Historical knowledge and the A-Level curriculum – suggested new horizons, and how collaboration between secondary education and higher education might contribute.

Siobhan Dickens, PhD student, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

RHS Curriculum Conference, 23rd-30th April 2020

With thanks to: Dr Mary Earl, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).
Overview of the research informing this talk:

Aims/focus:

- to explore how historical knowledge and historical practice are represented in the 16-18 curriculum (A-Level and equivalents);
- to investigate the reasons why they had come to be represented in this way;
- to consider the effects of this on students’ understandings of history and the nature of historical knowledge.

Methods: Detailed textual analysis of a corpus of seven documents, connecting close linguistic analysis with a wider body of relevant literature and theory:

- OCR, Edexcel & AQA A-Level specifications.
- CIE Pre-U specification.
- International Baccalaureate (IB) History subject guide.
- Ofqual Conditions and Requirements and Guidance for History.
Presentation aims:

1. On the basis of these research findings, suggest three possible ‘new horizons’ for further developing the A-Level History curriculum going forward:
   
a) Diversification.

b) Enriched understandings of ‘evidence’ and ‘interpretations’.

c) ‘Keeping pace’ with disciplinary developments.

2. To introduce a model for inter-professional engagement that can address these issues.

3. Introduce three discussion points for the online conference forum.
1. Diversification
## Chronological ‘de-diversification’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OCR A-Level</th>
<th>AQA A-Level</th>
<th>Pearson A-Level</th>
<th>CIE Pre-U</th>
<th>IB</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Medieval</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to c.1000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medieval</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1000 to c.1500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Modern</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1450 to c.1750</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1700-c.1950</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twentieth Century</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Units which exclusively cover the twentieth century, or where over two thirds of the coverage focuses on the twentieth century.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes**

Unit 1 Pre-U Outline Papers typically cover two of the above chronological periods, and where this was evenly distributed between both they have been counted twice.
### Geographical ‘de-diversification’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>OCR M</th>
<th>OCR S</th>
<th>AQA M</th>
<th>AQA S</th>
<th>Pearson M</th>
<th>Pearson S</th>
<th>CIE M</th>
<th>CIE S</th>
<th>Total M</th>
<th>Total S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain and Ireland</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin and Central America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia, the Pacific and Australasia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘De-diversification’ of historical methods and approaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OCR</th>
<th>AQA</th>
<th>Pearson</th>
<th>CIE</th>
<th>IB</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(national or geopolitical)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social or Cultural</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

- **M** = main focus
- **S** = subsidiary focus, i.e. the study of this unit requires some mandatory consideration of content or issues associated with this approach/perspective, even if modest.
- The coding for Social and Cultural approaches was combined due to the difficulty of, in practice, discerning from brief bullet points of unit content the extent to which a social or cultural approach was intended. In the discipline, however, these approaches would be understood differently.
- Where the spread of approaches appeared to be equally balanced across two categories the unit was coded twice.
‘De-diversification’: pre-colonial, non-Western peoples and societies are most invisible at present.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Pre-Medieval</th>
<th>Medieval</th>
<th>Early Modern</th>
<th>Modern</th>
<th>Twentieth Century</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin/Central America</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia-Pacific</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A-Level specifications only)
Why Diversify?
2. Enriching current conceptualisations of ‘sources’ and ‘interpretations’.

| AO1 | Demonstrate, organise and communicate knowledge and understanding to analyse and evaluate the key features related to the periods studied, making substantiated judgements and exploring concepts, as relevant, of cause, consequence, change, continuity, similarity, difference and significance. | 50-60% |
| AO2 | Analyse and evaluate appropriate source material, primary and/or contemporary to the period, within its historical context. | 20-30% |
| AO3 | Analyse and evaluate, in relation to the historical context, different ways in which aspects of the past have been interpreted. | 20-30% |

(Ofqual, 2014a)
‘Primary sources’: beyond the ‘cult of the archive’ (Jordanova, 2006)
‘Interpretations’: integrating the ‘memory turn’ and opening up a wider range of accounts to critical scrutiny
3. ‘Keeping pace’ with developments in historical scholarship.

a) ‘Big picture’ developments/trends – e.g. cultural history, decolonising the curriculum.

b) Mid-level updates on directions of travel in particular areas of scholarship (e.g. what have been the most significant developments in historical scholarship on twentieth century Germany in the last five years?)

c) ‘Micro’ level dissemination of specific historical research projects – sources and methods as well as findings.

Different people/groups might take responsibility for different levels of dialogue and dissemination.
How might collaboration between secondary and higher education contribute?
‘Washback’ / ‘backwash’ (e.g. Baird et al., 2017; Torrance, 2007)

Higher Education as one ‘consultant’ and ‘respondent’

Requirements set by minsters, DfE and Ofqual (regulator)

Interpreted by Awarding Bodies

The (intended) A-Level curriculum: specifications and assessments.

Day-to-day educational practice in schools and understandings of what knowledges and practices are ‘valued’.

Consultation influences

Faculty of Education
‘Trickle up’ (e.g. Chapman 2011b, Phillips 1998)

The (intended) A-Level curriculum: specifications and assessments.

- Higher Education as long-term partner: dialogue and collaboration.
- Awarding Bodies
- Minsters, DfE and Ofqual (regulator)

Pedagogic norms in secondary education
(schools, initial teacher education, teacher subject associations etc.).
Achieving sustainable curriculum change through inter-professional collaboration and dialogue:

1. **Long-term and ongoing** dialogue and engagement (short-term or one-off interaction have significantly less effect).

2. Requires genuine **two-way dialogue** and **co-construction** of knowledge, values and norms (not one way ‘knowledge transfer’).

3. Greatest learning and change occurs from activities **embedded in day-to-day practice**, and/or involving jointly working **on** concrete outputs together.

4. Small-scale projects would ideally lead to **scalable** outcomes that can be embedded in day-to-day practice e.g. design of educative curriculum materials that help students AND teachers learn.

(Edwards, 2012; Hofmann, 2019; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2011)
Discussion question 1:

In relation to dialogue between HE and secondary education (schools, assessment professional, publishers etc.) about the History curriculum, who should
a) facilitate; and
b) participate in these dialogues?

How can we maximise the contribution of existing professional organisations and networks whilst also engaging new stakeholders that may not yet be involved in these communities?
Discussion question 2:

What channels and resources do you have experience of using to either

a) (as an academic) disseminate scholarship & research findings to secondary educators; or

b) (as a secondary educator/assessment professional/publisher/resource author) access historical scholarship and research findings?

Which channels – in your experience – enable curriculum development and change more or less effectively and why? (e.g. journal databases, direct collaboration, social media, via professional association etc.)
Discussion question 3:

What experiences do participants have of co-producing (across HE/secondary sectors) curricula or educational resources, or using the outcomes of HE-secondary collaborative projects?

What worked well or less well in these experiences? What recommendations would you make for developing and scaling up these types of projects?
I look forward to talking further in the Conference discussion forum.

Full references can be found in the slides on the Conference website.

I would be delighted to respond in more detail to enquiries about the research and evidence which informed this presentation.

Thank you!

Faculty of Education

seo26@cam.ac.uk  @dickens_siobhan
References – corpus of documents analysed for the research:


References:

All images royalty free & sourced from Pixabay: https://pixabay.com/


References:

All images royalty free & sourced from Pixabay: https://pixabay.com/


