

Royal Historical Society

*Teaching History at University: A Brief Introduction
for Postgraduate and Early Career Historians*



Updated: January 2020

Introduction

Teaching at university is big business, and the question of how to ensure its quality is coming under greater scrutiny. At the same time, scholars, particularly those early in their career, are expected to deliver teaching through ever more precarious contracts of employment.

The core market in undergraduate education both nationally and internationally is vital to the reputation and financial viability of universities. Combined with the imperative to be seen to deliver 'value for money' to fee-paying undergraduates, this has led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of the teaching academics deliver, and a concern that time and effort invested in this aspect of the profession should be properly rewarded in career progression.

The Royal Historical Society is committed to promoting good practice in the employment of temporary teaching staff at all levels. In 2017, in collaboration with History Lab, we put together a Code of Good Practice for departments hiring early career teaching staff. While aimed primarily at those making decisions about hiring, early career historians may also find it a useful document to know what to look out for in good (and bad) job application processes. This document can be found on the RHS website through the Early Career page: <https://royalhistsoc.org/early-career-historians/>.

One of the key skills of an academic historian's professional life is achieving a good balance between teaching and research. While a strong research record is necessary to get a place on a short list for an academic position, it is also important to demonstrate a successful and enthusiastic track record of undergraduate teaching and supervision.

But how should postgraduates and early career historians approach teaching, and best demonstrate their skills in job applications?

Teaching while a PhD Candidate

PhD candidates who are hoping to embark on an academic career should undertake some teaching. The experience can offer a diversion from, and new perspectives on, your research. It offers its own intellectual rewards, and can be a vital (if unsatisfactory) source of income.

Teaching during your PhD will also give an early indication of whether you enjoy it – and not everyone does.

Most departments and research funders now have policies setting out at what stage and how much postgraduates should teach. Don't underestimate the commitment teaching involves – not only contact time, but preparation and training. It is important to not take on the maximum permitted load without careful consideration even if your supervisor approves it.

If possible, avoid doing teaching solely for 'the money': in CV terms, the quantity of teaching you do is less important than that it is sufficiently well-prepared and executed that it generates approval from both students and the department. If you are provided with written feedback from students that provides evidence, make sure you save it!

If you have the chance to teach in more than one year of your studies, carefully weigh up the benefits of repeating teaching in a second year (which may reduce the preparation involved) against those of expanding your repertoire (which may make you look more attractive to a future employer). In addition, where the opportunity arises to give a lecture as part of a course, or participate in a session related to your research on someone else's MA module, for example, this will often provide an opportunity to broaden the range of your teaching portfolio.

You are unlikely to be designing your own module at this stage; most often, postgraduates are employed as teaching assistants e.g. to cover seminars and assignment marking within large survey modules. You will almost certainly have the opportunity to demonstrate that you can plan a class imaginatively around the topics you are assigned to teach, and that you are comfortable addressing topics that may have little in common with your research specialism.

In an ideal world, by the time students receive their doctorates, they should have added much of the following to their CV/portfolio:

- Evidence that they have experience of leading seminars and planning a variety of sessions (such as trying out different ways of increasing student engagement, tackling sensitive topics).
- Evidence that their teaching has been well received by students in the form of feedback comments/scores.
- Evidence that they have experience of teaching undergraduate students on courses which extend significantly beyond the specific focus of their research (e.g. 'Europe in the Twentieth Century' rather than 'The German Economy in the interwar period').
- Naming as a reference someone who knows not just their research but also their work as a teacher and how effectively they have acquitted their responsibilities.
- Evidence they have undertaken appropriate training. In many cases, formal training will enable scholars to apply for [Associate Fellowship of the HEA](#) or similar recognised commitment to professional teaching standards.

Graduate Teaching Assistants: Conditions of Work

Over recent years issues around the employment of early career scholars, including Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) have come to the fore in discussions about British higher education generally.

The precise terms and conditions of employment for GTAs vary considerably from institution to institution. Rates of pay may also reflect the qualifications of the GTAs (with those with PhDs receiving a higher rate) and the levels of responsibility they are assigned in particular roles. Almost all GTA work will be paid at an hourly rate with a set number of hours assigned to the role to cover all or some of direct teaching time, feedback, preparation, assessment and training, although where marking is involved this may attract a different rate per script.

As a generalisation, it is clearly the case that what is often very demanding work is not well paid, and pay may not take account of all the work that is required to execute the role effectively. If you are taking on a role as a GTA, you should go into the role with your eyes open and ensure you acquaint yourself with the terms and conditions to which you are signing up. In some cases you may well find yourself obtaining employment at more than one institution simultaneously.

The conditions in which academics are employed (and particularly at early career level) are the subject of ongoing discussion at departmental, institutional and national levels, including formal disputes involving trades unions that represent university staff.

It may well be worth seeking out 'shop-floor' views from those already engaged as GTAs before committing yourself, especially if you are seeking a position outside your 'home' department. You may also wish to consider joining a Union.

The following list indicates some points on which you might seek clarification if it is not apparent from the details supplied by the department.

- If the pay is hourly, what does the contract cover: does it include adequate preparation time, feedback, assessment work etc? If you are teaching seminars associated with a lecture course, are you expected to attend lectures and if so, is this time paid or unpaid?
- What support is provided from senior academic staff? Will a module leader offer peer observation, for example? What teaching materials/access to virtual learning environments are provided? Who will carry out assessment, or address complaints about teaching?
- What space and facilities are available to GTAs to carry out their duties? (Not just teaching rooms, but appropriate places to prepare/relax between teaching sessions, to deliver feedback, or to be available to students)?
- What training is required/provided by the institution?
- What expectations are there regarding the role of GTAs in providing pastoral or academic support to students?
- What form of representation is provided for GTAs in departmental governance?

Two important contexts for GTA roles are employment law and universities' responsibilities towards their students. The first sets certain basic parameters for terms and conditions, but also has implications for the number of times a person can be asked to deliver the same teaching without the university incurring additional obligations to that person. The second means that the university has a responsibility to ensure that the teaching delivered by GTAs meets professional standards. This means that training will be required, and a GTA should expect to have their teaching observed and marking monitored (and this is in the GTA's interest in any case).

It is important also to clarify what role if any a GTA is required to play in pastoral support of students. Generally both support such as reference-writing and identifying or dealing with the consequences of students' disabilities or personal circumstances fall outside the responsibilities of the GTA, but this will not stop students approaching them as a first point of contact or the GTA being the person first to identify an issue. It should be clear what an institution expects of its GTAs in such circumstances.

Teaching after your PhD / as a Research Fellow or Assistant

Many institutions will not recruit all the teaching assistants they need from within their own postgraduate student body, and opportunities are readily available particularly in places like London, where there is a concentration of History departments in a small geographical area.

Opportunities to take on teaching (usually hourly-paid, or single module) can arise quite suddenly and at a late stage of an academic year for a whole variety of reasons, so even a speculative enquiry accompanied by a CV may sometimes yield results. More importantly, look for opportunities advertised on departmental websites, on social media channels such as Twitter, and on jobs.ac.uk.

In this situation the same sorts of considerations apply as already indicated for PhD students, and it remains important to try and ensure that you can continue with your research even if you find yourself with significant amounts of teaching.

At the postdoctoral level there may now be additional opportunities to take sole responsibility for a whole module to cover e.g. parental or research leave. However, having a doctorate opens up new opportunities to broaden a CV.

If you are awarded a research fellowship or obtain a position on a funded research project, do not allow your teaching CV to gather dust. Funding bodies and institutions will have their own rules about the amount of teaching they regard as compatible with the position they have funded, or about the responsibilities of host institutions to offer you opportunities to teach as part of your career development. Assuming that you have acquired some teaching experience by this stage, it makes sense to seek out opportunities to broaden and deepen your portfolio at this point. Ways to do this might include:

- Contributing to core courses/modules on themes such as historiography/skills where you may have complete control of the content of your session.
- Seeking opportunities for experience of MA level teaching and undergraduate lecturing if you have not done it before.

- Contributing to postgraduate research training.
- Designing and delivering your own module (though bear in mind that departments may be wary of investing in the start-up costs for a module that will only endure as long as your association with the institution – the best that may be available may be taking sole responsibility for an existing module).
- Acquire further teaching qualifications such as [Fellowship of the HEA](#).
- Other elements within a research post can also provide evidence of teaching ability- this can especially be the case with impact-related activities.

A willingness to contribute to the wider life of the department will be something those making permanent appointments will be looking for in your CV at the next stage.

Teaching during a funded postdoctoral position

At the postdoctoral level, a certain amount of teaching may be built in to the terms of a funded research fellowship or other position, in which case there is unlikely to be any additional income stream associated with the teaching.

The terms and conditions for teaching activity as part of a research post will vary depending on the funding body, and it is quite possible that a department may inadvertently assume that your particular post fits a pattern with which it is familiar from other funding bodies. How many hours are involved? Are the stated hours a ceiling above which you should not teach, or an entitlement which you can demand? How will such opportunities fit with the demands of your research in terms of archival research? You may be able to negotiate concentrations of teaching in particular semesters/terms or even years to create a rational fit with the demands of your research project.

Whether postdoctoral teachers are engaged in teaching as part of a research post or employed on a temporary contract to augment or cover some aspect of a department's teaching, it is important that they establish clearly the context for their work in this respect. Both research fellows and those on temporary teaching-focused contracts may need to be more proactive than GTAS to seek out opportunities for formal training and access to teaching qualifications as part of their career development.

For those not on research projects or research fellowships, predictably enough the injunction to read the small print is the most helpful advice. Factors to consider include:

- Employment law is a key consideration in the way contracts are worded by HEIs, who are often mindful that the role specified in the contract must be such so as not inadvertently to create any obligation to the person employed which might tie their hands when appointing to a permanent position or require them to continue to employ them after the date at which the post expires. Another issue is access to redundancy payments.
- It is particularly important in posts defined as a percentage of a position to note whether or not an obligation or opportunity to engage in research is envisaged (does

it only cover term time, for example?) and what can be asked of you beyond teaching itself (pastoral responsibilities, administration?).

- Will you be provided with a room or other facilities such as IT? This may not be in the contract itself, but you need to know.
- Is there any opportunity to shape your own teaching schedule, e.g. by requested allocated research days? Can you concentrate your teaching in to a single day or in appropriate blocks?
- Any postdoctoral teacher hoping to deliver a module of their own also needs to be mindful of the often extremely bureaucratic procedures and long lead in times that may be required to get a new course approved and available to students with appropriate resources in place. You may need to do significant work on this before your appointment formally commences, and to plan well ahead for any new initiatives during the course of your post.

Training to Teach

As a subject history is very well taught at universities – the subject is consistently among those which achieve high scores in the National Student Survey, notably for the enthusiasm and engagement of the teachers delivering courses. But it is also a very demanding subject to teach in terms of the preparation required of both staff and students to ensure that a class is a success, and in the type of feedback required to enable students from very diverse backgrounds to improve and succeed in their studies.

The training in teaching offered by HEIs, particularly when leading to an accredited qualification such as those offered by Advance HE (formerly the HEA) can offer much that is of considerable value, not least by giving ideas for new approaches which can enliven seminars and make feedback more effective. Many institutions may also offer more focused training sessions on particular areas, such as the use of virtual learning environments, which can be of immediate practical value.

In practice most departments will supplement institutional training models with more local support from colleagues and course leaders. GTAs and other early career historians can expect to be assigned a personal mentor, and to be involved in processes of peer observation and review.

Although problems with biases in student evaluations, particularly against female teachers, are increasingly recognised, student feedback can be useful when used carefully and with a clear goal in mind. Many teachers will build additional occasions for receiving such comment into the seminars they run, or to provide an opportunity for mid-module reflection, especially if they are delivering a module for the first time.

There are a number of resources available for those who are interested in developing their teaching skills:

- The [Historians on Teaching](#) website, developed by Alan Booth, who has a long-standing interest in this area.

- The [Historical Association](#) (including its journal, [Teaching History](#)) and the personal websites of historians teaching in schools can offer stimulating food for thought despite a prime focus on history in the schools.
- The American Historical Association website includes a large section of teaching resources.
- The Programming Historian website offers a large number of tutorials for historians who want to use digital methods and technologies in research and teaching.
- In terms of thinking about what represents good practice in module design, the recently revised [QAA benchmark statement for History](#) is a good place to start.
- [LearnHigher](#) offers material for a range of study skills

How to showcase Teaching Experience in a Job Application

Applications for both temporary and permanent posts in History or Humanities departments will need to show evidence of teaching experience on a candidate's CV, and quite possibly a formal pedagogical qualification.

When it comes to applying for a permanent or fixed term position in a department, your application materials will need to demonstrate that:

- You have a genuine enthusiasm for teaching, and can offer some form of proof (e.g. teaching evaluations / student feedback) that you are reasonably good at it.
- You are organized, and able to handle the demands of teaching alongside sustaining a research career.
- You have some understanding of common challenges facing teachers of undergraduates (teaching students of varying ability; dealing with different types of class; the need to convey complex information and arguments to students unfamiliar with a topic etc).
- You ensure that marks are recorded, feedback supplied appropriately and constructively and a module/course is well managed. Emphasising administrative skills may well signal that you will be useful to a department in other ways as well.
- You are capable of and interested in teaching topics and classes not immediately related to the current focus of your research.
- You are capable of working as part of a team.