

Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG)

Diversity in assessment?

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Introduction

“Diversity in assessment is vital...” proclaimed the History Benchmark Statement (paragraph 30). SACWG¹ decided to test whether History departments have taken up the Benchmark exhortation and do use diverse assessment methods. This work is part of the Group’s exploration of assessment practices in higher education in the UK. Like all SACWG’s projects, the intention of the current undertaking is to stimulate debate, rather than to provide conclusive answers.

This paper:

- a) briefly describes the results obtained so far from a survey of some 250 undergraduate modules and the 580 associated *summative* assessment items in nine institutions; and
- b) raises some of the questions prompted by the survey.

The purpose of this phase of the project has been simply to log the range and frequency of the assessment methods used by the History departments. Although a comparatively small sample, the data provide a starting point for discussion and reflection.

The Workshop will provide participants with an opportunity to discuss the results set out below; to consider how far the survey reflects practice in their own departments; and to speculate on whether new or different methods might be introduced into their courses.

The Survey’s Method

The data have been collected solely from written sources provided by the institutions. These materials have included validation templates, module guides and subject handbooks. The type of assessment used, essay, examination etc have been recorded; at this stage, weightings have been ignored. (There is a striking variation of the amount of detail on assessment given by tutors in the same institution. It may be, of course, that imprecision allows flexibility. However, this raises the question of what - and when - students are told about a module’s assessment regime.) The next phase of the project will be to talk to module teams to understand how the broad rubric of, for example, a 2000 word essay is interpreted in practice.

Results

Types of assessment

Charts 1 and 2 show that essays and exams predominate:

- ❑ Over 60% of all the assessment items take the form of an essay (43%) or exam (19%).
- ❑ The next most common method involves the assessment of oral skills (14% overall, comprising some form of presentation, 59%, or evaluation of seminar contributions, 41%).
- ❑ Surprisingly, perhaps, for History modules, Document exercises constitute just 7% of the total number of assessment items reported in the sources made available to us.
- ❑ If Dissertations and linked activities such as project proposals and mid-year reports on work in progress are excluded, only 15% of the sample (61 tasks) relate to other types of assessment. Of those 61, 18 (30%) are book reviews.

Based on this profile of methods, it does seem that the Benchmark Statement has had, at best, limited impact.

Essays

Charts 3, 4 and 5 on the word lengths of essays set appear to reinforce the conclusion that historians assess conservatively:

- ❑ 50% of essays set a 2000 word requirement.
- ❑ A long way behind come the 2500 and 1500 word essay (19% and 17% respectively).

Examinations

A slightly more novel approach to examinations emerges from the data on types of exams (Charts 6, 7 and 8):

- ❑ The classic 3 hour unseen exam has ceded its supremacy to the 2 hour unseen paper (15% of all exams compared with 46%).
- ❑ Even 2 hour seen exams are more common than any sort of 3 hour paper.
- ❑ Seen exams are twice as common as unseen ones.
- ❑ In-class tests, though relatively few in number, are being used in some departments.

Exams are clearly no longer the hegemonic assessment tool they once were; nonetheless, they still represent nearly one-fifth of all the assessment items in the survey.

Level and assessment

Despite the emphasis on Levels, reflected, for example, in the QAA's *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*, there is no discernible pattern in the use of different types of assessment at different Levels of study (Charts 9, 10 and 11). The increase in 2000 word essays, 2 hour unseen exams and oral presentations at Level 3 is to a large extent the consequence of some institutions having just two levels: Introductory and Advanced or the equivalents. This is one of the areas that will benefit from further investigation in the next part of the project.

Some questions

The assessment methods

Essays

- ❑ Why is the 2000 word essay so pervasive at all levels?
- ❑ Why are not more short(er) pieces of writing required?
- ❑ How much prescription or choice do students have in the essay's subject matter, title, format?

Examinations

- ❑ Why has the 2 hour unseen paper superseded the 3 hour unseen as the preferred examination mode?
- ❑ How much variety is there *within* the different exam formats? For example, is there totally free choice? Does the paper have sections? Is there a compulsory question? What is the range of choice: how many questions have to be answered from how many questions set? Is the exam open book? If so, what materials are allowed in the exam room?
- ❑ For seen exams: is it a take away exam? Is it time constrained? How long before E-Day is the paper distributed?
- ❑ How does an in-class test differ from an exam?

Reports and projects

- ❑ Are these really essays by another name? (The length requirements are similar to the wordage specifications for essays.) Do reports have a pre-defined structure, for example?

Document exercises

- ❑ Is there an under-reporting of this type of work as such exercises may form part of an exam paper or a coursework essay question?

Self- and peer assessment

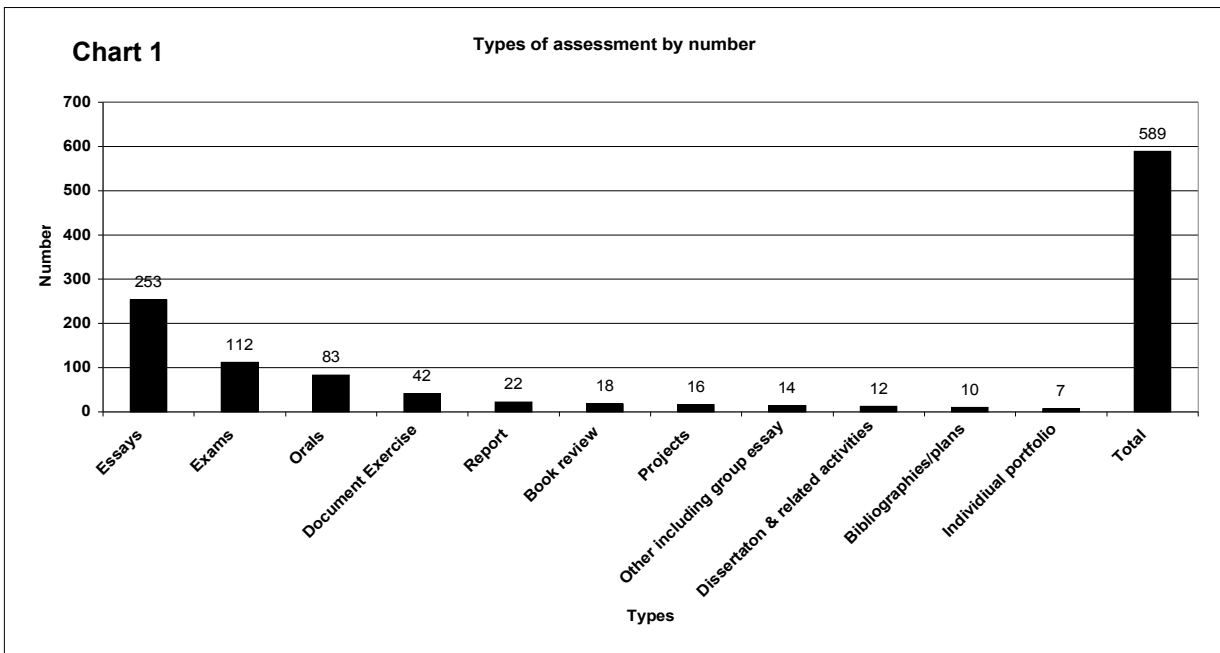
- There were only a few references to these forms of assessment. Why?

Wider issues

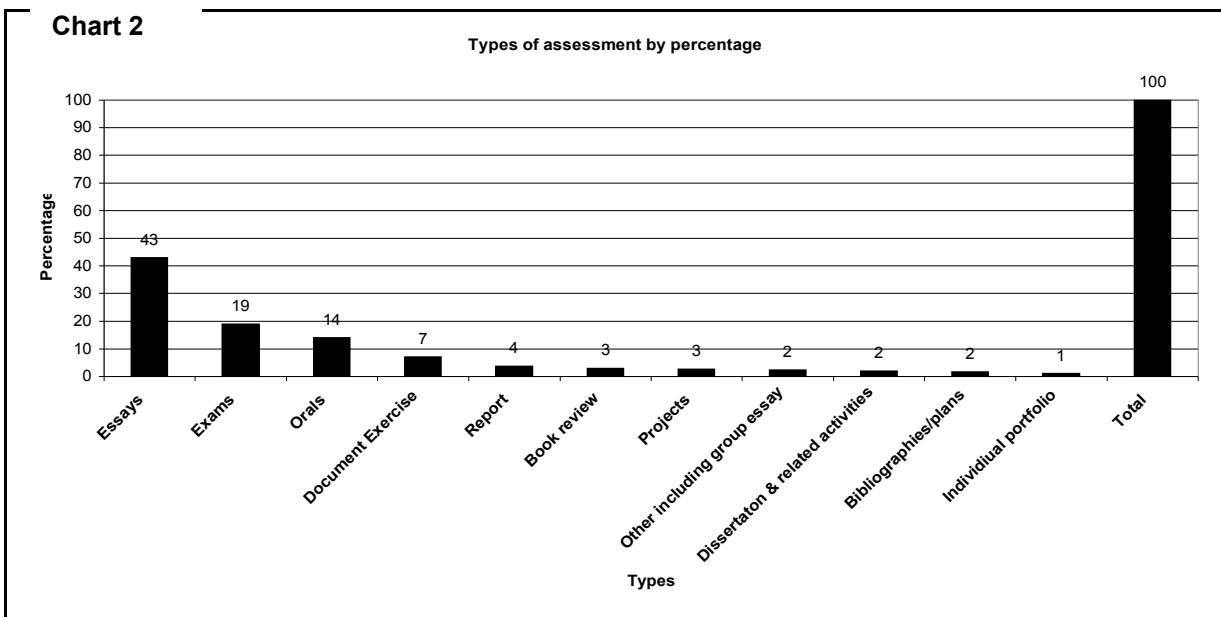
- How far are module leaders' assessment strategies determined by departmental or institutional rules and cultures about, for example, the number of assessments that can be set for a single module?
- Stress is placed on developing students' post-graduation/employability skills. How appropriate are the assessment methods reported in the survey for developing such skills?
- How far are these assessment methods appropriate for an outcomes-based curriculum?
- Given the frequency with which students are exposed to the same or similar assessment methods, what is the evidence for improved student performance in, say, a 2 hour unseen exam?

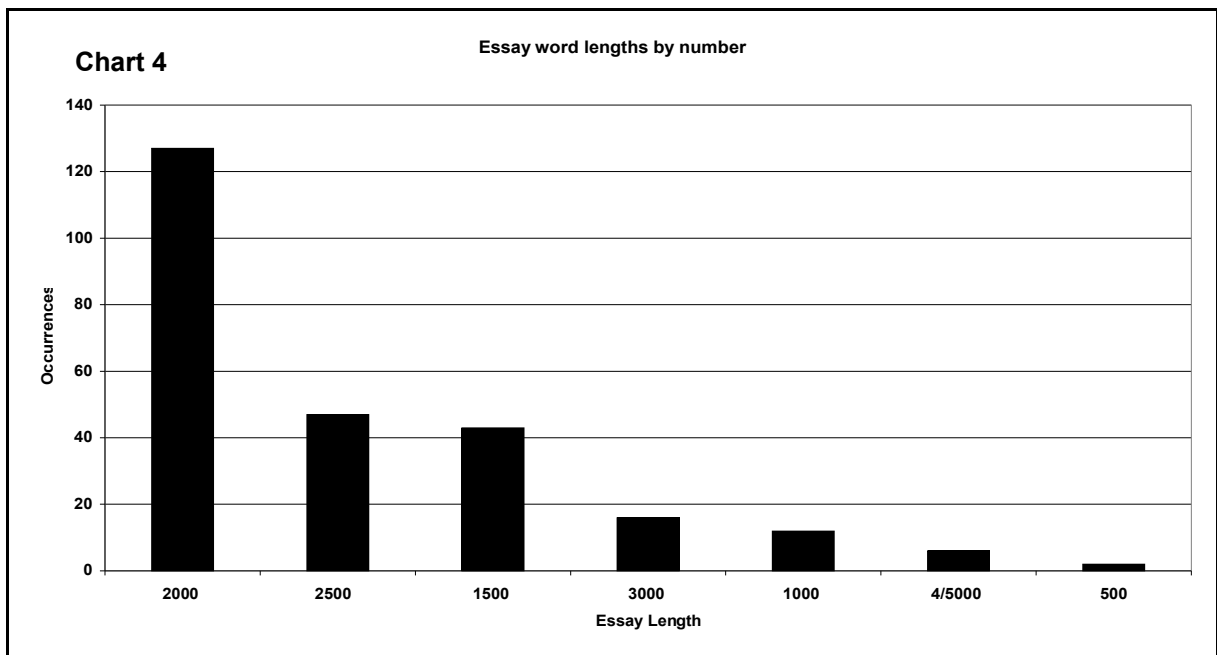
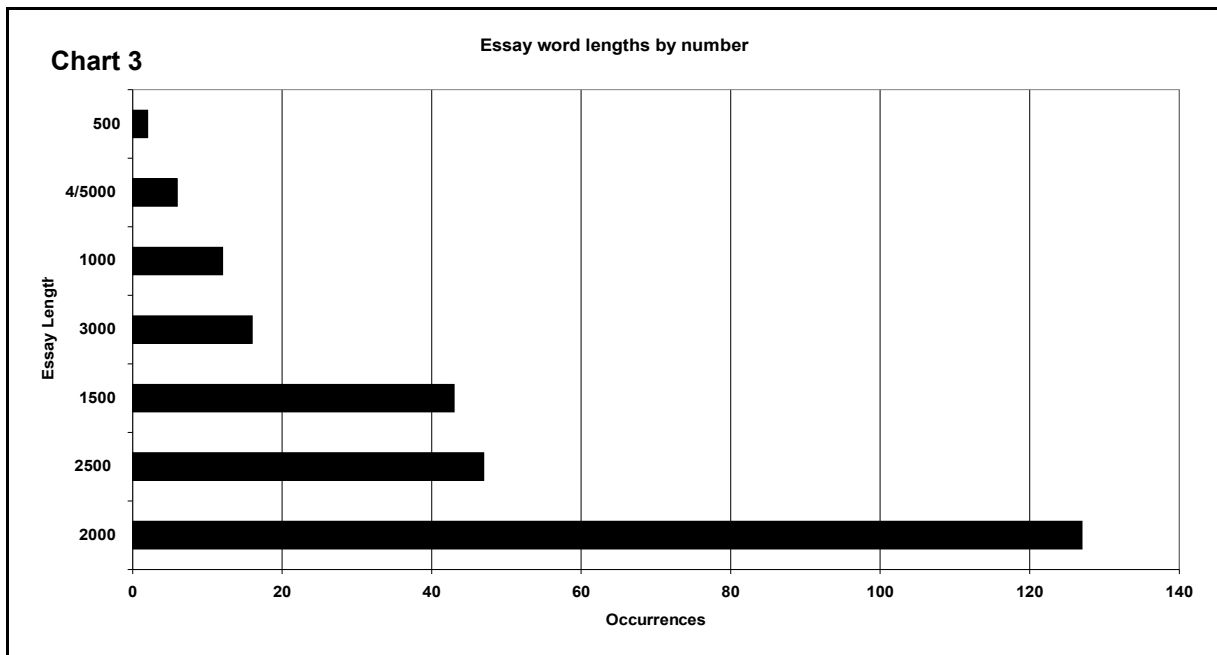
Concluding comments

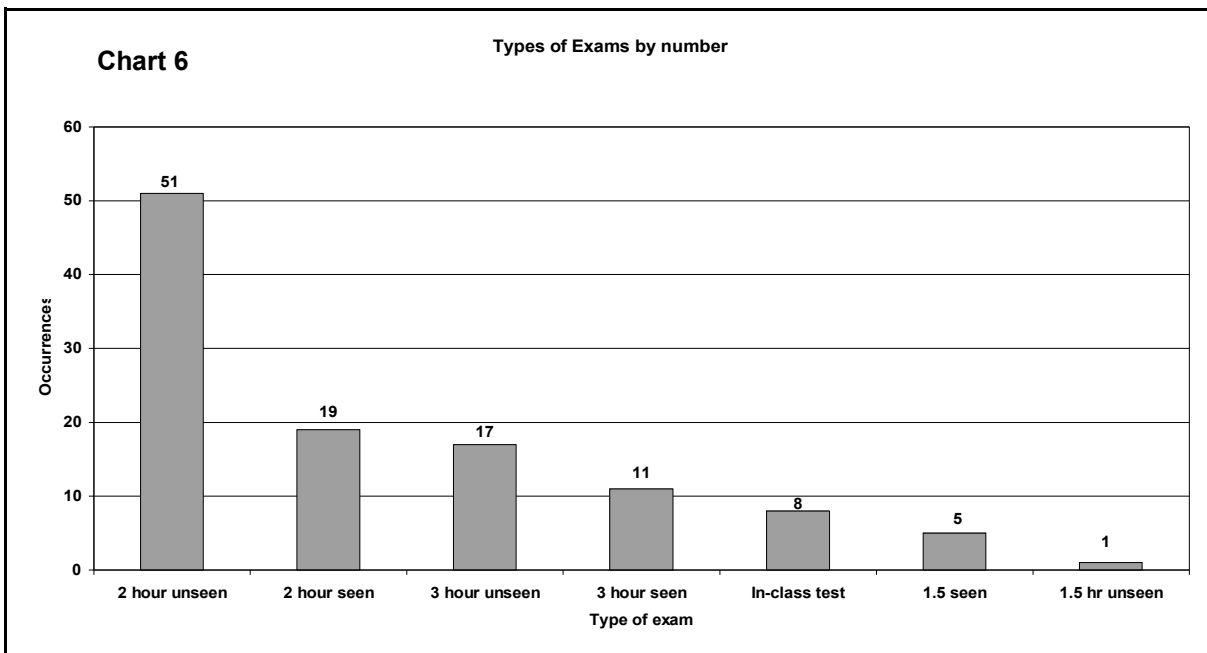
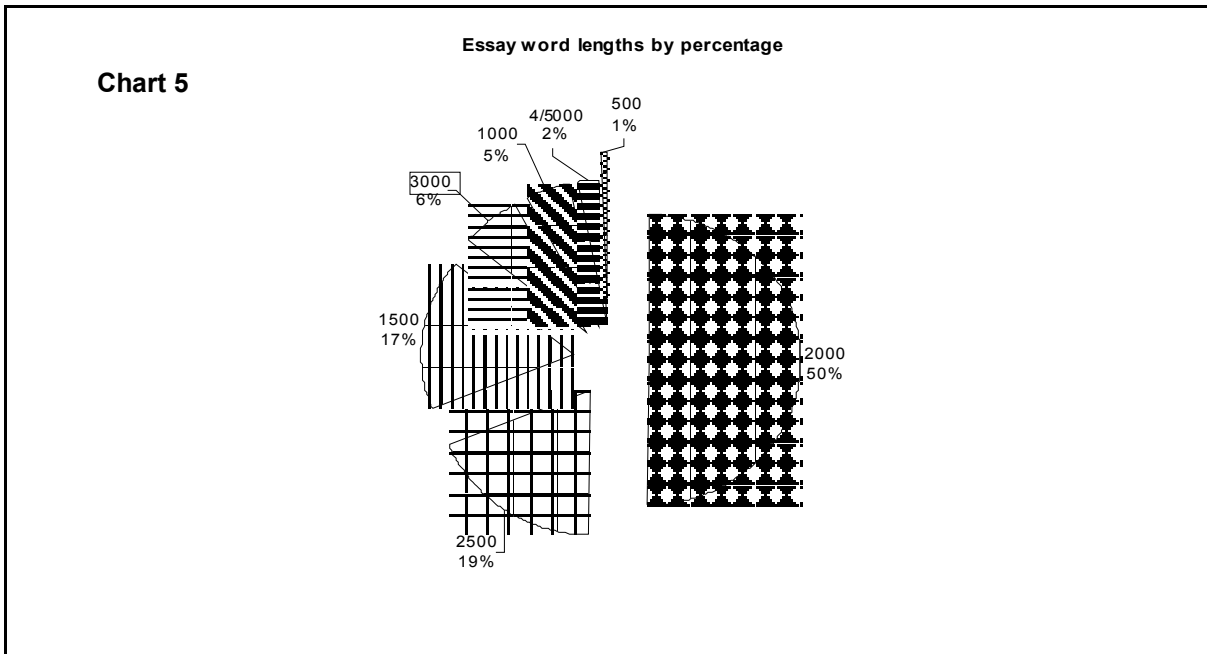
Detailed investigation of how assessment tasks are designed will help to provide a fuller account of the range and variety of assessment methods used in History departments. The proposition the next phase of our work will test is that there is diversity in History assessment but that this diversity is hidden beneath bland uninformative labels such as a 2000 word essay.

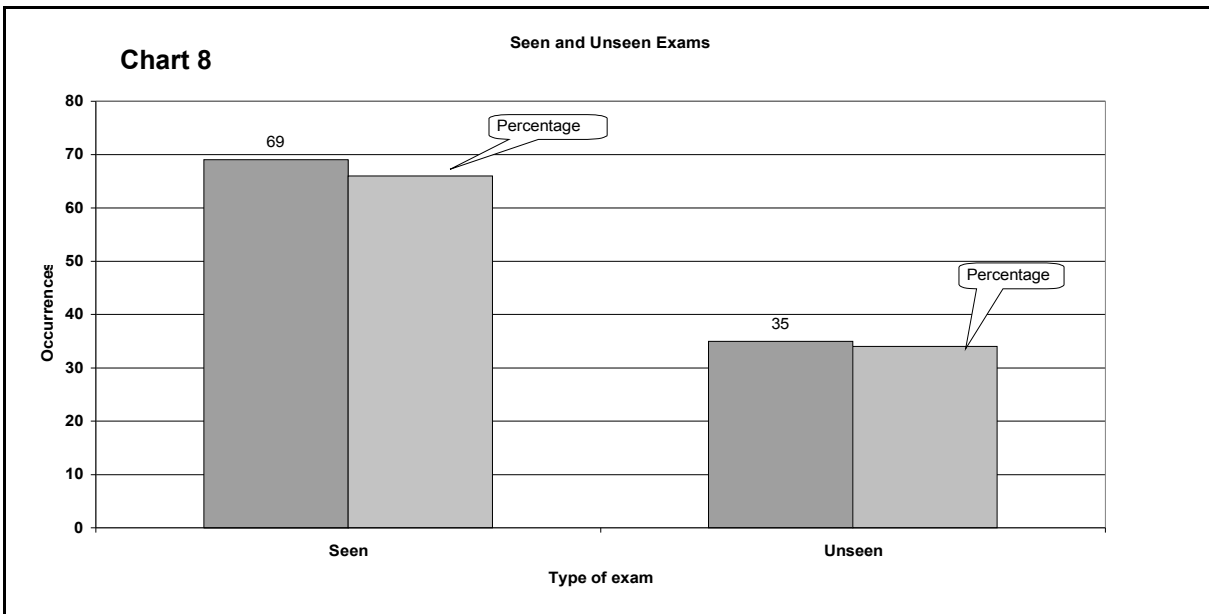
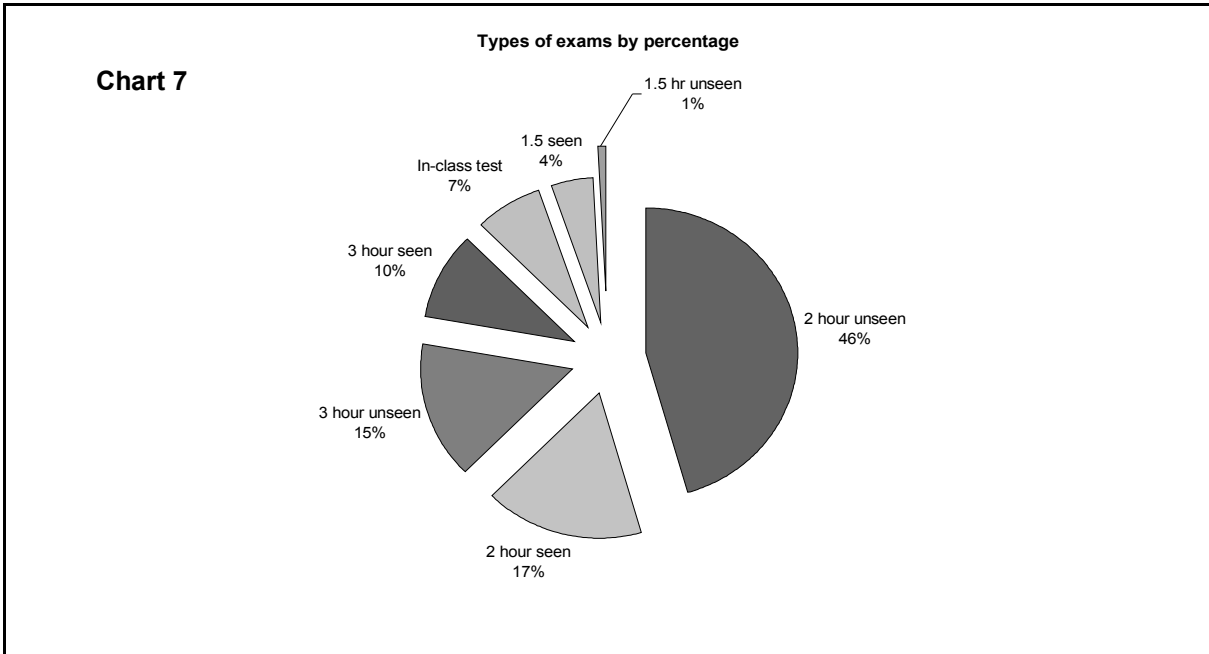


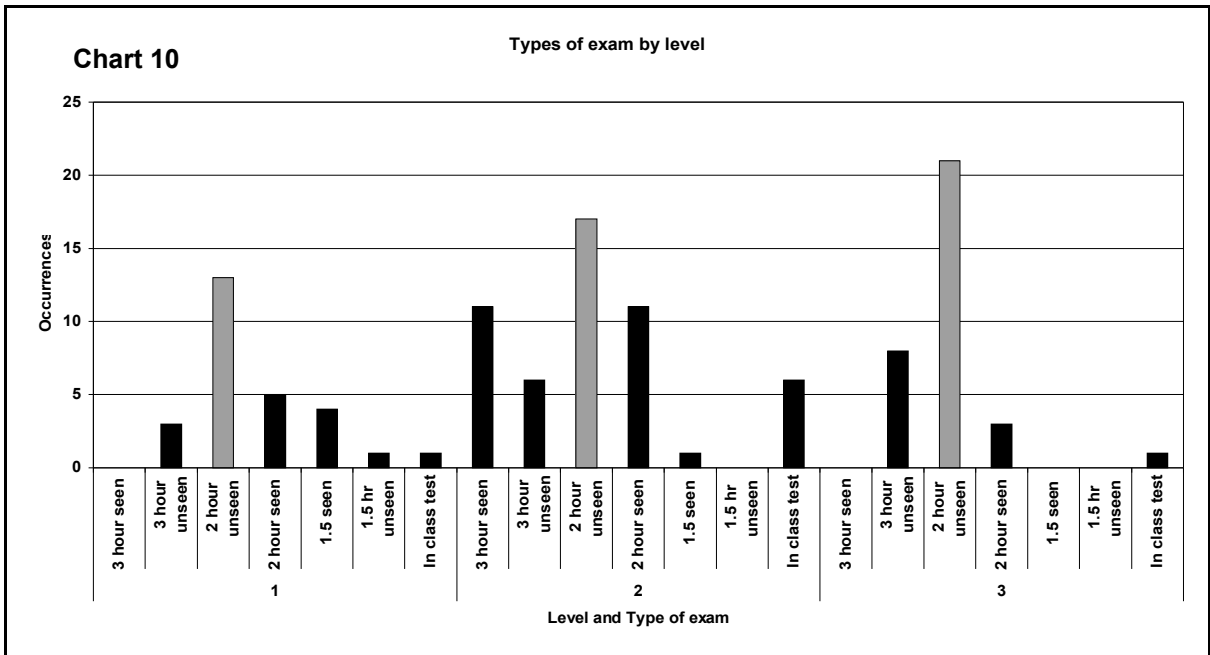
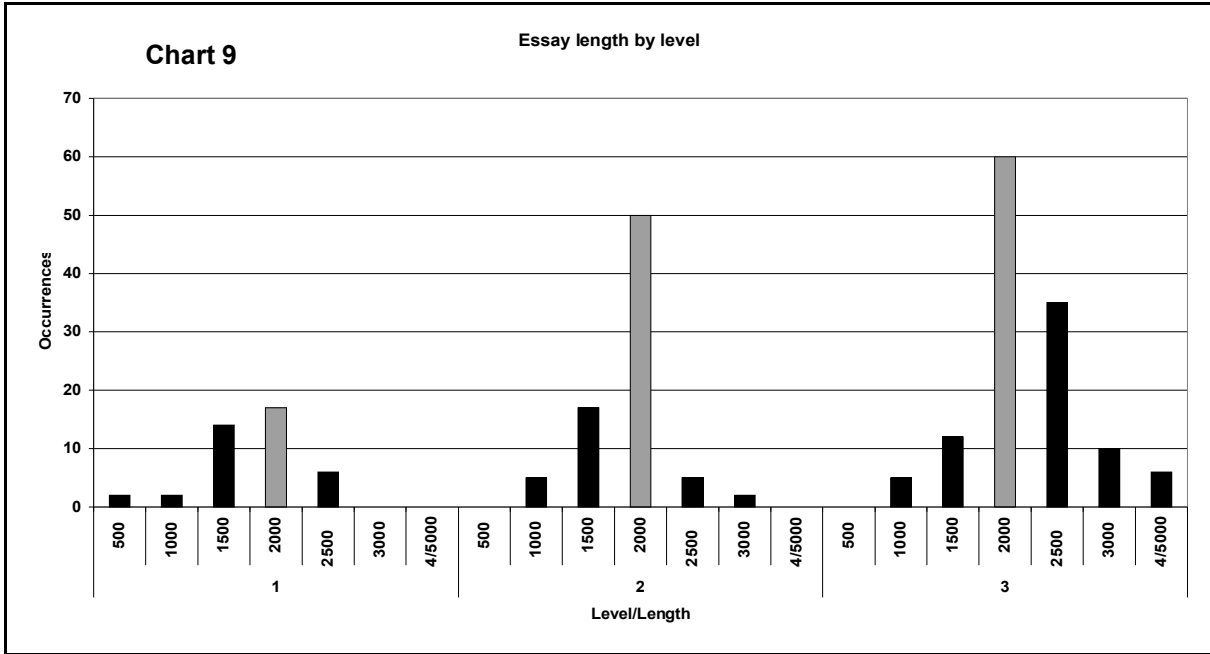
History's approach to assessment could well be the same as other social science and humanities subjects. However, that is another project.

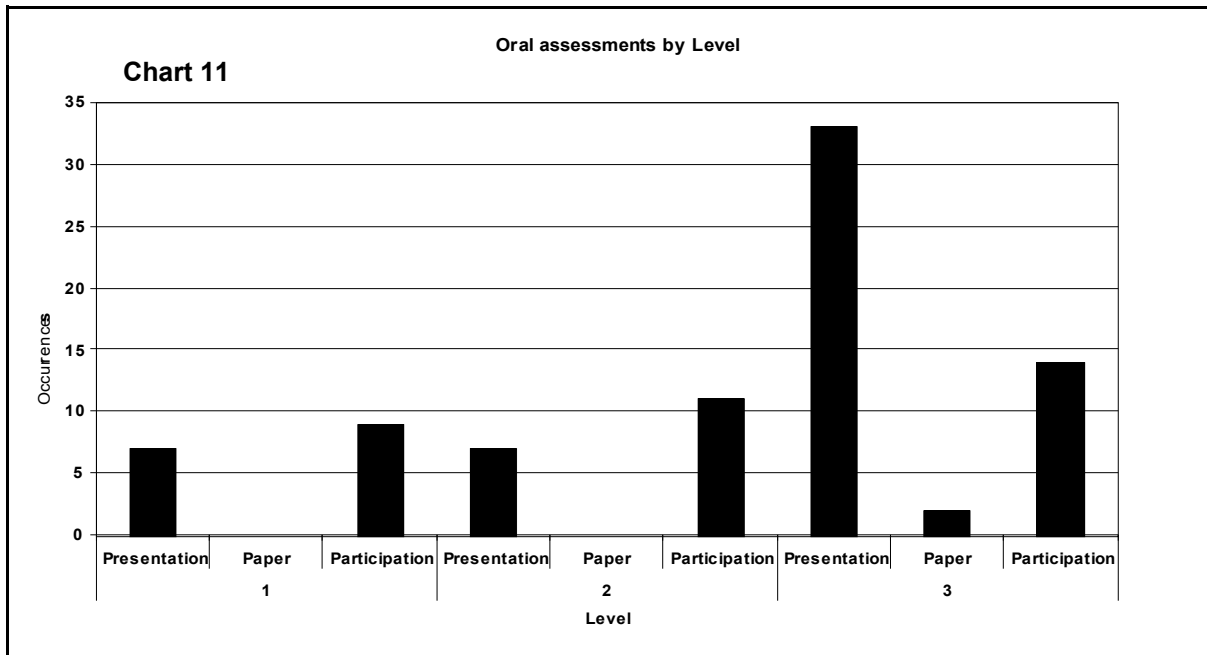












¹

SACWG, formed in 1994, is a group of administrators and academics from eight Higher Education Institutions who collaborate in order to further the investigation and discussion of assessment and related matters. An account of SACWG's development will appear in the August 2004 issue of **Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education**.