Issues around diversifying
A Level History content – an exam board perspective

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This presentation will cover:

1. What does a ‘typical’ A level history course look like at present?
2. Restrictions to change, including:
   - DfE subject content requirements
   - Exam Board interpretations of the above
   - Teachers’ areas of expertise
   - Availability of resources
A typical A Level History course

But A levels, taken at age 18, remain as drab as they have been for decades. Only thin shafts of the kinds of economic, labour and social history taught in universities since the 1960s penetrate their curricula. There are rarely even token appearances of gender, race, sexuality, consumption, the body, everyday life, emotions, material culture or the built and natural environments. As for the history of the non-Western world before the 20th century, it impinges only when the West “discovers” or “conquers” it. A brave attempt by one A-level exam board to introduce pre-colonial African history has met with near universal indifference.

Contributor to the Times Higher Feb 15, 2018
A student’s response to their own course

To the history team at OCR,

I am writing to you because I have realised that in our history course we haven't covered many women at all - in fact only one so far (Gytha and her rebellion against William the Conqueror). I feel that more women should be included in the course as representation is very important for people to see that they should all have an equal chance in life, and for us as historians to gain a fuller understanding of the past and how it was lived by everyone in society.

Several people have said to me that the reason for this is that women weren't historically allowed to be in positions of power or achieve great things, however this is not always the case. They have just been silenced throughout time despite contributing much to our society today. This is why we should be taught about their impact on us just as much as we are taught about men.

[...]

our knowledge of history is incomplete by leaving out half the population. Therefore I think the first step to bring light to the efforts of the whole world is through education.

Yours sincerely and with best wishes,
A ‘typical’ A Level course

With OCR, 4 papers:
- English or British History (typically a c70 year period)
- Non-British History (again, typically 50-70 years)
- A thematic study, on different content to the above, covering at least 100 years
- Coursework – a 3-4000 word essay on any topic of the student’s choosing

The following slides give a breakdown of the relative popularity of the options within the examined papers
British History options – relative take up

A Level Percentage of Entries for Unit Group 1

- Y113 Britain 1930-1997
- Y112 Britain 1900-1951
- Y111 Liberals, Conservatives & Rise of Labour
- Y110 From Pitt to Peel
- Y109 The Making of Georgian Britain
- Y108 The Early Stuarts & Origins of Civil War
- Y107 England 1547-1603
- Y106 England 1485-1558
- Y105 England 1445-1509
- Y104 England 1377-1455
- Y103 England 1199-1272
- Y102 Anglo-Saxon England & Norman Conquest
- Y101 Alfred & the Making of England

Percentage of Entries
Non-British options – relative take up

A Level Percentage of Entries for Unit Group 2

- Y224 Apartheid & Reconciliation
- Y223 The Cold War in Europe
- Y222 The Cold War in Asia
- Y221 Democracy & Dictatorships in Germany
- Y220 Italy 1896-1943
- Y219 Russia 1894-1941
- Y218 International Relations
- Y217 Japan 1853-1937
- Y216 The USA in the 19th Century
- Y215 Italy & Unification
- Y214 France 1814-1870
- Y213 The French Revolution
- Y212 The American Revolution
- Y211 The Rise & Decline of the Mughal Empire in India
- Y210 Russia 1645-1741
- Y209 African Kingdoms
- Y208 Philip II 1556-1598
- Y207 The German Reformation
- Y206 Spain 1469-1556
- Y205 Exploration, Encounters & Empire
- Y204 Genghis Khan
- Y203 The Crusades
- Y202 Charlemagne
- Y201 The Rise of Islam

Percentage of Entries

0 5 10 15 20

Percentage of Entries

Oxford Cambridge and RSA
A Level Thematic Unit

A Level Percentage of Entries for Unit Group 3

- Y321 The Middle East
- Y320 From Colonialism to Independence
- Y319 Civil Rights in the USA
- Y318 Russia and its Rulers
- Y317 China and its Rulers
- Y316 Britain and Ireland
- Y315 The Changing Nature of Warfare
- Y314 The Challenge of German Nationalism
- Y313 The Ascendancy of France
- Y312 Popular Culture & the Witchcraze
- Y311 The Origins & Growth of the British Empire
- Y310 The Development of the Nation State
- Y309 The Ascendancy of the Ottoman Empire
- Y308 The Catholic Reformation
- Y307 Tudor Foreign Policy
- Y306 Rebellion & Disorder under the Tudors
- Y305 The Renaissance
- Y304 The Church & Medieval Heresy
- Y303 English Government & the Church
- Y302 The Viking Age
- Y301 The Early Anglo Saxons

Percentage of Entries
Coursework

Here, with OCR, students have a completely free choice.

• Wide variation in titles
• Many familiar topics, but many ‘new’ ones too
• See the titles proposal tool at
  https://ocr.org.uk/qualifications/as-and-a-level/history-a-h105-h505-from-2015/

• Recent titles submitted have included:
  • To what extent was the film industry responsible for acquisition of rights for the LBGTQ community?
  • How far were women affected by the troubles in Northern Ireland?
  • Assess the reasons for the changing attitudes towards capital punishment in Britain c1830-1965.
  • To what extent did the influence of the Roman Empire transform Celtic art and culture in Britain between the 1st and 5th Centuries?
Restrictions to change

DfE Subject Content

5. Both AS and A level specifications must require students to study:

- the history of more than one country or state, including at least one outside of the British Isles

- aspects of the past in breadth (through period and/or theme) and in depth

- significant individuals, societies, events, developments and issues within a broad historical context

- developments affecting different groups within the societies studied

- a range of appropriate historical perspectives, for example aesthetic, cultural, economic, ethnic, political, religious, scientific, social or technological
Restrictions to change – exam boards

Exam boards will consult:
- teachers
- examiners
- HE
- subject associations
- other stakeholders
- publishers

But have to build specifications that are attractive to teachers, bearing in mind too much non-mandated change is expensive.
Restrictions to change – expertise and resources

• British history options all have a textbook, but contrast take-up of Georgian History, with, say, the early Tudors
• African Kingdoms has a comprehensive free package of support – see https://africankingdoms.co.uk/
  • For similar on British Empire see http://www.soashistoryresources.co.uk/
• When teachers join depts. where particular topics are taught they need to be able to hit the ground running – they cannot simply change the course
• It is not feasible for commercial publishers to publish for every option
Questions to consider

Is significant change to A Level History content warranted/desirable?
If so, how should it be implemented:
- through the Subject Criteria (DfE) content?
- do the Exam Boards have a role?
- through teacher expertise?
- through resource provision?
What are the advantages and disadvantages of the above?

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