
Other students' attitudes, Family / personal problems, Health problems, Homesickness, Stress, Financial considerations, Assessment  
Results, Lack of Internet Access, I have not felt discouraged this month, Other*
- 3.** Thinking about the past month, has the course been what you originally expected? How so?
- 4.** Thinking about the past month, how has this course NOT been what you originally expected?
- 5.** Describe any times this month when history was taught in a way that was different from the way it was taught in your secondary school.
- 6.** Describe any times this month when you were told to study history in a way that was different from the way you were asked to study it in your secondary school. For example, being asked to discuss a type of source you have never used before.
- 7.** Describe any times this month when you felt you knew less about a subject than other students in your course.
- 8.** Describe any times this month when you felt you knew more about a subject than other students in your course.
- 9.** Was there any time this month when the lecturer used terms or phrases that you did not understand? Did you ask anyone about them? (An international student, a domestic student, the lecturer, the seminar tutor, an advisor, a family member, another person, no one)
- 10.** If you remember the word or term, what was it?
- 11.** Was there any time this month when the seminar tutor used terms or phrases that you did not understand? Did you ask anyone about them? (An international student, a domestic student, the lecturer, the seminar tutor, an advisor, a family member, another person, no one)
- 12.** If you remember the word or term, what was it?
- 13.** Was there any time this month when you were given instructions that you did not understand? Did you ask anyone about them? (An international student, a domestic student, the lecturer, the seminar tutor, an advisor, a family member, another person, no one)
- 14.** If you remember the instructions, what were they?
- 15.** Have you received any coursework back this month? Did you receive a worse mark than you expected? Why?
- 16.** Describe any times this month when you felt your background to be different from other students on your course. Did this difference bother you?
- 17.** Describe any times this month when you disagreed with the way history was being taught. Did you speak to anyone about this?



## Appendix D: Final Survey

Thank you for continuing with the History at the Higher Education Academy's First Year Survey. Please answer all the questions below, referring particularly to your history courses. If you feel that a question does not apply to you this month, please write "Does not apply". As this is the final survey, we ask that you be as detailed as possible.

- 1.** What has encouraged you this month? (Please check one or more)  
*Assignment deadlines, Lecturer's enthusiasm, Tutor's enthusiasm, Other students' attitudes, Personal ambition, Interest in the subject, Family expectations, Financial Considerations, Feedback received, Extra Curricular Activities, I have not felt encouraged this month, Other*
- 2.** What has discouraged you this month? (Please tick one or more)  
*Difficulty with the reading, Difficulty with the coursework, Difficulty with the lectures (Dull), Difficulty with the lectures (Could not understand accent / language), Difficulty with the seminars, Difficulty keeping up with workload, Other students' attitudes, Family / personal problems, Health problems, Homesickness, Stress, Financial considerations, Assessment Results, Lack of Internet Access, I have not felt discouraged this month, Other*
- 3.** Have you received any coursework back this month? Did you receive a worse mark than you expected? Why?
- 4.** I have not received any work back this month.
- 5.** Thinking about your entire first year, has the course generally been what you originally expected or not? In what ways?
- 6.** Thinking about your entire first year, do you think that your opinions about what university should be have changed? In what ways?
- 7.** Thinking about your entire first year, did you ever feel that you were not fully prepared for university studies? Why?
- 8.** Thinking about your entire first year, were there any aspects of your course which were too similar to what you did in secondary school, either in topic or in method? What would you have preferred?
- 9.** Thinking about your entire first year, were there any occasions when you were happy that aspects of your course were very similar to what you did in secondary school, either in topic or in method? Why were these similarities helpful to you?
- 10.** Thinking about your entire first year, what aspects your background did you feel were similar to the majority of your fellow students? How did you feel about this?
- 11.** Thinking about your entire first year, what aspects your background did you feel were dissimilar to the majority of your fellow students? How did you feel about this?
- 12.** Thinking about your entire first year, do you think you made the right choice about your course selection? Why or why not?
- 13.** Thinking about your entire first year, did you ever disagree with the way history was being taught. Why? Did you speak to anyone about this?
- 14.** Thinking about your entire first year, what have been the best, most useful, or most enjoyable aspects of your course?
- 15.** Thinking about your entire first year, what have been the worst, least useful, or least enjoyable aspects of your course?
- 16.** Next year, I will  
*continue my single-honours degree in history, continue with history as part my joint-honours degree, concentrate on the non-history part of my joint-honours degree, switch to an entirely different degree course, leave university, other*
- 17.** Do you have any other comments, concerns or observations about your first year that you would like to share with us?  
Remember, all information collected is completely confidential and will only be used to improve the student experience in future years.

# Appendix E: Interview Questions

## Initial Interview

1. Could you tell me a little about your education before this course? Did you go straight from A-levels or did you take some time off?
2. Why did you want to study history?
3. Did you get a lot of information from the university, before you started, on what your programme would be like?
4. Did you get a chance to speak with anyone at the department during the summer or when you first arrived to help you settle into the programme?
5. Were you confident that you would do well in the history programme? Why?
6. What were you expecting the history course to be like? Has it met your expectations so far?
7. Who at the department do you have the most contact with? How do you feel about this?
8. What could the department or your tutors have done to make your first few weeks easier?
9. Have you become friends with many people on your course?
10. Do you work with them outside class?
11. Would this be helpful and what would encourage you to do this?
12. Do you socialise with them outside class?
13. Would this be helpful and what would encourage you to do this?
14. Who has helped your transition into university the most? The least?
15. Is there any advice you would give history departments in the UK?

## Exit Interview

1. Do you think your perceptions about your university or university in general have changed over the past year?
2. Thinking about your whole year, do you think that your transition into university has gone smoothly?
3. Do you think that your transition has been a steady one or do you think there was a steep learning curve at the beginning, middle or end of the year?
4. Having completed a whole year, do you think that your previous experiences, either in education or work or socially, have helped to transition?
5. What were the most straightforward or easiest aspects of your course?
6. What were the most difficult, confusing or non-intuitive aspects of your course?
7. How did you go about adapting to these?
8. Do you think you relied more on your peers or the staff for support when facing difficulties with your course?
9. Did you ever feel that you could not or did not wish to seek formal support?
10. Thinking about your entire first year, did you ever disagree with the way history was being taught?
11. How have you felt about the assessment you were asked to do? How was the feedback that you received? What form did it take? Did you normally share your mark or feedback with your peers?
12. Thinking about your entire first year, which aspects your background did you feel were similar to the majority of your fellow students?
13. Which aspects your background did you feel were dissimilar to the majority of your fellow students? How did you feel about this?
14. Were these differences or similarities ever made explicit by staff or peers?
15. Do you think you made the right choice about your course selection? Why or why not?
16. Will you continue with the programme?



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