

Proposals for Better History in schools:

1. History should be a separate subject in the school curriculum and should be compulsory to 16.
2. History should have a guaranteed and protected allocation of timetable time throughout the secondary school system, from 11 to 16.
3. Government should draw up the framework for the history curriculum and issue clear guidance on subject content, allowing schools to shape its detail to the specific requirements of their students. Government should review the content and assessment of the history curriculum at least once every ten years.
4. The history curriculum should be arranged in two broad chronological arcs, both covering the period from the ancient world to the modern day. The first should be covered at Key Stage 2 and the second in Key Stages 3 and 4.
5. Government should work *from the outset* with professional bodies and resource providers to ensure that the curriculum is fully resourced, with particular emphasis on the online provision of historical source material and of a range of high quality textbooks. It should also work with the history profession to ensure the provision of appropriate training and professional development.
6. The history of Britain should form the core of the history curriculum in Key Stages 2 and 3. The different histories of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales should all be addressed, in proportion with each other so as to develop an understanding of the whole.
7. The development and nurturing of an *extensive* body of historical knowledge should be the central aim of the history curriculum.
8. 'Construction of Narrative' and 'Argument and Analysis' should be the assessment objectives at GCSE. New types of examination and assessment tasks for assessing these objectives should be developed.
9. Historical sources should be studied in as near to their original form as possible, as part of in-depth enquiry work. *The current practice of setting specific evaluation and analysis exercises on short extracts from historical sources in examinations should be ended.*
10. GCSE history should focus on the history of the modern world from the First World War onwards.
11. Assessment at GCSE should be through tiered examination papers and through coursework.

12. Examinations in history both at GCSE and at A/AS level should be reformulated, using the A* grade to reward wider reading and imaginative or original thinking.

Rationale

1. History as a separate curriculum subject

- 1.1 The Better History Forum is convinced of the vital importance of history in the education of all young people in preparation for the adult world. We share the serious concerns expressed by the Historical Association, and others, about the steady decline of history's status and position within the curriculum.¹
- 1.2 Some of this decline is the result of external factors, including the Options system, the demands of Ofsted and League Tables, and the growth of skills-based courses. However, we believe that history has weakened its own position by developing a teaching approach that has undervalued the importance of developing and extending students' historical knowledge, particularly of British history.
- 1.3 We applaud the inclusion of history as a discrete subject within the English baccalaureate (Ebacc), and we are pleased to note that, as a result, the numbers of students embarking on GCSE courses in history is beginning to increase.² However, we also recognise that the Ebacc is not compulsory, and that students still usually have to choose between history and geography, another vital subject in preparing young people to understand the world they live in.
- 1.4 **Recommendation 1**

We therefore reiterate our recommendation that History should be a separate subject in the school curriculum and that it should compulsory to 16.
- 1.5 We recognise that history has found its place in the curriculum increasingly squeezed in recent years, and that this has been most marked in those schools, such as academies, which exercise the greatest degree of autonomy over their curricula. While supporting the principle of school autonomy, we also recognise that it should not conflict with students' overriding right to learn about their past.

¹ Historical Association *Survey of History in Schools in England* (London: Historical Association 2009; *ibid.* 2010 and 2011) all available at www.history.org.uk.

² 'Ministers toast EBac success as pupils opt for "rigorous" GCSEs' *Times Educational Supplement*, 2 September 2011.

1.6 Recommendation 2

We therefore recommend that history should have a guaranteed and protected allocation of timetable time throughout the secondary school system, from 11 to 16.

1.7 We recognise that there are different groups with a legitimate claim to some say over aspects of the content of the history curriculum. These include teachers, parents, head teachers, academic historians, examination boards, community and heritage groups and government. It is important to get a workable balance between the proper concerns of these different groups; nevertheless we recognise the particular responsibility of government to ensure that school history reflects the values and principles held to in the community at large.

1.8 Recommendation 3

We therefore recommend that government draw up the framework for the history curriculum and issue clear guidance on subject content, allowing schools to shape its detail to the specific requirements of their students. We recommend that government should review the content and assessment of the history curriculum at least once every ten years.

2. Primary history

2.1 At the specific request of the Schools Minister we have looked into the issue of how the primary and secondary history curricula can best relate to each other. We recognise and value the very different styles of learning commonly used in the two sectors, and we appreciate the particular difficulties facing many primary teachers, relatively few of whom are subject specialists and an overwhelming majority of whom, the Historical Association has found, have 'minimal training in how to teach history'.³ We share the concern of the primary teachers and specialists we consulted to retain and value the broad topic-based structure of the primary curriculum.

2.2 We are also concerned to ensure that primary history should relate to, and prepare children for, secondary history, while also being a rounded and fulfilling experience in its own right. In particular, we think that children should have the chance to encounter history from a wide range of chronological periods in the course of their primary learning.

2.3 We are aware both of research and practice that indicates how children's understanding of chronology can be deepened by

³ *Historical Association Primary History Survey (England): History 3-11*, Historical Association 2011.

coverage based on reinforcement of earlier learning rather than simple repetition or revisiting of the same topics.⁴ Primary history needs to have its own coherence and structure, which should be satisfying both to teach and to learn as well as providing a firm basis for history at Key Stage 3.

2.4 Recommendation 4

We therefore recommend that the history curriculum should be arranged in two broad chronological arcs, both covering the period from the ancient world to the modern day. The first should be covered at Key Stage 2 and the second in Key Stages 3 and 4.

3. Resourcing and Training

3.1 Too often in the past it has been the practice to set out curricular aims and designs and only to think about resourcing and training at the end of the process, by which time there can sometimes be very little time available for resources to be prepared or training undertaken before the new curriculum is implemented.

3.2 We are fortunate in this country in having a range of excellent bodies who can resource the school curriculum, including heritage bodies, publishers, broadcasters, web-based companies, museums and archives. Professional bodies like the Historical Association (HA) and the Schools History Project (SHP) as well as learned societies like the Royal Historical Society (RHS) and the History Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) are all experienced in the provision of professional development and scholarly expertise.

3.3 Recommendation 5

We therefore recommend that government should work *from the outset* with professional bodies and resource providers to ensure that the curriculum is fully resourced, with particular emphasis on the online provision of historical source material and of a range of high quality textbooks. It should also work with the history profession to ensure the provision of appropriate training and professional development.

⁴ Research into children's understanding of chronology includes: Terry Haydn, 'Teaching children about time', *Teaching History* 81, October 1995; Alan Hodkinson, 'Enhancing temporal cognition: practical activities for the history classroom', *Primary History* 28 (May 2001); Ian Dawson, 'Thinking across time: planning and teaching the story of power and democracy at Key Stage 3', *Teaching History* 130 (Picturing History) March 2008; Jones, 'Shaping macro-analysis from micro-history: developing a reflexive narrative of change in school history', *Teaching History* 136 (Shaping the Past) September 2009; W. Stow and T. Haydn, 'Issues in the teaching of chronology' in *Issues in Teaching History*, edited by J. Arthur and R. Phillips (London: Routledge Falmer 2000) pp.88-91.

4. British, European and World History

4.1 It has sometimes been asserted, especially by academics working outside the school classroom, that to recommend that children should be taught British history must mean that they are to learn a narrowly patriotic, anglo-centric, even xenophobic view of the past.⁵ We reject this criticism. All children have the right to learn the history of the land where they live and whose future they will build; indeed, it is an essential part of the education of the citizen. To learn about important figures, even those often celebrated as national heroes, does not mean that they should be studied uncritically. Euroclio, the European History Teachers' Association, has undertaken research into how such famous historic figures can be studied in a balanced and objective way rather than simply airbrushed out of school history.⁶ We are deeply concerned at the extent to which the study of the history of Britain has suffered over the past forty years. An outline knowledge of the history of this country can no longer be expected even in students who have specialised in history to A level.⁷

4.2 There are legitimate concerns about the way in which, as a nation, we develop a sense of identity. We recognise that identity is complex, and that it may sometimes be appropriate to speak of many layers of identity, such as family, community, culture, nation, rather than of one single sense of national identity. However, no sense of identity or identities can be developed from a basis in ignorance. In whatever way young people develop a sense of their identity, they need a firm basis of knowledge about the histories of the component parts of the country they live in.

4.3 Recommendation 6

We therefore recommend that the history of Britain should form the core of the history curriculum in Key Stages 2 and 3. The different histories of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales should all be addressed, in proper proportion to develop an understanding of the whole.

4.4 Where the timetable allows at Key Stages 2 and 3 appropriate topics from European and world history should also be taught, and at all times the European and global aspects of British history should be brought out fully and appropriately.

⁵ See, for example, Richard J. Evans, 'The Wonderfulness of Us: (the Tory Interpretation of History)', *London Review of Books*, 17 March 2011.

⁶ Vikki Askew, 'A heroes' welcome', *TES Teacher* 12 November 2004.

⁷ The case was well summarised by Derek Matthews, professor of economic history at Cardiff University, who undertook a simple fact test with his first year undergraduates and found that almost 90% of them could not name a single British prime minister of the nineteenth century. Derek Matthews, *The strange death of history teaching (fully explained in seven easy-to-follow lessons)* (Derek Matthews, 2009) available from sbsdram@cf.ac.uk.

5. Historical Knowledge, Narrative and Sources

5.1 The *primary* role of the history teacher is to promote, extend and deepen students' knowledge and understanding of the past. The commonly-held view that it is to develop skills or concepts seriously misunderstands the nature of the subject and the manner in which historical knowledge is acquired, assimilated and deepened. As a result, much contemporary practice denies young people a vast array of historical knowledge to which they are entitled and without which they are incompletely equipped to function in society; indeed, students' knowledge even of the topics they do study is often seriously inadequate.

5.2 Recommendation 7

We therefore recommend that the development and nurturing of an extensive body of historical knowledge should be the central aim of the history curriculum.

5.3 The central task of the historian is to weave the results of his or her research into a cogent argument and a coherent narrative. Primary schools have long understood the power and learning potential of Story in history; in the secondary school history curriculum, the construction of narrative has not been developed as an assessment objective.

5.4 Major advances have been made in research into the assessment of narrative construction, many of them by members of the Better History Forum.⁸ It is feasible and urgent that this research should be translated into classroom and assessment practice.

5.5 Recommendation 8

We therefore recommend that 'Construction of Narrative' and 'Argument and Analysis' should be the assessment objectives at GCSE. New types of examination and assessment tasks for assessing these objectives should be developed by Examination Boards working in conjunction with Higher Education and professional associations.

⁸ Sean Lang, 'Narrative: the under-rated skill', *Teaching History* 110 (Communicating History), March 2003; Kate Hawkey, 'Mediating Narrative in Classroom History', *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 3:2 (2003); Kate Hawkey, 'Narrative in Classroom History', *Curriculum Journal* 15:1 Spring 2004: 35-44; Sarah Gadd, 'Building Memory and Meaning: Supporting Year 8 in Shaping Their Own Big Narratives', *Teaching History* 136 (Shaping the Past) September 2009; Robin Kemp, *Thematic or Sequential Analysis in Causal Explanations? A Critical Investigation of the Kinds of Historical Understanding Developed and Demonstrated within Year 8 and Year 10 Pupils' Efforts to Construct Historical Narrative Accounts* Cambridge University PGCE Dissertation, 2008.

5.6 Historical sources are the ‘stuff’ of history and can enthuse and inspire children in their learning about the past. Moreover, children can engage with ‘real’ source material through online or virtual resources in a way that was not possible in even the recent past. However, the current nature of source-based assessment in examinations, both at GCSE and at AS/A level, bears little relation to actual historical practice or even to actual historical sources. Consequently, not only are students drilled in formulaic exercises of little practical application, but an enormous amount of time is wasted preparing them for these exercises, time which could have been better spent in extending their historical knowledge. Since analysis of source material is, in any case, meaningless without extensive knowledge, the lack of this renders much current practice in source analysis a largely pointless exercise.

5.7 Recommendation 9

We therefore recommend that historical sources should be studied in as near to their original form as possible, as part of in-depth enquiry work and in support of reasoned argument. *The current practice of setting specific evaluation and analysis exercises on short extracts from historical sources in examinations should be ended.*

6. GCSE

6.1 Taking our proposals for history at Key Stages 2 and 3 as a basis, and remembering our recommendation that history should be compulsory to 16, it follows that the content for history at GCSE should grow out of, and build upon, the content covered at these earlier stages.

6.2 There may well be a case for having an element at GCSE that reinforces the understanding of British history gained at Key Stage 3; however, it is only by the ages of 14-16 that young people have developed the maturity necessary to understand fully the complexities of more recent history.⁹

6.3 Recommendation 10

We therefore recommend that GCSE history should focus on the history of the modern world from the First World War onwards.

6.4 Our detailed consideration of the assessment of narrative construction leads us to the conclusion that an element of differentiation by task should be introduced into the GCSE history curriculum, as is common in other subjects.

⁹ Paul Goalen, ‘Okay, we won. So what else do you know about the war?’ *Times Educational Supplement* 31 October 1997; ‘Battle of Britain’s history erupts’, *TES* 19 November 2004.

- 6.5 Enquiry work is an essential element in the learning of history. It relies upon the analysis and use of historical source material. However, it is poorly suited to assessment by examination and would be better suited to coursework.
- 6.6 **Recommendation 11**
- We therefore recommend that assessment at GCSE should be through tiered examination papers and through coursework.**
- 6.7 Mark schemes at GCSE and AS/A level have become so prescriptive that it is a common complaint that the sort of original or imaginative answer that would once have been rewarded highly is now penalised because it does not fit the Chief Examiner's original vision for how the question might be answered. Professor Justin Champion has described how 'any display of imaginative insight outside the established criteria is discouraged because it will not attract marks', with the result that 'students have been trained to follow rules, to find ways to hit the assessment criteria, rather than to think critically'.¹⁰
- 6.8 Moreover, the process by which GCSE and AS/A level courses have become 'packages', with 'badged' textbooks written by Chief Examiners, supported by training sessions run by the Examination Boards, means that there is a growing tendency to 'play safe', restricting the students' learning to that which is contained within this 'package', and inhibiting students from thinking more originally or laterally, or even from reading beyond the textbook.¹¹ This is a lamentable and perverse situation for any educational system to be in.
- 6.9 We believe that the A* grade, at GCSE and at A level, should be used to improve educational and academic standards. Instead of being used only to reward the upper band of candidates achieving an A grade under existing criteria, it should be used to reward students who have demonstrated original thinking, reasoning or knowledge, perhaps going well beyond the requirements of the syllabus.
- 6.10 **Recommendation 12**
- We therefore recommend that examinations in history, both at GCSE and at A/AS level, should be reformulated, using the A* grade to reward wider reading and imaginative or original thinking.**
7. Those who resist change often point out that, as Chris Culpin put it, 'there never was a 'Golden Age' of history teaching' and remind us that in the 1960s it was a deeply unpopular subject, in desperate

¹⁰ Justin Champion, 'Through the looking glass', *Independent* 17 June 2010.

¹¹ Warwick Mansell *Education by Numbers: The tyranny of testing* (London: Politico, 2008).

need of rescue in the face of dull teaching and the rise of exciting new and more apparently 'relevant' subjects like sociology.¹² This, after all, was why Mary Price issued her famous alarm call 'History in Peril' back in 1969.¹³ Even longer ago, in 1910, M.W. Keatinge wrote that 'a very slight acquaintance with men in different stations of life shows that, in spite of the increased attention paid to history in schools during the last decade ... a lamentable ignorance is everywhere to be found'.¹⁴ The BHF does not believe in a 'golden age' of history teaching any more than we believe that all history teaching in the past was bad or boring. We do believe, however, that history teaching can be better than it currently is and that we have practical and radical proposals for how to make it so.

¹² Chris Culpin, 'What kind of history should school history be?' Medlicott Medal Lecture, 2007, *The Historian* Autumn 2007 p.7.

¹³ Mary Price, 'History in Danger' *History* 52: 179 October 1968: 342-347.

¹⁴ M.W. Keatinge, *Studies in the Teaching of History* (London, 1910) p.6.