



**Summer History UK Steering Committee Meeting
Online 11:30-13:00, 24 June 2024**

Welcome and Apologies

Present: Sarah Holland (Co-Convenor, Nottingham); Grainne Goodwin (Secretary, Leeds Beckett); Jasper Heinzen (Treasurer, York); Coreen McGuire (EDI, Durham); Sara Barker (Research, Leeds); Simon Peplow (Education, Warwick); Liz Egan (ECR, Warwick); Heidi Mehrkens (Aberdeen); Kathy Davies (History Lab+); Jon Coburn (Lincoln); Andrew Gritt (Nottingham Trent); Ruth Atherton (South Wales); Christian O’Connell (Gloucestershire); Anna Plassart (Open University); Andrew Jotischky (Royal Holloway); Deborah Toner (Leicester); Time Reinke-Williams (Northampton); David Laqua (Northumbria); David Veevers (Bangor); Andrew Roach (Glasgow); Helen Birkett (Exeter).

Apologies: Antonio Sennis (Co-Convenor, UCL); Sarah Jones (Pedagogy Forum, Bristol); Ross Balzaretta (Nottingham); Elizabeth New (Aberystwyth); Tracey Loughan (Essex); Fabian Hilfrich (Edinburgh); Shaun Evans (Bangor); Siobhan Talbot (Keele).

Updates from Institutions

Sarah Holland (SH) greeted SC members and noted how valuable their contribution was as such a busy time of year. She opened the discussion by noting in this meeting we would foreground inputs and updates from institutions given the widespread instability in the sector. The feedback focuses on the following linked issues:

- **Servance schemes, redundancies, and hiring/promotion freezes** – this was a common experience across a range of universities regardless of region, background, teaching/research remit. The feeling was that these cuts were not targeting History, but having felt some of the wider erosion of the Humanities in recent years threatened reductions are a cause of concern. Colleagues reported that staffing changes were significant and happening apace, and in those institutions which have been through the process in recent months there was no sense of confidence that further cuts would not be imposed. Members stated that career mobility was stagnant, and this was demoralising for existing staff even where jobs were secure, whilst hiring freezes placed extra burdens on remaining staff.
- **Curriculum reviews** – There was a sense that specific History programme changes alongside wider university restructuring (amalgamation of some

schools/departments; changes to the term/semester model) were being rushed through. In some cases, this involved the streamlining of modules and loss of electives to rationalise teaching or accommodate a changing staff base. This was felt to contradict all we know about the pedagogical value of optionality and student choice.

- **Research** – The drive to restructure has generated concerns about the integrity of History research and REF status, given that subjects areas were being merged or coming under the remit of a research lead from a different discipline. The move towards reducing optionality, noted above, was felt to jeopardise the principle of research-led teaching. Members highlighted significant withdrawals of institutional funding to support any kind of research activity and voiced concerns about the affect this would have on future research performance.
- **Student Recruitment** – Some members noted that student recruitment to History was up on previous years but that there were concerns that this was being overlooked in the narrative about shifting student numbers. In other areas there was a worry that History was cross-subsidising other disciplines and anxiety about the sustainability of quality teaching which was threatened by reduced staff. Inflexibility around tuition fees for domestic students also means that, despite applications to History following a small upward trajectory, the financial reality was that the deficits universities were struggling with would not be offset.

Colleagues suggested a number of strategies and responses to this uncertainty:

- **Enhancements to History at secondary school level** – Colleagues expressed a sense of frustration that there seems a disconnect between History in higher education and the type of History provision in schools, particularly at A-level. There was a consensus that school students to GCSE standard enjoyed History provision (borne out by national figures), but A-Level was regarded by students as laborious, prescriptive, and uninspiring, and this was often dictated by curriculum and exam pressures on teachers to teach the same narrow diet of subjects. This is echoed through the experiences of parents at open days who often speak to this narrative of History as a difficult subject. Members felt this did not represent the breadth and diversity of History teaching at tertiary level, but students were already ‘turned off’ the subject before the pool of A-level applicants became smaller still. Where schools have taken control of the curriculum internally it was observed that both teaching and student appreciation of History had improved.

It was noted that universities had responded to the challenges of decolonising the curriculum and diversity of historical representation, but that message of breath of research and teaching interests was still not being communicated to non-white students at secondary school. So, work remains to not only attract pupils to GCSE and A-Level History generally, but also to widen participation.

One area where it was felt we could have an input is through influence on school curriculum design and exam boards. This was difficult to achieve and sustain on an individual academic level but perhaps an area where we could exert some institutional

pressure or work with organisations like the Historical Association. If schools do not have the funds and materials or suffer from a teach-to-the-test mentality, it is up to universities and HUK to take the resources and message to them.

- **Challenging of narratives/data** – Connected to the issues discussed regarding schools, it was noted the message about the value of History (and the Humanities more broadly) needs to be amplified and negative perceptions about doing History as a subject with no direct vocational outcome need to be countered more vocally and rigorously in the media.

It was also suggested that we resist pejorative narratives within our own institutions about the future of History. Reports and commissions from consultants can make predictions about the future shape of universities based on data which is open to interpretation, or which perpetuates existing biases about the Humanities. We should reject accounts that infer History is a shrinking market when this is not the case and has reflected relative stability in uptake at GCSE, A-Level and further study in recent years. Vigorous data of our own is one way we can contest damaging and simplistic recommendations presented to and by senior management.

- **Lobbying** - As well as continuing work with the other History associations it was suggested we think about other avenues such as providing a short briefing document and sending it to the new Minister for Education and Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education or contacting [ministers with a history degree](#).

SH thanked everyone for their contributions around the current malaise in Higher Education and its specific effects on History and reminded members of some of the work HUK, alongside the IHR and RHS, are doing to defend and strengthen the discipline within the context of attacks on the Humanities and the future of Higher Education.

Co-convenors update

SH updated members on a range of current projects which have all been very active and developing in various ways. SH reminded members that if anyone was interested in contributing to any of the current projects or forums to get in touch with her at Sarah.Holland@Nottingham.ac.uk.

She noted that the executive was considering some necessary updates to the constitution which would go before SC members for consultation and approval at the AGM.

SH reported that HUK's **Disability History Project**, which is co-funded by the RHS, has now secured an advisory board which have held their first meeting and have recruited research fellows who will be working on the project over the summer.

Collaboration with Schools, as discussion above shows, is one of the most pressing issues. HUK is working alongside the Historical Association to see what is feasible and has garnered interest from a teacher perspective where there is a desire to show what History at university

is like, what role does pedagogy play, as well as the diversity of subject material. The group are also considering how academics and teachers can collaborate and work more closely together and putting resources around 'Why Study History?' together. If anyone is actively interested in taking up some of this work, we would be delighted to incorporate them into this working group.

The **Assessment working group** are actively working on the survey launched at the end of May. SC members should have received the link to the [History Assessment survey](#). SH asked that members ensure that somebody from their department completes this so there was a higher response rate. The group were also investigating types of assessments some universities were imposing on courses and reflecting on whether assessment had reverted to pre-covid patterns (e.g. exams) without good pedagogical reason. The group were also working on an edited resource on Assessment in History and intend to consider postgraduate assessment and will have part of that group leading on this and would welcome additional input.

The **Value of History group** is undertaking work on the value of history in terms of its relevance to contemporary challenges and issues. The group is also working on creating statements on the value of history and is collaborating with the Working with Schools group to get that message out there. We need to get the message of civic engagement and why History matters, out to schools and the wider public.

Officer Vacancies

- Communications Officer – SH confirmed that there is a really pressing need for someone to cover this role because we need to make sure the HUK website is up to date, that we have a continuous messaging profile and that social media platforms are being monitored and updated. The organisation needs this role to be responsive and to act quickly to the rapidly changing context. SH added that if a SC member has those skills and can act dynamically that would be great but given the importance of the role someone who can do the basic Comms would also be welcome.

SH put it to the Committee that if we could not get a current SC member to take on the role HUK could co-opt someone from a subscribing institution to the position and if this did not transpire, we might need to look to a limited paid role to cover this brief and there was initial support for this in the meeting.

- EDI-Co Lead – SH outlined that in order to fully represent the EDI office HUK is seeking a colleague to work alongside Coreen McGuire (CMcG). CMcG represents HUK interests in representing disability interests and needs in the organisation but would welcome a co-lead to focus on the diversity aspect of the EDI portfolio. Interested parties should contact SH in the first instance.

Officers' Reports

Treasurer - Grainne Goodwin (GG) was pleased to welcome Jasper Heinzen (JH) to his first official meeting as HUK's new treasurer. JH reported that the organisation's finances are very healthy, and this has allowed the funding of some projects, including research roles for the Disability Project, and people are encouraged to apply for funds for similar projects. JH stated that his current task was to seek recognition for the organisation with HMRC as an approved professional and learned organisation. This would ensure that the payment of membership subscriptions was easier. He noted that HUK needed to fulfil certain conditions for the process which would involve providing HMRC with documentation and financial standing and sought committee approval for this, which was supported unanimously.

Research - Sara Barker (SB) updated the meeting that two members had volunteered to work alongside her in the research office. Ross Balzeretti has kindly volunteered, and SB would be speaking with a second colleague later in the summer to confirm their participation. One of the urgent needs of this group will be keeping abreast of the changing research landscape in our departments, schools, and faculties, including access to internal research support and the shifting focus between research and teaching. SH noted that two other major concerns were on the horizon; the uncertainty around the frame of reference for REF and the impact of Open Access and Open Research and there were some member anxieties about this.

SB informed members that over and above the work SH and Antonio Sennis were doing with the IHR and RHS, she had a separate meeting with Barbara Bombi and Philip Carter to ensure that all the History organisations were aligned to show collective research strength but also to speak to and for specific constituencies. With a Lucy Noakes due to take up the presidency of the RHS in the autumn SB wanted to get a sense of their priorities in the next few months and has another meeting scheduled to compliment those being undertaken by the co-convenors. SB noted that an event on students as researchers is also in the pipeline for delivery in 2024/25.

Education - Simon Peplow (SP) spoke to the New to Teaching event happening in the w/c 24th June and a planned workshop aimed at those who may not have had much chance to do teaching or module design in their respective institutions. Some of the other work undertaken was around student engagement and there are efforts to collaborate on and collate findings from surveys and focus groups at various institutions. Anna Plassart suggested there was work being undertaken at the OU that could be combined with this as well. Although the working group did not secure funding from a QAA grant bid, small pots of money have enabled some research. The group are beginning to see trends about what engages students and how they navigate their priorities.

ECR - Liz Egan (LE) updated the meeting on the final stages of the imminent New to Teaching event including workshop elements and an ECR roundtable for which Kathy Davies from History Lab+ will be present. This will focus on sharing experience and advice, key tips, and strategies but also on issues such as precarity. LE also reported on her progress with the Academic Jobs Bootcamp, including updating the job specification to make it more current. This is now scheduled for late October and there are a few volunteers for the panel, but more are welcome. This may entail interviewing at the bootcamp itself, but if colleagues are pressed for time, then LE would welcome participation in shortlisting, one of the areas which previous

participants and ECRs are anxious for is more thorough feedback on applications. If you are interested contact LH at Liz.Egan@warwick.ac.uk.

EDI - CMcG noted that she will be on leave next academic year. Her focus this year has been on connecting people working on similar EDI initiatives and HUK is now connected with other groups such as those from the RHS working on EDI. Some of this work will be taken forward by SH and the Disability Project researchers. We wish Coreen the very best for her leave.

Projects

- **Employability and Policy Project** – Anna Plassart (AP) updated the group on the work she has been developing with the OU – Wales, the Learned Society of Wales and with backing from HUK. The project centred on the value of the Humanities to employers and policy makers.

AP asserted that all the reports and documentation point to the value of students studying History so there is no problem with the findings of such research, it is more that the message is not being heard by policymakers and the public. We do not need more data but more effective communication and an appreciation of how this circulates beyond academia. AP outlined the difficulties of embarking on a project of this nature with no background in policy making or time to constantly lobby decision makers so suggested that utilising institutional external relations was a strategic and efficient way to access this sector. For reasons of scale AP decided to focus the work on the Welsh political landscape. This meant that OU links with the Institute of Welsh Affairs and the Learned Society of Wales could be maximised and secured participation with the head of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, employer representatives and two vice chancellors.

The event was pitched as a workshop so participants could generate ideas and co-create a policy briefing. AP underlined the need to work with partners in your own institution to get a project of this nature going and to ensure that attendees were involved in the discussion and generation of content rather than being talked at by academics. The report (attached with these minutes) is now circulating on a number of websites beyond academia.

- **Working with Schools** – Daniel Laqua (DL) presented an update on work the group has been conducting on a draft guide to facilitating collaboration with schools. This is with the input of Sarah Longair (Lincoln) and Tracey Loughran (Essex) and will appear on the HUK websites after consultation. In the longer term, the group is planning a resource bank showcasing collaborative projects with schools and will be sending out a survey on this in due course.
- **Experiential and Practice-based learning event** – DL also provided feedback on the experiential learning event which took place after the March meeting with the intention of developing some case studies to disseminate via the website. At the moment there are six potential case studies to start a bank of resources with a view to circulating this next academic year.

- **Pedagogy Forum** – On Sarah Jones behalf SH tabled a report on the recent activities of the forum. The forum has covered a wide range of issues including the use and abuse of Generative AI and how to make core modules popular. This has attracted over 100 people from academia and beyond and offered some productive conversations and connections. For next year the intention is to host a session on the challenges of post-graduate teaching, on casual teaching contracts and the role GTAs, as well as publishing pedagogy research. If you have a topic which you think merits discussion in a forum, please contact SH and Sarah Jones: Sarah.Jones@bristol.ac.uk.

End of term on the Steering Committee

GG noted that she would be in touch with committee members in July who had reached the end of their first term on the steering committee to ask if they would like to continue for a second period of three years and would contact members who had served the full six years (two terms) which the constitution permits to alert them to the end of their tenure. She extended thanks to any member who would be stepping down before the next AGM.

AGM and Plenary

GG also raised the issue of the AGM. She noted that last year HUK had a very successful in-person plenary workshop followed by a hybrid AGM at the IHR. But in the context of cuts to departmental budgets and individual staff travel allowances should we be revisiting the feasibility of an in-person event in the current climate?

Some members were in favour of preserving the in-person nature of this annual event given how much time we spend online and the opportunity to meet, network and have meaningful conversations. It was reflected that the IHR presented one of the best locations to host such an event given the time constraints, hybrid facilities and absence of alternative venues.

SH acknowledged that this still presents two points of consideration given previous conversations on the issue; location and timing. The IHR is convenient from many members but can be London-centric for an organisation which seeks to represent a broad regional constituency. Secondly, the scheduling of the autumnal event on a Saturday was off putting for some members, though finding a date/day which accommodated all steering committee members could not be guaranteed. SH and GG agreed to look into options and canvas opinion before any decision was made.

SH closed the meeting by thanking everyone for the fulsome discussion and for everyone's efforts representing their institutions and contributing to all the projects and working groups which make HUK's work viable.