



# Report from the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Teaching and Learning in History Conference

Held 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> May 2011  
Lady Margaret Hall  
University of Oxford



## INTRODUCTION

The 13th Annual Conference for Teaching and Learning in History took place during the period of restructuring of the Higher Education Academy. The new structure sees the end of the subject centre network and some uncertainty about how the discipline will be supported in the coming years. The year 2010-11 has also witnessed a change of government, the Browne Review of Higher Education, the imminent introduction of fees, and the ending of state funding for the Arts and Humanities. Therefore, it might be expected that the delegates who gathered for the conference would be in a gloomy and pessimistic mood. In fact, the contrary was the case. Although there were anxieties expressed about the future there was a strong commitment on the part of delegates to focus on supporting excellence in all aspects of the learning and teaching of History in the UK. The emphasis was on collaboration, knowledge exchange and innovation.

The first session of the conference was devoted to a discussion of continuing the good work of the History Subject Centre after its closure in July 2011. This took the form of an interactive workshop where delegates detailed the three activities of the Subject Centre that they thought were the most important to continue. When these were pooled, four areas emerged as most valued: the annual conference; early career support; publications and regional networks. Delegates then grouped together to discuss ways in which these activities could be supported in the future. The resulting recommendations were added to by other delegates throughout the conference and resulted in the publication of a fuller briefing paper, *After the History Subject Centre*: [www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/elibrary/internal/br\\_richardson\\_afterthehsc\\_20110501](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/elibrary/internal/br_richardson_afterthehsc_20110501) which makes recommendations for History Subject Associations, Heads of Departments, the Higher Education Academy and the wider History community on the key areas of support required in the near future.

As usual the conference was enhanced by delegates attending from the US, Australia and Europe as well as from all parts of Britain. The papers delivered demonstrated the diversity of exciting and innovative research and practice taking place to develop resources and case studies to inspire others. This year, generous time allowances were made for audience discussion and participation and many speakers benefited from the advice and considered insights of other delegates. An added attraction of this year's conference was the presence of a professional film crew who interviewed many of the delegates on their teaching practices. The filming is part of the *History Passion Project*, funded under the wider umbrella scheme: History Graduates with Impact, and the filmed interviews will be published on the project website this summer. We also hope to upload some of the film taken during the conference to our main website to enable those who were not present to follow the discussion on the conference theme of Thriving in Difficult Times. A number of other speakers spoke eloquently on issues such as curriculum reform, employability and assessment and feedback – all key issues in this current period of uncertainty.

As this will be the last conference organised by the History Subject Centre, I would like to thank, on behalf of the whole Subject Centre team, all past and present supporters of the conference and the work of the Centre as a whole. We wish you the best of luck for the future.

Dr Sarah Richardson, Director, History Subject Centre



Teaching the History of  
the Big Society  
*George Campbell Gosling*

The Great History  
Conundrum  
*Alex Moseley*

## MONDAY

In Talbot Hall, the first parallel session of the day began with a discussion of ‘Teaching the Big Society’ in higher education history programmes. George Campbell Gosling, of Oxford Brookes University, presented a robust discussion of the Big Society, or, more accurately, of civil society and charity in Britain. Despite a long history of research on these themes, recent reports regarding AHRC funding, among other disputes, have made the idea of teaching the Big Society distasteful to many. George, however, presented not only a compelling case for the inclusion of civil society in the teaching of European and British history, but also solid examples of when and where such teaching might fit into existing modules and courses. He was likewise clear about the long legacy of Britain’s civil society on modern perceptions of charity and welfare. It was made clear that although the term “Big Society” is a novel one, with clear and intractable links to the current government, the debate regarding public and private support for the most vulnerable in society is longstanding and the use of this debate in HE teaching should be neither hijacked by those seeking to support the current government or rejected outright by those in opposition. Instead, teaching the debates surrounding civil society provides a point of entry to students and produces, one hopes, graduates who are able to debate the merits and flaws of the Big Society with clarity and analytical reflection.

Afterwards, Alex Moseley returned to bring the community up-to-date on Leicester’s Great History Conundrum, first presented at the 11th Annual Conference. Much like George’s efforts to promote a controversial theme, Alex spoke of the initial suspicion engendered by his games-based approach to teaching history skills at the University of Leicester. However, the programme, now its third year, has been (almost) universally appreciated by staff and students and has prompted a demonstrable improvement in the acquisition and application of key research skills by the university’s history cohort. There are still refinements to be made, he admitted, regarding the marking and weighting of group work—the course wiki—but in general they are extremely pleased with the outcomes so far. The discussion which ensued raised several key points regarding the transferability of the Great History Conundrum to other departments within and beyond the University of Leicester. Alex believed that, although each department would have to fine-tune the questions to complement departmental resources and aims, the out-of-the-box resource should be highly transferable. The real concern was the use of the game in several departments in a single university, wherein a student might end up taking 2 or even 3 versions depending on their degree programme. Overall the debate around the implanting of skills into degree programme, either as stand-alone modules or within content-based modules, was a highly contentious one. Nonetheless, all present agreed that The Great History Conundrum was a hugely impressive piece of curriculum design and worthy of emulation.

**How best to use student failure to motivate and instruct in the classroom**  
*Andrew Koke*

**Lessons to be learnt from School History**  
*K.G Hammarlund*

Andrew Koke gave another inspiring and thought-provoking talk on his innovative work in teaching practice at Indiana University. In exploring the role of failure in education, Andrew began by asking ‘what is a game you like to play?’ and ‘how did you learn to play it?’ We learn from failure and losing ... repeatedly—a theme explored by James Paul Gee in his research on video games. Their appeal lies in their ability to provide a challenge that is surmountable—not too easy to master, but not impossible to achieve. Going on to discuss a situation that has resonance internationally, Andrew stated that there is no room for failure as students’ progress through higher education in the USA, resulting in students producing assessed work that they think meets their tutors requirements. With the stakes high, how can we introduce the possibility of failure and bring the students’ own agency into the classroom?

Andrew attempted to do just that by running a course that included 45 pieces of assessed work, some only a paragraph long, to encourage the students to be honest and take a risk in their responses knowing that no one assignment would ruin their grade average. Andrew was honest enough to acknowledge that the workload for the tutor was high and in feedback, the students believed the course was easy. He had underestimated the quality of the students and could have pressed for more analysis in some of the assignments: a point that will be addressed when the course is run again next year. Interestingly, ALL the students who completed the course completed ALL the assignments!

Karl Hammarlund’s work in Sweden at Halmstad University is largely with students learning history and teaching combined, and as such was able to bring a valuable perspective to the discussion on ‘lessons to be learnt from school history’. Teaching in schools can effectively rebuild the world or story in which history took place to help convey meaning to its study and reveal that historical fact is not a simple commodity. They are guided through the questions ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ but should we assume that students in higher education then automatically know how to become a better historian and narrator, in exploring beyond the verified facts. Karl discussed a useful exercise used in his teaching in which a series of ‘fact cards’ are produced around a specific historical topic/event. The students are then ask to rank the facts in order of importance to the developing topic/event, creating a greater awareness of historical analysis beyond regurgitating a series of unweighted facts.

Both talks proposed the value of unpacking teaching exercises, improving the training and tools used for the teaching and study of history.

**A Student's eye-view of  
Historiography**  
*Marcus Collins*

**Thriving in Difficult  
Times: The Hull History  
Partnership**  
*Amanda Capern*

After lunch, we again divided into parallel sessions. In Talbot Hall, we were favoured with two papers on the connections between secondary and higher education history. The first, by Marcus Collins of Loughborough University, explored students' own perceptions of their history reading at secondary school. After several weeks of lectures that explained the key schools of historical thought, students were asked to write a historiographical review of their secondary education. Overwhelmingly, student felt they had been taught "traditional" or top-down, narrative history with a very narrow perspective. Although some noted elements of "new" history in their secondary schools, many felt that their global perspective was too narrow and the focus on British history, or at least European history, was far too great. This was, of course, in great contrast to recent calls for a more emphasis on "Our Island Story". The question was raised on whether students had felt this way during their secondary education, or whether they had felt their eyes had been opened by their first weeks of University, which may prompt additional research in this area. Despite some negative appraisals by his students, Marcus argued the National Curriculum, while certainly not perfect, was in fact doing a laudable job at preparing students to be reflective of the multiple identities most Britons hold. He also noted that a more domestically-focused history curriculum was currently the norm in many other countries in the world and that more research ought to be done into current trends before decisions are made regarding secondary education.

Similarly, Amanda Capern from the University of Hull spoke about the Subject Centre funded project The Hull History Partnership. The project explored the possibility of integrating internships with public history organisations, compulsory education providers and research archives and libraries in the history programme. The pilot project involved 6 interns who worked on independent projects over the course of the term. The project, like many other work placement modules, was supported through structured contact with academic staff, who monitored student progress and helped them achieve their personal and professional goals within their chosen placement. In the end, several of the students were able to move confidently forward in their career paths explicitly thanks to the experience gained during the internship and all agreed to the benefits of their involvement. Yet, despite the recognition of these benefits, the pilot programme acknowledged the potential difficulties they would face when scaling their project to a full cohort of 18 students next year. Among these in particular was the potential for chaos in the choice of placement (something discussed at length by Harvey Woolf & Richard Hawkins later in the conference) and the possibility of "losing" students through a lack of frequent, structured contact with the history department. In the end, despite the scalability of the project being limited by staffing constraints in the department and with partners, the positive feedback from the pilot has demonstrated the feasibility of such projects and the benefits offered by such endeavours. A robust discussion followed Amanda's talk about the practicalities of her project (more details of which are available at [www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi)) and the future of internships in history programmes.

**From a three-point to a seven-point grading scale**  
*Henrik Agren*

**Liberated by Flip: Student Presentations, Academic Feedback and the Moving Image**  
*Chris Szejnmann*

In the first presentation of this session, Henrik Agren introduced the process by which the University of Gavle decided to replace their existing grading system with a seven-point scale. Henrick provided an open and honest account of how he and his colleague had approached the new grading scale, including how they had approached the changes to ensure that the grading criteria of the new system was clear for students to use. He emphasised that there had been no drive for change from students, academics or employers and he raised the question that perhaps the change was simply to make a change. By clearly describing the nature of the grade scale, Henrik raised the question of whether there were too many grades in place, overcomplicating the system for academics and students. In particular, it meant that academics were now working within a new 'judgement curve' that meant students had to adapt to new grades whilst academics were simultaneously trying to define what those grades meant. Henrik provided examples of the new way of working, stimulating an interesting debate on the reliability of exam marks for assessing student aptitude.

The second presentation by Chris Szejnmann extolled the benefits of getting his students to use video presentations on a chosen presentation topic and then receiving feedback using video as well. Chris enthusiastically championed the use of Flip as easy enough to operate and technologically sound enough to provide excellent quality video. He stated that many students moved outside of his original brief by editing their videos, adding music and FX. Chris highlighted that by using videos instead of face to face presentations, it enabled students to free themselves from the associated embarrassment of standing in front of their fellow students and try more unusual approaches in presenting the subject matter. In the following discussion, participants were clearly interested in Chris's approach and in trying out video presentations themselves!



In the first of their two sessions at this year's conference Alan and Jeanne discussed the progress of their fascinating project on the value of passionate teaching, funded by the History Subject Centre. The key aims are to encourage conversation about the issues concerning historians as teachers, generate ideas about present and future practice and provide digital and bibliographical resources to take forward. There was a huge response to the project survey, with over 10% (220) of teachers in UK HE history departments taking part. Although there were many individualistic and personal responses, a great deal of commonality has been found. In their presentation, Alan and Jeanne concentrated on questions 7 and 8 of the survey to encourage discussion on the wider theme of the conference:

- In your view what can students get from history teaching at its best?
- How would you describe the value of these things to policymakers?

Some wonderful examples were given of the responses they received, which can be found on the Passion Project section of our 'Graduates with Impact' website: [www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/history\\_passion](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/history_passion).

In short, history teaching at its best cultivates people with a complex awareness, who display a critical disposition, sympathetic imagination and a will to learn and keep learning. Responses to the latter question interestingly resorted to a more skills-based vocabulary, even if this fell short of their reasoning on value. This is understandable at a time when employment and competition for graduate jobs is becoming very difficult, but the survey (and project as a whole) revealed deeper discussions. Referring to David Nicholl's updated work on 'the Employment of History Graduates' ([www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/emp\\_report](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/emp_report)), there is a growing realisation that the 'traditional' jobs for history graduates are not reflected in today's reality and we should not simply follow the demands of current employers in an environment where there are no longer jobs for life. The study of history can be effective in preparing graduates for skills that we do not even know are needed yet, giving them the 'flexicurity' for a world where it is increasingly difficult to 'code' graduate careers and look at the kinds of LIVES they are going to be living.



**Home and Away:  
Internationalisation and  
First Year Transition in  
HE History**  
*Melodee Beals*

**After Standards:  
Australian Historians  
Grapple with a  
Compliance/Audit Future**  
*Sean Brawley*

## TUESDAY

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Melodee Beals, Academic Co-ordinator with the History Subject Centre, discussed the findings from her recently completed, extensive project on 'International Students in History: A Comparative Study of First-Year Transition, 2009-10'. The aim of the project was to better assess the aspects of first year transition that are particular to international students and which are more general difficulties faced by all those beginning their undergraduate studies. In highlighting key aspects of transition, a more focused programme of support can be developed for all. A robust survey and interview strategy began in October 2009, inviting responses from new first year undergraduates: 202 individual responses were received during the project from 22 universities across the UK.

As an American who came to study in the UK herself, Melodee was expecting to find more commonality than divisions, which proved to be largely the case. Common to all was the feeling that regional and economic backgrounds often resulted in culture shock, perceptions of HE influenced by the media made transition difficult and the true balance of teaching, discussion and independent study is not fully appreciated by incoming students from home or abroad. However, difficulties relating specifically to international demographics were found in some areas: the perception that lecturers relied too heavily on British source work; difficulties in expressing opinions during seminars; and the possession of a different world view from their peers. An interesting final thought is that despite the importance of internationalisation in HE, it is appreciated but rarely recognised by home students. The full project report can be found on the subject Centre website:

[www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/publications/briefingreports/internationalisationfirstyear/](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/publications/briefingreports/internationalisationfirstyear/)

Sean Brawley's discussion on working within the increasingly regulatory environment in Australia revealed how the history HE community there is trying to secure meaningful, sustainable change and create a positive opportunity to embed quality teaching in a difficult situation. Learning and teaching is one of five standards within the new HE regulatory framework and a project was established to ensure that discipline communities define and take responsibility for implementing academic standards within academic traditions of collegiality, peer review, pre-eminence of disciplines and academic autonomy. The discipline reference group for History (including Sean and Alan Booth) aimed to align standards against international best practice but the key to success is to underpin these standards across the sector. 'After Standards – The Future of History' aims to do just that with buy-in from all Australian HEIs that offer history as a major. The project approach is bottom-up and self-organised to ensure a strong discipline teaching and learning focus: to build, with the assistance of the project's institutional partners, a sustainable community of practice around teaching and learning that can both implement and monitor change and, where necessary, assume or support an advocacy role for the discipline within the Higher Education sector and with government. For more information please visit

[www.afterstandards.org](http://www.afterstandards.org)

**The Employability and  
future career progression  
of undergraduates**

*David Hussey*

**Employability and the  
History Curriculum**

*Alison Twells*

The final parallel sessions of the conference looked at the issues of employability and feedback and assessment – increasingly high on the agenda in the current environment, and set only to increase.

In the session in Talbot Hall, David Hussey discussed the preliminary findings from a project at Wolverhampton, investigating how far employability is constructively aligned in the history departments' programme. A key issue is how far employability issues are embraced by the student body and their awareness of future career progression. Following a survey of students at Worcester and Wolverhampton, which have quite different student profiles, it became clear that the employability agenda was valued quite differently by the two cohorts. Students at Wolverhampton often started their degree with a clear focus on how it would increase their employability prospects in specific directions, whilst the comparatively younger students at Worcester were more open to the experience of student life and a broader perspective on their studies. Going on to concentrate on responses from Wolverhampton, David found that 79% felt that they had had no activities in their studies that related to future employment, there was demand for greater engagement with employers, internships, placements and work based learning, but NOT volunteering opportunities. Essentially what they would like is bespoke employability assessments and guidance - a tall order!

David will be revisiting the history curriculum in the light of the survey, in a bid to make the links with employability more explicit. Expectations in this area are clearly high and probably unrealistic. The question now is possibly how will the decision to pursue study in history develop over the next few years?

Alison Twells went on to talk about the development of a new 'Applied History' module, which forms part of her long-standing work in community history and the importance of employability and work-related learning to life skills and academic rigour. Her community history work at Sheffield Hallam University has often been part of local regeneration projects which has involved huge student engagement and enjoyment. Within a one-semester module the work can seem rushed, which was an important reason behind the development of the new two-semester 'Applied History' module. With her extensive experience in developing work-based teaching, Alison was able to highlight some of the key issues in taking this approach for those considering a move in this direction. There are huge time implications when planning, resourcing and delivering learning in collaboration with external project providers. The expectations of both students and providers/employers also need to be assessed and managed, but the biggest potential problem is in setting up and establishing assessment criteria – a matter discussed by Richard Hawkins and Harvey Woolf in the parallel session.

In the discussion following both papers, delegates contemplated the idea that it was the responsibility of staff to actively demonstrate which transferrable skills they were offering to students and whether there should be an active career management aspect to degree courses.

In the Old Library, delegates were first treated to a talk by Sam McGinty and Alasdair Blair of De Montfort University on their continuing project “It's Good to Talk: Feedback, Dialogue and Learning”

([www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/feedback\\_project/](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/feedback_project/))

Working through the National Student Survey, many departments have found that scores relating to assessment and feedback are consistently low compared to other aspects of the university education experience. Yet, the questions used in the NSS are not always universally understood in the same way. For example, in statement “Feedback has been prompt”, what exactly does prompt mean? Does it indicate that the marker adhered to posted guidelines or simply that the student was satisfied with how quickly the work was returned? Likewise “Criteria used in marking have been clear in advance” is ambiguous because while most, if not all, students have access to the precise marking criteria they will be judged upon, many chose not to—or did not know how to—obtain these guidelines in advance. In the case of the former, is poor satisfaction really the department’s fault? In order to gain a better understanding of how these NSS questions were being interpreted by students, the research team undertook surveys at two post-1992 universities with History, Politics and International Relations students. The survey was based around expanding the following NSS questions:

- Feedback has been prompt
- I have received detailed comments on my work
- Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things

Analysis of the results from this more detailed questionnaire demonstrated a wide variety of experiences for students, both positive and negative, but indicated that providing additional feedback on summative assessments, especially exams, and framing feedback as “feed-forward” were likely to have a positive influence on the NSS scores. When the panel broke for questions, it became clear that conflicts over a perceived lack student initiative, such as a failure to attend office hours or pick up marked work, were highly frustrating as was the fundamental disparity between what students and lecturers defined as feedback. Several possible solutions were offered. Some were simple, such as explicitly telling students when feedback was being given: “And now I am going to give you feedback on your assessment”. Others suggested utilising programmes such as Adobe Acrobat or Word to insert audio comments into student work, which has thus far being greatly appreciated by students.

**Beyond the Portfolio:  
Assessing WPL in  
Undergraduate History  
Programmes across UK  
HEIs**

*Harvey Woolf &  
Richard Hawkins*

Sam and Alasdair's presentation was followed by a discussion of assessment in work placements within History programmes by Harvey Woolf and Richard Hawkins of the University of Wolverhampton. With the skills agenda receiving ever-increasing attention from curriculum designers, workplace-learning modules are being offered more regularly. The paper, therefore, examined the variety of placements currently on offer throughout the UK and particularly the methods for assessment that were used within them. The project began with a survey of existing work placements, taken from publicly available module information and was followed by an online survey and a series of interviews. Their research brought to light several important trends. First, there was very little consistency among history offerings of work placements. Some were highly integrated into the programmes progression framework as a compulsory module, organised and run by members of the history department. On the other end of the spectrum were optional modules, offered at faculty or university level, where students maintained ultimate responsibility in finding an appropriate placement and completing the established requirements.

In terms of assessment, the main focus of the morning's panel, the researchers found that the majority of work placements required students to submit a reflective project, of some description, in order to determine their engagement with the project. They were rarely assessed on the actual outputs of their workplace and their employers had little or no impact on their overall mark. Often, the employer would be asked to submit a report on the student's activities, but this feedback was not passed onto students or weighted heavily in the final assessment. The paper, and ensuing discussion, brought to light some critical questions which departments will have to consider if they choose to implement or continue their work placement programmes. Among the most important were:

- should placements be compulsory components of a history degree
- should the product of the placement form the basis of assessment
- how important should online media, such as wikis or electronic feedback, be in assessment
- should the mark of a placement contribute to the overall degree classification.

It was generally felt that work placements were a positive contribution to the student experience, but that logistical problems regarding organisation and assessment were unlikely to be overcome consistently in the near future. Their work is part of the Graduates with Impact project and more details can be found at: [www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/wpl](http://www.historysubjectcentre.ac.uk/research/gwi/wpl)

**Thriving in Difficult Times: Cameron, cuts and careers – the ‘utility’ of history?**

*Freya Cox Jensen*

**History Passion Project: Purpose, Value and Pleasure – Part II**

*Alan & Jeanne Booth*

Returning from lunch, the conference gathered in Talbot Hall for a plenary presentation by Freya Cox Jensen of Christchurch College, University of Oxford. Continuing on from last year’s discussion of student engagement in Oxford’s tutorial system, Freya collaborated with a colleague from the medical school to undertake comparative study regarding motivations for medical and history students. With the announcement of the near-trebling of tuition fees at the University of Oxford, Freya wondered how history’s status as a non-vocational degree programme would shape student uptake. The study consisted of a series of informal interviews with students from both programmes, asking them to explain their motives for undertaking the degree originally, what they hoped to gain from it in the future and, had fees been £9000 when they began, would they have undertaken the same degree. The results were, as expected, noticeably different between the medical and history students. The former had considered the degree innately vocational, and continued to do now. Because of this, while they would have not wanted to pay the higher fees, they would have been willing to do so in order to secure their chosen career. Those reading history, on the other hand, focused much more closely on their personal affinity for the subject, or, occasionally, their previous success with it in secondary school, as the primary reason for their taking the course. Consequently, the higher price tag would make some, though not all, reconsider their degree path.

In this final session, Alan and Jeanne were joined by a panel (Sarah Richardson, Alison Twells and Paul Hyland) to continue the discussions around their project, concentrating on the practical strategies that can be used in a classroom and shared to help students to thrive – rounding off the conference theme. Each panel member gave insights into their teaching. Sarah Richardson discussed strategies that she uses to develop students’ skills as historical researchers. For example she outlined how a field trip might provide a series of opportunities for students to research a particular landscape and environment, encouraging them to lead sessions within and outside the classroom.

Alison Twells summarised her community history projects where students work on areas of family or local history enabling them to apply their historical skills to benefit audiences outside academia.

Paul Hyland considered the diversity and commonality in a classroom of students, all tied together through the social experience of learning in a controlled environment with him as guide/joker/expert. Paul thinks of the class as a research community in which they learn of and through each other’s knowledge, views, abilities, passions, concerns and goals. The goal is to find ways of enabling them to become self-supporting, self-motivated, self-monitoring and self-evaluating. The yardstick of success of teaching is the enduring value of what has been learned well beyond the assessment and the course: the bottom line is what is useful for a lifetime.