

historyUK

MINUTES

Meeting of History UK, 18 November 2023, 14:00-15:30 @ The IHR and online via Teams

Present (in person): Antonio Sennis (Co-Convenor, UCL); Grainne Goodwin (Secretary, Leeds Beckett); Sara Barker (Research Officer, Leeds); Coreen McGuire (Teaching Officer, Durham); Richard Hawkins (Treasurer, Wolverhampton); Liz Egan (Warwick, ECR); Tracy Loughran (Essex); Anna Plassart (Open University); Daniel Laqua (Northumbria); Martin Farr (Newcastle), Robert MacNamara (Ulster), Andrew Roach (Glasgow).

Present (online): Sarah Holland (Co-Convenor, Nottingham); Ross Balzaretti (Nottingham); Fabian Hilfrich (Edinburgh); Christian O'Connell (Gloucestershire); Kate Ballantyne (Liverpool John Moore); Jasper Heinzen (York).

Apologies: Simon Peplow (Education, Warwick); Manuela Williams (Communications Officer, Strathclyde); Tim Reinke-Williams (Northampton); Heidi Merkhens (Aberdeen); Sarah Crook (Swansea); Shaun Evans (Bangor); Siobhan Talbott (Keele); Deborah Sutton (Lancaster); Sarah Jones (Bristol); Erica Wald (Goldsmiths); Rebecca Andrew (Chester); Kathy Davies (History Lab +, Sheffield Hallam).

Welcome & apologies

Co-Convenors' report

- Advocacy Work

Antonio Sennis [AS] began by offering some context for the recent discussions around advocacy that have taken place. There was a recognition of History UK's origins in the History at the Universities Defence Group in the early 1990s when other history organisations were not as active in advocating for the discipline. History UK was formed with the intention of monitoring, defending and campaigning against challenges to the History sector and this became one of HUK's trademarks. The current landscape bears some similarities with that moment in the 1990s, not just in terms of threats to History departments and jobs but also to what history means to wider society in the UK.

In the 2020s the Royal Historical Society has stepped up its position as an advocate for our discipline and this more interventionist stance compels us to think about our own organisation in a more constructive way. What are HUK doing in terms of advocacy? Letter writing campaigns are a big component of this; writing letters to institutions and departments who are threatening cuts, closure or restructuring, but does this go far enough, is it sufficiently proactive, are there other aspects of monitoring threats and speaking out for the discipline that we should be fulfilling? Should we have a designated role with explicit advocacy commitments?

The discussion was opened to the floor and there were some key points raised by SC members in the room and online which focused on is whether an advocacy role was too much for one individual and whether we actually have a uniform advocacy policy given the differences in HEIs?

Coreen McGuire [CM] suggested that whilst the need for work on advocacy was recognised and applauded there were concerns about allocating this to one person on the committee. This was felt to be a sensitive and potentially precarious role given the politically charged culture wars taking place and having a publicly named individual might make that person/s a target. It was suggested that a job share or dual position could mitigate against one person taking on the burden of advocacy champion for the organisation and they might do so without being explicitly named.

Richard Hawkins [RH] pointed out that another perceived difficulty was geographical, institutional and reputational differences which might lead to tensions about what issues we engage in, given the competitive and sometimes polarised positions universities adopted over controversial issues (e.g. recruitment, the cap on numbers, cuts to specific types of history, etc).

It was noted that one of the great strengths of HUK was the breadth of representation and the forum it offers to people from different departments to come together, listen and share experiences. If this is the case, then Sara Barker [SB] commented that perhaps our advocacy role may be less external-facing and more about garnering and exchanging information, getting a cross-representation of experience across the section, and sharing strategies and good practice for combatting threats and cuts.

Daniel Laqua [DL] asked that the responsibilities attached to any advocacy position were defined as clearly as possible; is this advocacy against university managements, is this about advocating for history as a subject in the public realm, is this about lobbying political figures on the value of history, is this about collating and updating any recent material we have which might constitute advocacy or all of the above? AS remarked that 90% of this type of advocacy was undertaken by the RHS with significant political and public relations clout, though that in itself is shaped by leadership styles in the RHS.

Andrew Roach [AR] suggested that the RHS was wary of doing something overtly political and that this could be HUK's function, with AS agreeing that, with its reputation as the 'naughty cousin', HUK had a remit to do this. This was compounded by HUK's role in representing History *departments* specifically. RHS leadership would be changing in early 2024 so we don't know which direction any new president will take.

- **Internal Advocacy**

Connected to the earlier discussion about broader activism, another aspect of advocacy that was considered is HUK's relationship with departments. AS remarked that many departments are unaware that one of their colleagues is a member of HUK. There is an obligation on SC members to enhance the visibility of the organisation and its projects in their institutions. DL agreed that if advocacy is to be successful, departments need to see HUK as a recognisable voice.

Updates, events and emails go to Head of Departments, but these are then contingent on the time, inclination and good will of those Heads in circulating the news more widely and putting these on the agenda of departmental meetings. Where institutions have no steering committee representation, this was particularly difficult. Where institutions have steering committee members it is incumbent on them to act as a conduit both for news to feed up to us and our news and initiatives to disseminate to departments, so we must work harder on our internal relationships whether that is the HUK representative presenting a paper to their subject team, promoting working group activities, or sharing new policy reports. SB noted that whilst many colleagues are aware of HUK events, they are less conscious of the work we do on a rolling basis.

There was agreement that SC member should fulfil some basic prerequisites to invigorate things like advocacy, initiatives and HUK's profile. Sarah Holland [SH] has considered this and circulated some basic responsibilities. SC members should:

- Ensure all HUK communications about events, initiatives or other matters are clearly communicated to the rest of the department they represent on the committee
- Ensure that they let all members of their department know that they represent them on the Steering Committee
- Provide opportunities (either via email, in person, online) for members of the department they represent to identify areas of concern or interest relevant to the work of HUK
- Ensure areas of concern or interest raised above are clearly communicated to the co-convenors and/or steering committee as a whole
- Update the co-convenors and secretary to a change of Head of Department
- Attend Steering Committee meetings (and remember to send apologies where attendance is not possible)
- Notify the co-convenors and secretary if they are on long-term research leave, parental leave or are absent from their institution for an extended period which may affect representation on the steering committee

Working Groups' Update

SH gave a roundup of the activities HUK working groups have been involved in. The 'Advocating for the discipline and the value of history' working group have fed into ideas of advocacy already discussed this morning. Outside of the meeting, Manuela Willaims [MW] has been doing a stock take of institutions under threat of closure and restructuring and has worked on defining key aspects of any advocacy role which will be discussed in the 'Advocating for the Discipline' working group and shared in due course.

The 'Assessment' working group is already surveying the assessment landscape and producing an open access resource, reflecting changes within assessment in the discipline and also challenges in terms of AI. The activities and focus on the 'Working with schools' group was discussed fully in this morning's plenary session, but there were updates on several action points on schools and longer-term collaboration to tie into research. The 'Student engagement' working group is in the process of applying for funding for a collaborative project to look at student engagement in different types of institution across the UK and to really get a sense of dis/engagement as an issue.

SH reinforced the importance of these groups which bring ideas together, share experiences and kick start initiatives. Many of the groups were only established in the summer so this has been an excellent start with lots of action points to carry forward into 2024.

Confirmation of new members

The meeting welcomed new committee members. We are delighted to receive into the SC ranks Rebecca Andrew (Chester), Jasper Heinzen (York), Sarah Jones (Bristol), Simon Peplow (Warwick), Andrew Roach (Glasgow), Erica Wald (Goldsmiths), Liz Egan (ECR), Kathy Davies (History Lab+), Martin Farr (Newcastle as stand in for Simon Mills).

Ross Balzaretti (Nottingham), Andrew Jotischky (Royal Holloway), Deborah Toner (Leicester), Fabian Hilfrich (Edinburgh), Grainne Goodwin (Leeds Beckett), and Antonio Sennis (UCL) have agreed to extend their service to a second term on the committee till 2026.

Thanks were also offered to retiring members Tim Grady (Chester), Adrian Howkins (Bristol), Charlie Witham (Edgehill), Alex Titov (Queens, Belfast), David Stark (Reading) and Stewart MacCain (St. Mary's, London) who have stood down from the SC.

Officer Reports

- Treasurer

AS recognised the great work that RH does as Treasurer, particularly through some of the bureaucratic challenges in 2023 around the bank account. RH is looking to step away from the Treasurer role but would welcome a SC member shadowing him before standing down completely.

RH reported that after significant assurances from HUK, including a provision of organisational archives and a solicitor's letter assuring Barclays that we were not involved in any nefarious banking activities, threats to suspend the account had been withdrawn. RH suggested we consider moving the account to a different provider, although there are no guarantees that switching to another financial institution would be any better. He noted that there are lessons to be learned from the experience with Barclays regarding our identity and institutional memory.

Robert MacNamara [RM] asked whether we are registered Charity Commission and suggested this might be worth pursuing especially if we wished to change provider and they asked for this as a proviso of opening an organisational account. Other documentation such as the constitution and five years-worth of minutes might be required and some banks need authorised signatories which brings its own issues given the change in SC personnel.

RH reported that due to the pandemic and lack of spending on in-person events we had accumulated a significant balance. The financial security this brings is important, but it may also register some red flags if we do choose to move banking institutions and given the overall balance it was worth considering a linked savings account, so we don't lose the interest value on available funds. Given the health of HUK's bank balance we should think seriously about projects and initiatives on which this might be spent.

- **Research**

SB reported that there was a small number of expressions in interest in a writing group scheme but not enough critical mass to make running a long-term writing group feasible, so she would revisit this idea in 2024.

Initial ideas to host an event on historians in the Media have been replaced with a more resource-based format of delivery which will involve collecting materials and hosting these of the HUK website and SH has been approached about using our online presence for this. This means materials can be amended, updated, and added to keep them accessible and current.

SB noted that more information about REF was imminent. She is planning a research event and will share details of this at the next steering committee meeting.

SB also requested that additional support from a number of the SC interested in all things research and has had two volunteers come forward to help her develop some fresh perspectives on working on research.

- **Education**

Simon Peplow [SP] tabled a report in advance and it was noted that having taken over from SH in the summer one of the key objectives he was working towards was the New to Teaching event. There are to be some changes to the planning and scheduling of this and he will be in touch with us at the next steering committee meeting to think through innovations to the New to Teaching session for summer of 2024.

- **ECR**

Liz Egan [LE] was welcomed to the SC having taken over from SP in the summer and just completed her PhD in August 2023. She took up the reins of the Academic Bootcamp with support from SP and DL. LE noted that the bootcamp took place in September but was less well attended than in previous years. Three ECRs applied and only two attended on the day so LE had reflected on why numbers were limited this year. Feedback suggested that those attending did so because they were made aware of the event through twitter (which may have been impacted by the shift to X and the late summer timing of the event), but better marketing might be one way to mitigate against this in future. This also raised debate on whether the format of the event, which is still online, is appropriate. LE noted that one participant suggested that they could only have attended if the event was virtual and if the event switches to in person or hybrid, we have to consider issues of financing attendance given the target audience was ECR and late-stage PhD students.

AS was adamant that the bootcamp is one of our distinctive activities and we should be fully invested in supporting this, financially and in terms of SC representation. It is a great opportunity for SC members to give something back at a critical stage of career development so early internal communication and expressions of interest about this event are as important as external publicity about it.

There was discussion about whether and to what extent any in person bootcamp should be subsidised, in London or elsewhere. AS suggested that financial support for the bootcamp would signal how integral ECRs were to HUK and RH suggested that before the pandemic there was a bursary available, so precedent existed for this. TL offered that advertising the event via the RHS events pages may be another way to boost dissemination without having recourse to social media. AS stated that we need to look beyond our own website for this because of the limited traffic it attracts.

There was also some discussion of whether other jobs related to History rather than a solely academic pathway should be featured at the bootcamp. TL mentioned that she had experience of running a session on non-academic jobs and would be happy to help working on this sort of venture again. SH recounted how recent findings from History Lab+ confirmed the alternative career options PhD students were pursuing and they ran their 'Life after the PhD' event with this in mind. SH suggested that some collaboration on this with our new History Lab+ representative might be fruitful. LE remarked that, anecdotally, completing doctoral students felt that applying for schemes, civil service jobs etc. was a lot more straightforward than applying for academic jobs. Fabian Hilfrich [FH] cautioned that we as academics are not best placed to offer wider career advice to PhD/ECRs and whether our time and effort was best spent focusing on a job in academic. There was some debate about this point for LE to take away for planning of the 2024 bootcamp.

- **EDI**

CM announced the upcoming publication of the findings of the EDI pedagogy project. She noted that this was a great example of the collaborative projects we do and was the result of a huge group effort from SH, CM, Adam Budd and MW and the participants in focus groups whose contributions formed the basis of the findings. CM noted that there was debate about the place of disability in EDI and this was an area of research the group would be pursuing next.

- **Employability**

MW tabled a report to update the committee on the employability project underway at Strathclyde. Following the award of funding to complete three podcasts that explore the notion of employability for History students, MW has worked with the student/researcher sponsored by History UK. The student has had conversations with her institution's Careers Service and with students and employers in Scotland. She has drafted a set of potential questions to ask during the podcasts which have been circulated to the members of the Employability working group for feedback.

Three podcasts are planned: one exploring the hopes, expectations, and concerns of History students; one discussing the views of employers; and one exploring the transition journey out of university of former students/alumni.

The first two podcasts are scheduled for completion by end of January 2024, the second in spring 2024. A new meeting of the working group will discuss the launch of the podcasts together with the directions of further and larger piece of work.

MW and the student have been accepted to deliver a presentation to the AdvanceHE Students as Co-creators symposium 2024 on the experience of creating the podcasts. The presentation will be branded with the HUK logo.

Report on Experiential Learning in History Event

DL gave a summary of the experiential learning in History event held at Northumbria in the early summer which, in the end, did not require HUK financial support. There were eleven in-person presentations covering many aspects of experiential learning with keynotes from Lucie Matthews-Jones and Cath Feeley. DL also noted that there was discussion of the relationship between top-down initiatives, tutor-inspired innovations, and content-led experiential learning. The idea is to take the event further through two channels. The first is to have a pedagogy forum event linked to the theme to take place in the first couple months of 2024. The second activity is to collate some examples that we can promote on the website to generate a sort of toolkit.

Institutional Updates

Curriculum and management changes formed a feature of feedback from institutions. Under institutional updates the impact of a change of VC or management regime had on staff was highlighted. At one institution it was noted colleagues had invested time and energy in an overhaul of the curriculum only to have this direction altered by change at the top. This causes feelings of disquiet in not knowing whether any of the work previously undertaken was to be pursued further or replaced by another shift in policy. Staff had also been hired on contracts related to new curriculum developments and there is uncertainty over their futures.

Cuts at Oxford Brookes were discussed, where all professorial positions in History are threatened as part of a university-wide efficiency exercise. This more overt action was considered alongside the more insidious threat that 'reforming' – be that diluting, simplifying and streamlining - curriculum models posed to the study of history, such as Winchester. It would be useful to keep track of this activity as part of our advocacy, so we could map where and when these types of cuts were happening. SH stated that HUK is keen to get a perspective on this from a range of universities.

In better news, Anna Plassart [AP] reported that the OU has made permanent 150 associate lecturers who have traditionally been on non-permanent contracts. Reforms at the OU over the past year have made those posts secure, though some of these remain fractional.

AOB

AS expressed his gratitude to the IHR and Claire Langhamer as director for hosting both the plenary and AGM. The SC also thanked Tracey Loughran for all her work on putting together the plenary session on collaborating with schools and our speakers at that event, Sarah Longair, Alison Kitson and Daniel Laqua.