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Sharing good practice: a survey of history in colleges

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A good practice survey of factors that have contributed to high achievement in history teaching at GCE AS and A level in colleges judged as outstanding or good by Ofsted at their last history inspection. The survey contains examples of good practice as well as the views of history teachers and learners.

Of particular interest to:

Colleges, history teachers, learners, parents and guardians, the Department for Education and Skills

Age group

16–18 and 19+

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Executive summary

Between July 2005 and March 2006, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and Additional Inspectors visited 24 colleges to survey good practice in GCE AS and A-level history teaching. The colleges were selected because they had been judged to be outstanding or good by Ofsted in their last inspection in history.

In these colleges, pass rates were consistently above the national average for both GCE AS and A level. Most learners achieved or exceeded their predicted grades. Written work was well researched, sharply focused and persuasive. Learners were highly motivated and responded enthusiastically to the opportunities to develop and use their research skills in assignments and coursework.

Teachers were highly effective in helping learners to meet course requirements. Lessons were well planned, full of variety, appropriately paced and enjoyable. The use of group work to promote critical thinking, analysis and debate was exemplary. High quality resources were used imaginatively to explore and develop learners' understanding of history. In the best practice, information and communication technology (ICT) was used to enhance skills such as investigating sources, analysing historical information, understanding causation and writing essays. The assessment of learners' work was very good, with effective monitoring procedures to record their progress. Well focused additional learning support contributed effectively to learners' progress. In a small minority of lessons, teachers' questioning did not sufficiently develop learners' oral skills.

Imaginative and very well organised enrichment activities contributed to learning and learners' interest in history. Enrolments onto GCE AS and A-level courses in the majority of the colleges in the survey had increased each year. Most colleges offered learners a wide choice of historical periods to study. College departments had developed good external links with local schools and organisations to widen participation and enrich learners' experience. There was good progression to history or related courses at university.

Good and often outstanding management contributed to success. Departments set and achieved challenging targets and promoted a self-critical and developmental culture. Team work was excellent. Staff were very knowledgeable and encouraged learners with their enjoyment of and commitment to the subject. In a minority of the departments surveyed, however, self-assessment was neither rigorous enough nor sufficiently linked to action plans.

The survey sought the views of teachers and learners. Key points arising included the narrowness of the content of the history curriculum at GCSE and A level for some learners; a perception of the increasingly marginalised role of history within the secondary curriculum; the use of coursework to broaden

choice; changes to assessment criteria; and how the study of history contributed to key life skills.

Key findings

In the history departments surveyed, the following contributed to high achievement and good standards.

- ❑ Teaching focused on setting learners challenging targets and developing both their enjoyment of the subject and the skills necessary for examination success.
- ❑ A wide variety of teaching methods engaged learners and developed their understanding of history. In particular, group work enhanced learners' critical thinking and their analysis and evaluation of evidence. High quality resources, including the imaginative application of ICT, supported teaching and learning effectively.
- ❑ A wide range of enrichment activities contributed both to learning and the learners' interest in history.
- ❑ Very good, and often excellent, additional learning support contributed substantially to the successful progress of all learners.
- ❑ Good or excellent assessment with effective monitoring procedures enabled all learners to make good progress.
- ❑ Many of the colleges visited had established productive links with secondary schools and local organisations. These were very effective in helping learners to progress to further and higher education.
- ❑ Good or excellent leadership of history departments promoted a culture of continuous improvement.

The survey identified aspects which needed further development, even though the overall quality was good or better.

- ❑ Some self-assessments were not sufficiently rigorous and did not use data from lesson observations fully enough to plan for improvement.
- ❑ Some teachers did not involve learners sufficiently or question them effectively to enhance their oral competencies, advance their reasoning and reinforce learning.
- ❑ The sharing of good and outstanding practice across colleges was infrequent.
- ❑ A minority of the departments surveyed did not fully integrate the teaching of the key skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication into schemes of work, lesson plans and teaching.

Recommendations

The Department for Education and Skills with the Quality Improvement Agency should:

- disseminate good practice in history across colleges.

Where necessary, colleges should:

- ensure that the history department's self-assessments are rigorous and use evidence, such as data from lesson observations, to plan for further improvement
- enhance teachers' questioning skills to develop learners' oral competencies
- ensure that schemes of work and lesson plans include the teaching of key skills.

Background

1. Achievement and standards were outstanding in 17 of the 24 colleges in this survey. Pass rates were consistently above national averages for both GCE AS and A level. Learners' progress, compared to their prior attainment, was positive, and often significantly so. A high percentage of learners gained grades A or B; retention rates were also high. Progression to higher education was excellent. In three of the colleges, there were some pockets of underachievement, particularly from lower ability learners, some of whom performed poorly in those aspects of the course which focused on the writing of history and interpretation.
2. Enrolments onto GCE AS and A level history courses were healthy and, in 17 of the colleges visited, had increased annually. History was a popular subject, and departments of between 250 and 400 learners were not uncommon. Eighteen of the colleges offered a wide choice of courses, balancing an emphasis on 20th century history with options either from medieval, 16th century or 18th century history. The diverse content provided many opportunities for learners to discover, develop and extend their interests. Tolerance, persecution, justice and bias were discussed within the periods studied, referenced to contemporary society and used to inform learners' moral, spiritual, political and cultural development. For example, one sixth form college offered courses in Greek, Roman, medieval, Tudor, 18th century and 20th century history. Teachers and learners were positive about greater choice and the promotion of what were perceived as minority options. Two of the colleges offered no choice and, while this did not affect enrolments, achievement and standards, inspectors and learners considered that there was less opportunity for breadth of study.

Factors contributing to high achievement

Teaching and learning

3. The quality of teaching and learning was generally good and often outstanding. During the survey, inspectors observed 84 lessons: 34% of these were outstanding and 62% were good. Many of them showed how history at this level can be challenging and fun, and yet also teach the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary for success in examinations. Teaching was highly effective in helping learners meet course requirements. Lessons were planned well with clear aims and detailed schemes of work, although in two of the colleges lesson plans were too ambitious with too much content to be covered. Six of the colleges did not fully integrate key skills in communication into schemes of work or lesson planning. Teachers used a variety of teaching methods to respond to learners' preferred learning styles. One college colour-coded its schemes of work to signal different learning strategies as a way of responding to learners' different needs; all of these referred to extension tasks and key skills.
4. Standards of work were high: learners gained comprehensive subject knowledge related to the period of study and terminology, and learnt to use them intelligently. They worked collaboratively and independently and were very well prepared for examinations. Most of them were able to unpick complex issues, analyse and evaluate their findings and draw sensible conclusions based on appropriately selected evidence from different sources. Essays were well argued; work was thoroughly researched and presented effectively. The more able learners showed an impressive intellectual capacity and a mature understanding of the forces of continuity and change.

Case study 1: working collaboratively to develop written skills

A lesson in a sixth form college aimed to develop e-essay skills in preparation for an assessment. The topic was: 'Do you agree with the view that Perkin Warbeck posed the most serious threat to Henry VII's throne?'

The class was divided into groups of five or six. Each group had to:

- decide on its overall argument
- determine the structure of the essay, working out the main points to be used in each paragraph
- agree on the evidence to be used.

Paragraphs were divided between group members, with one learner responsible for the introduction and conclusion. One member was responsible for collating the materials into the full essay format.

The class moved to a computer area outside the classroom, where students each had their own computer base. After the collation, the group sat at the collator's work-base to discuss the essay and make any changes. Then each group emailed its essay to the whole class for marking against the examination board's marking scheme.

This was an intensive task, conducted with remarkable energy. The work was of a high standard, with excellent and well focused discussion. The follow-up lesson explored students' views of the question and what they had learned about essay style.

5. The assessment of learners' work was excellent and monitoring of their progress was thorough and effective. Teachers set assignments regularly and marked them comprehensively and fairly. Constructive comments and clear targets enabled learners to improve. Class files with on-going assessment records were part of the regular monitoring of progress. Learners' initial qualifications were noted. Regular timetabled discussions provided further monitoring of learners' action planning and their progress. Such approaches were common in the colleges surveyed.

Case study 2: improving written work through familiarising learners with key assessment criteria

In a sixth form college, specially devised checklists were drawn up: one for source work, another for essays. After learners had completed an assignment, they judged how far they had met the relevant criteria by marking the level of their success on a continuum. The teacher assessed the accuracy of their statements by adding comments alongside those of the learner. In marking their own scripts (or, in lessons, those of the person sitting next to them), learners also referred to a glossary of abbreviations to highlight important strengths and weaknesses. When teachers returned written work to learners, they gave brief oral feedback to individuals after points of general importance had been covered in class.

6. Coursework and individual assignments broadened historical study and developed the skills of independent learning and research. The best coursework showed well developed analysis, understanding, and convincing argument.
7. The breadth of coursework seen during the survey was often impressive. At one London college, studies included British decolonisation in tropical and equatorial Africa; an examination of the importance of personal ambition as the real motive behind Jinnah's demands for the establishment of Pakistan; the Cultural Revolution as a manifestation of

Mao's desire for personal power; and an examination of whether the Bourbon monarchy was chiefly to blame for the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.

8. The survey found highly imaginative approaches to teaching, such as effective role play to help learners explore their understanding and develop organisational and oral skills.

Case study 3: role play to enhance understanding

In an AS medieval history lesson in a sixth form college, a group of high-attaining learners deepened their understanding of medieval kingship and practised the skill of presenting an oral argument by taking part in a mock trial of William the Conqueror. The charge was: 'That you were unnecessarily harsh in the treatment of the English rebellion 1066–1072.'

The layout of the classroom mirrored a courtroom; as the learners entered, they were asked to sit in their appropriate place. After some initial nervousness, they entered fully into the spirit of the activity. All of them had a speaking role. Nearly all had prepared well and showed a good knowledge of the character they were portraying or questioning. The witnesses entered into their roles with empathy, dealt accurately and confidently with questions and showed real insight into the world of, for example, Hereward the Wake, Edwin and Morcar, and the main factors which influenced their actions. The summing up by the prosecution and defence teams used persuasive arguments that were not only in harmony with the historical facts but also showed a deep understanding of the values and attitudes of 11th century England.

9. Group work was a particular strength and was managed skilfully. Learners listened to each other's points of view, bounced ideas off one another and collaborated to solve problems. Commonly, such activities continued outside the lessons, developed further by learners through emails, additional group meetings or interactive conferences. In this way, learners acquired, organised and used new knowledge and developed the higher-order skills of analysis, evaluation and critical appraisal.

Case study 4: group work to encourage collaboration

In one college, each history class was divided into learning teams of about four or five. The teams were carefully put together to represent a range of ability and skills, with the expectation that the learners would work together and support each other. All small group work in the class took place in these teams, but the learners also worked in their teams on projects outside the classroom. Observation of this initiative showed how it promoted inclusion and

fostered cooperation. Learners recognised that it also developed relevant skills for their future well-being.

10. In six of the colleges, teachers did not use enough questioning to advance learners' reasoning, extend and reinforce understanding, promote debate and develop learners' oral skills; the sessions were used largely to elicit short responses and revise previous learning. A lack of challenge was common in a minority of the satisfactory lessons because teachers were thinking for the learners rather than actively involving them.

Resources

11. Inventive teaching engaged learners and encouraged high levels of investigative participation, not just through questioning but also through well structured group work or the imaginative use of resources, including ICT.

Case study 5: imaginative use of ICT to explore and develop understanding

At one college, exemplary use of ICT enhanced learning. The learners investigated the assassination of Sergei Kirov, using a computer 'murder mystery game' designed by their teacher to professional standards. After two hours the learners had developed further the essential skills for success in examinations and gained an excellent understanding of the origins of the Stalinist purges. They enjoyed:

- reading a range of contemporary sources
- following up clues
- working out what evidence was important and what was irrelevant
- reaching a conclusion, based on the balance of probabilities, which –they were required to back up with evidence.

Attention was given to learners' individual needs through different worksheets. This was an exciting, challenging and imaginative lesson.

12. Resources to support teaching and learning generally were very good, and often excellent. Handbooks for courses and topics contained impressive material to guide, stimulate and advise learners, including excellent materials on examination board assessment schemes, examination essay marking schemes, level descriptors and helpful words for essay writing. Intranet websites provided good sources of support and information. As in example above, several colleges used email imaginatively to enhance assessment and stimulate debate, and ICT was used to enrich the task

and not as an end in itself. In the best examples, it enhanced skills such as source investigation, the analysis of historical information, the understanding of causation, and essay writing.

Case study 6: the use of a database to practise source techniques to tackle issues in the A level Unit 6 paper

A source-work database in a sixth form college was devised to allow learners to practise the skills they required for the GCE A level Unit 6. The programme was developed to respond to staff and learners' assessment of needs. The activity focused on developing learners' ability to use the sources, respond to them and integrate sources with their own knowledge. Among other possibilities, learners could choose the difficulty level of the assignment. The exercise was used flexibly: as a whole-class activity, as teacher-directed homework, or for self-study.

Additional learning support

13. Throughout the colleges in the survey, an important factor was the emphasis on additional learning support. Colleges had responded well to the enrolment of a broader range of ability levels, encouraged through initiatives to widen participation. Large numbers of learners of different abilities used such support. It enhanced the development of the more able and tackled, very successfully, issues for learners at risk of not achieving. Often, additional intervention started at or followed induction and focused on key subject skills.

Case study 7: supporting and developing skills

In one college, during the first four to five weeks, learners completed five exercises which assessed their current levels of skill in reading, understanding key historical terms, note-making, evaluating sources and planning essays. All the exercises had a historical content. The learners received written feedback and then weekly sessions to develop their skills, either individually or in small groups, during the academic support time.

At the start of their second year, learners were asked to consider what they felt went well in the first year and rate their performance in each of 11 areas. These included the five mentioned above and also skills pertinent to A level, for example 'making links/connections between and within topics' and 'utilising your reading lists to advance historical understanding'. They were asked to think about what grade they wanted to achieve, how they intended to do this, and to record their 'smart' targets. Written feedback from the teacher indicated their significant strengths in academic support time in the early weeks. In this way their learning was personalised.

14. Integrating additional learning support into departmental practice and frameworks was both widespread and excellent. Departments provided comprehensive guidance and additional learning support in lessons, subject tutorials and other activities. These included regular timetabled history skills classes, preparation sessions for examinations, Oxbridge entrance groups, and the development of a wide range of differentiated learning materials. One college held weekly timetabled history skill sessions for AS learners. Learners were invited, individually, to attend but others also attended for additional help, including A-level learners. Attendance was high throughout the year. The sessions were supplemented by extra revision time for GCE AS and A level and a broad range of other support, including email helplines. In all the colleges surveyed, inspectors noted a wide range of informal help. In one sixth form college, 25% of history learners received some form of additional learning support during their course. This included a substantial number of learners with dyslexia or dysphasia: they were given outstanding support and did very well. Learners with special learning needs and/or disabilities were integrated into class groups where they played a full part.
15. Seventeen of the colleges organised imaginative extension programmes for the most able learners. For example, in a sixth form college, an extension class was asked to design a secondary school history curriculum. Groups of learners were given research tasks and materials which explored the current debate about the place of history in the secondary curriculum. These stimulated much informed discussion on the purpose of history, its relevance at primary and secondary level, and the importance of such notions as 'Britishness', 'internationalism' and 'multiculturalism'. Each group had to present its chosen curriculum and justify its choices; this generated further lively discussion. In other colleges, additional challenging reading texts were provided or specific projects set up, such as organising a history conference. Learners received timely and extensive guidance on their university applications.

Enrichment

16. In many of the colleges, stimulating extracurricular activities enriched learning and learners' historical interests. Teachers were committed to developing learners' experiences. Regular trips abroad had a clear impact on learners' understanding of historical periods. For example, learners in a sixth form college studying the Spanish Golden Age spoke enthusiastically of the value of their recent visit to Madrid and how it had cemented their understanding of the period. In another college, as well as visits to student conferences, activities included participation in Black History Month and in the Historical Association debates. They also marked Holocaust Memorial Day, visited the National Maritime Museum, as well as history departments at several universities to discuss issues of historical significance, made an annual visit to Auschwitz, undertook History Swap Shop activities, and shared ideas with other colleges online.

Case study 8: effective organisation of an excursion

During the survey, an inspector accompanied a group of sixth formers and their teachers on a day's visit to the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London.

The inspector noted in the evaluation: 'The excursion was exceptionally well planned with groups given specific investigative tasks tailored to their level and interests. All tasks were challenging and the materials provided were of a very high standard. Learners were highly focused and engaged. They fully explored exhibition evidence and engaged in challenging discussions with their teachers, museum staff and each other. Teachers supported them well. An additional learning support assistant gave extra help to learners who needed it. An excellent follow-up session the next day gave students the opportunity for presentations and reflection.'

Leadership and management

17. The leadership and management of the departments were very good; they were outstanding in 17 of the 24 visited. History teams were successful in raising achievement each year. Analysis of key programme indicators was detailed and informative. Departments set and achieved challenging targets and promoted a self-critical and developmental culture. Good teamwork and communications were part of this. Staff were knowledgeable and inspired learners with their enjoyment of and commitment to history.

Self-assessment

18. Self-assessment was generally used effectively, although there were shortcomings in a small number of departments. For example, they made only limited use of data from lesson observations to improve teaching and learning. Most colleges elicited the views of learners through questionnaires, although sometimes this was too formulaic. One sixth form college had developed innovative practice: it used the student questionnaire completed annually by AS learners as a key performance indicator in the self-assessment process. In addition, student representatives from each class met staff fortnightly to report on teaching and learning, to which staff responded positively; teachers and learners were engaged in continuing debate on these issues. Documents and discussions with teachers and learners revealed that regular consultation had resulted in positive changes in teaching and learning, such as the successful use of a virtual learning environment (VLE) in history lessons and as additional support.

External links

19. Many colleges had formed good external links that widened participation and contributed to increased enrolment. The majority of the colleges surveyed had formed productive links with secondary schools which contributed to smoother progression to sixth form studies.

Case study 9: effective partnerships

A college in partnership with local organisations had promoted the development of a 'Junior University' scheme, an innovative response to the local need to increase participation in further and higher education. The college's history department played a key role in this initiative. It focused on work to improve GCSE achievement and complement and enrich the advice given to learners to inform their post-16 choices. An excellent web resource, 'Sixthsense', aimed to help secondary pupils make the transition from GCSE to A-level studies. The department arranged regular visits by high school learners for history master classes and events at the college. This subject specialist support continued after transition to prepare learners for higher education.

20. One college had established links with a northern university which brought trainees on a post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) course online with history learners to examine the best ways of answering specific history questions. All learners were involved in online exchanges about essays and assessment. Teaching in the lesson was skilful and learners bristled with intellectual appreciation.
21. The sharing of good and outstanding practice across colleges was infrequent.

Views of teachers and learners

Teachers' views

22. Inspectors interviewed over 70 teachers during the survey. They were knowledgeable, committed, and clearly enthused their learners with the enjoyment and challenges of history. They recognised the continued relevance of history in the post-16 curriculum as a means of:
- allowing learners to put their own lives in context, providing an insight into human motivation and development
 - contributing to students' emotional development
 - studying moral issues and acquiring a fuller understanding of modern politics.

23. Some of the issues teachers raised are discussed in more detail below. They included:
- transition from GCSE to A level
 - Britain, Europe and internationalism
 - syllabus options
 - flexibility in assessment methods
 - coursework and examinations.
24. Teachers felt that some secondary school pupils were not choosing history at Key Stage 4 because of its reputation as a 'difficult' subject. Many teachers perceived that an increasingly marginal role for history within the secondary curriculum would affect enrolments post-16. Others noted the narrowness of content and little sense of chronological development in the GCSE history curriculum. They acknowledged the narrowness of content for many learners studying overlapping events in the 20th century at GCSE and AS and A level. The teachers also felt that AS did not sufficiently prepare learners for the essay skills required at A level or the difficulties that less able students experienced with examination units that focused on, for example, historiography or interpretation. Some felt that the focus on historiography was too intense.
25. The teachers held strong views that learners benefited from a significant measure of internationalism in their studies without losing sight of Britain's position in history. Many felt that curriculum specifications remained too Eurocentric. Others voiced concern over the future of minority options such as medieval history.
26. They supported strongly the continuation and strengthening of an 'academic' syllabus option for the more able learners who, for instance, wished to study history at university. In addition, the majority of them supported the idea of an alternative A-level history syllabus with a more flexible structure, both in approach and assessment. They agreed that such a syllabus might promote, for example, the use of television and film footage, as well as links with museums and the heritage industry. They particularly supported greater flexibility in assessment methods.
27. They agreed strongly that coursework was an excellent way to develop learners' understanding of history and skills in preparation for university. Teachers argued that it brought a greater breadth and depth to learning and went some way towards satisfying individuals' passion for history.
28. Many teachers were concerned about what they saw as inconsistencies in the marking and grading of examinations. Their concerns were supported by senior college managers in several institutions. Many teachers also raised concerns at the frequent changes to examination specifications.

Learners' views

29. Inspectors interviewed over 160 learners. They all conveyed their strong enjoyment of studying history. They spoke confidently and with flair about their values and felt that their appreciation of history was being increasingly enriched. It extended their thinking which, in turn, helped them to understand their place in history. They acknowledged the contribution that studying history had made to their personal development, tolerance of differing views and the acquisition of key learning skills such as enquiry, analysis and evaluation. They also saw the potential of applying skills more widely, such as presenting a reasoned argument, evaluating their own writing and managing a heavier workload.
30. Learners felt very positive about their choices in the history curriculum, although some had found pre-16 history 'patchy', and 'Hitler and others tedious'. However, they acknowledged that their appetite for more history had been whetted at secondary school.
31. Learners supported a diverse approach to the study of GCE AS and A-level history through British, European and world studies rather than an approach focused on the evolution of British institutions and society. They argued for a wider understanding of European and world history to appreciate the evolution of global trends and change. They felt strongly that this would have a greater significance for their future careers and role as citizens.

Notes

The survey was conducted between July 2005 and March 2006. A sample of 20 colleges was selected, with a further four colleges involved in pilot visits during summer 2005. All the colleges had been graded as outstanding or good at their last inspection in the provision of humanities.

The visits were conducted by three of HMI and three Additional Inspectors. They observed 84 lessons and scrutinised policies, schemes of work and examples of learners' written work. Inspectors held discussions with 160 learners and over 70 teachers to seek their views on the teaching of history and its relevance within the post-16 curriculum.

Further information

www.successforall.gov.uk

This site provides a wide range of materials, directed mainly at primary and secondary levels, but nevertheless useful for teaching history at the 14–19 stage. The site on post-16 e-learning describes the use of digital and interactive technologies to achieve a more personalised approach within all areas of education and children's services. Further information on post-16 e-learning strategies can be found at:

www.becta.org.uk

www.qca.org.uk/history/innovating/14-19/index.htm.

The 'innovating with history' site on the website of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is directed mainly at the secondary sector but contains some materials and case studies that can be adapted for post-16 studies.

www.qia.org.uk

The site of the Quality Improvement Agency provides useful information on innovation and excellence in the learning and skills sector.

Annex

Colleges participating in the survey

Esher College, Surrey
Godalming Sixth Form College, Surrey
Greenhead Sixth Form College, Huddersfield, Yorkshire
Havant College, Hampshire
Hereford Sixth Form College, Hereford
Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge
King Edward VI Sixth Form College, Stourbridge
King George V Sixth Form College, Southport
Oldham Sixth Form College, Oldham, Greater Manchester
Peter Symonds Sixth Form College, Winchester
Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Darlington
Runshawe College, Lancashire
St. Francis Xavier Sixth Form College, London
Sir John Deane College, Cheshire
South Cheshire College, Cheshire
The Sixth Form College, Colchester
Varndean Sixth Form College, Brighton, Sussex
Winstanley Sixth Form College, Wigan, Greater Manchester
Woodhouse Sixth Form College, Finchley, London
York College, York, Yorkshire

Pilot visits

Ashton-under-Lyne Sixth Form College, Ashton-under-Lyne, Greater Manchester
John Leggott Sixth Form College, Scunthorpe
Loreto Sixth Form College, Manchester
Richard Huish Sixth Form College, Exeter