

# **Factors influencing pupil take-up of History post Key Stage 3, Final Report September 2007**

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**Executive summary**

The report is a follow up to previous research which looked into pupil perceptions of history at Key Stage 3: their views on what they liked and disliked about the way the subject was taught, and why they thought history was part of the school curriculum. The research found that although the majority of pupils reported that they enjoyed history, most of them had a limited understanding of the purposes of studying history as outlined in curriculum specifications.

This phase of the research focused on the views and concerns of history teachers in relation to pupil take-up of the subject post Key Stage 3 (KS3), and the 'health' and status of the subject generally in the light of recent concerns that the position of history on the school curriculum has been marginalised in recent years (Ofsted, 2005, 2007).

One of the main aims of the research was to gain a better understanding of the factors which influenced pupil take-up of history post KS3, but there was also an attempt to gain insight into other concerns which history teachers had about current curriculum arrangements and recent curriculum initiatives.

## **Main findings**

### **1. Variations in take-up of history at KS4**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'headline statistic' that 'only just over 30% of pupils study the subject at KS4' (Ofsted, 2007) conceals massive variations between schools. There are many schools where history is the biggest option choice for pupils and the subject appears to be thriving. But there are also schools where history attracts far fewer than one in three pupils and some where the subject barely survives on the post-14 timetable.

### **2. Concern over history's position, even where KS4 numbers are currently strong**

In spite of the relative stability of numbers opting for history at KS4, many of the history teachers surveyed were concerned about recent trends and curriculum initiatives, many of which were thought to militate against the position of history on the school curriculum. This was often seen as a downgrading of the importance of the humanities in the post-14 curriculum rather than of history *per se*. Some felt that there was a disparity between the media statements of politicians about the importance of school history, and the direction of the majority of curriculum initiatives over the past few years. Many respondents also felt that humanities subjects had fallen down the 'priorities' list in the eyes of many heads and senior management teams.

### **3. Main factors influencing pupil take-up of history at KS4**

In terms of the factors accounting for variable pupil take-up of history post Key Stage 3, respondents' views suggested that these could be divided into four main categories:

- national policy developments and trends (such as the move away from the 'Mark 1' National Curriculum, increased emphasis on vocational subjects and on literacy, numeracy and ICT, varying interpretation of 'choice' and personalisation, specialist school status, increased pressure on heads to improve examination performance).

- factors deriving from whole school/senior management team policy and their interpretation/steer on national policy.
- factors which were within the compass of the history department.
- parental views about history as a school subject.

### **3.1 In terms of national policy initiatives and developments relating to the school curriculum:**

a) The high profile of issues of ‘Britishness’, identity, citizenship, terrorism and political literacy

This was one of the few ‘change factors’ which was felt to be assisting the profile and position of history, although it was felt that this was more in the form of foregrounding history in public consciousness than in influencing curriculum policy.

b) Modern foreign languages not having been compulsory at KS4 in recent years.

This was another development which was felt to have had perhaps unintended benefits for KS4 history. The fact that the study of a language at KS4 has not recently been compulsory was felt to have been a factor which enabled more high-ability pupils to opt for history.

c) Pressure on headteachers to improve the public examination profile of their school

Many respondents felt that the pressure on heads to improve exam results had a negative effect on take-up of history at KS4, as some pupils, particularly the less able, were being counselled towards ‘easier’ GCSE options and what one respondent termed ‘the latest GCSE fiddle’. Some felt that such guidance was at times influenced by concern for the school’s exam profile rather than the interests of the pupils concerned.

d) Government, Media and Ofsted focus on the core subjects

Recent emphasis on the core subjects and ICT, in terms of national strategies, assessment and testing arrangements, and the focus of Ofsted inspections was felt to have downgraded Senior Management Teams’ (SMT’s) treatment of humanities subjects and pupils’ views of the status of such subjects.

e) The increasing place of vocational education initiatives at KS4

The increasing emphasis on vocational education at KS4 and the forthcoming introduction of specialist diplomas was seen as having serious implications for the numbers of pupils taking history at KS4. Although many history teachers acknowledged that this may be in the best interests of some pupils who struggled to cope with the literary demands of history as a school subject, some felt that there were less able pupils who enjoyed history who were being directed towards ‘dodgy’ and often disappointing vocational alternatives.

f) The introduction of ‘new’ subjects and the move towards a (quasi) ‘free market’ at KS4

The 'opening up' of the KS4 curriculum to include a wide range of new subjects, and the move away from the 'Mark 1' National Curriculum, where all pupils had a much more extended core of subjects up to the age of 16, was seen as another factor which was likely to reduce take-up of history post-14. The introduction of what was termed by one respondent 'shiny' subjects, such as media studies, critical thinking, sociology and business studies, had a strong appeal to some pupils, even where they had enjoyed studying history at KS3. This 'market' at KS4 now meant that History was sometimes in competition with as many as nine other subjects in a single KS4 option pool, so a 30% uptake was not as shocking or disappointing an outcome as it might have been several years ago, when history was often part of a compulsory humanities pool option. There are now many schools where pupils are not obliged to take any humanities subject at KS4. There has been a move away from the idea of a broad and balanced curriculum to the age of 16 as advocated by HMI in the 1980s (HMI, 1988) and in the original National Curriculum. Although in theory, KS4 was now more of a 'free market', with pupils not being directed towards a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, the fact that in some schools, substantial numbers of pupils were being 'guided' or pressurised away from history meant that the market in practice operated against KS4 history. The fact that 69.8% of pupils reported that they enjoyed history, and 69.3% of them thought that history was useful (QCA, 2005), and yet only three in ten pupils pursue the subject at KS4 lends some support to this hypothesis, although there is evidence to suggest that many pupils are not clear about *why* history is useful (Biddulph and Adey 2001, Fink, 2004, QCA, 2005), and this may also be an explanation of limited take-up of history at KS4.

g) The effect of specialist school status

The move towards most secondary schools having specialist school status was seen by nearly all history teachers as a factor which had adversely affected history at KS4. It was felt that in many cases, pupils were being pressurised into taking subjects which supported the school's specialist status. So for instance, in schools with languages status, it was felt that able pupils were being directed towards the study of a second language, with fewer pupils therefore opting for history. The comparative scarcity of humanities specialist schools, and the fact that they were often based around English as the lead specialism, meant that history tended to 'lose out' in this respect.

h) Two year KS3 option

The option to operate a two year KS3 programme was viewed very negatively by all but one respondent, in terms of its impact on the satisfactory delivery of the history curriculum. Concerns centred on the very limited time in which to provide pupils with a coherent 'map' of the past, and also provide pupils with an understanding of the nature of the discipline, and aspects of history relating to citizenship, identity and political literacy.

**3.2. In terms of factors deriving from whole school/senior management team (SMT) policy and their interpretation/steer on national policy:**

a) Recent changes to option pools arrangements

The restructuring of options pools for KS4 in recent years was generally felt to have had a negative influence on history take-up. In a few cases, it was felt that some consideration was given to safeguarding the position of humanities subjects, but more often, changes were felt to have a negative influence on history take-up post-14. This was regarded as ‘collateral damage’ by most respondents, in that they did not feel that these changes were a considered attack of history as a school subject. It was rather that little thought was being given to the unintended effects of some recent curriculum initiatives.

b) SMT perceptions of the relevance of humanities to pupils post-14

It was felt by some respondents that many senior management teams did not see a need for all pupils to pursue a humanities subject at KS4. Although there were still some schools where history take-up was influenced by the comparative ‘strengths’ of the geography and history departments, it was quite common for there to be no requirement for pupils to do either subject. There was some testimony which tended to support the recent Ofsted (2007) assertion that there are headteachers who do not see post-14 history as being relevant to their pupils.

c) Less able pupils being prevented or dissuaded from taking history at KS4

Several respondents felt that less able pupils, particularly those who might struggle to achieve a grade C or above in history GCSE, were being pressurised, or in some cases, prevented from taking the subject, and being directed to take other subjects which were felt to be ‘less challenging’ or ‘more appropriate’. (There was some evidence from our previous survey of pupil perceptions to suggest that there are a substantial number of pupils who enjoy history, even though they are not strong academically).

d) Varieties of practice with regard to ‘pupil choice’

There appears to be a variety of practice in terms of how directive SMTs are in influencing pupil choice at KS4. There were some schools where it was felt that pupils and parents were free to choose whatever subjects they preferred, and others where there was quite strong counselling/guidance/advice to pupils. Some respondents believed that this pressure was such that for some pupils, particularly the less able, history post KS3 was no longer an entitlement. Some respondents felt that even quite able pupils were being ‘steered’ towards vocational courses, and that this stemmed from concern for the school’s exam profile, rather than the needs of individual pupils.

e) Varieties of practice with regard to timetabling and staffing for history groups at KS4

There was also a variety of practice in terms of staffing for history classes. In some cases, strong demand for history at KS4 would result in more groups being timetabled, and the possibility of extra staffing for history, in others, the number of history groups was ‘capped’ and some pupils were told they would have to take another subject.

In some schools, consistently high take-up for history had resulted in the building up of a ‘big’ history department, staffed by five or more full time specialist history teachers. In others, high take-up resulted in an increase in the number of non-specialists teaching

the subject: in one case, this resulted in six people teaching history, only one of whom was a history specialist. Heads of department felt that the use of non-specialists generally had a negative effect on both the quality of teaching and the numbers opting for history post-14.

g) Having someone to ‘stand up for history’ on the SMT

Several respondents believed that it helped to have at least one member of the SMT who was sympathetic to the subject, whether or not this came as a direct result of having a senior member of staff who had previously been a history teacher. In many cases, it was felt that this ‘sympathy’ and support derived more from the quality of teaching and teachers in history, and the efforts they were making to give pupils a positive experience, rather than an intrinsic belief in the virtues of the subject.

h) The effect of ‘high initiative’ type schools

Some respondents believed that SMTs who tended to enthusiastically embrace a high proportion of new curriculum initiatives (for example, the two year KS3 option), were more likely to marginalise history’s place on the KS4 curriculum. Moves such as the two year KS3 programme, and some GCSE vocational or ICT combinations, were seen as a way of ‘trimming’ non core subjects and gaining more time and momentum for improving results in English, maths and science. Advocating the RSA’s *Opening minds* course as an alternative curriculum at KS3, and introducing a two year KS3 programme were thought to be about ‘*new heads and deputies trying to make their mark*’, and ‘*bright young things*’ establishing ‘forward-thinking’ credentials rather than thoughtful and considered curriculum policymaking.

### **3.3. In terms of factors which were within the compass of the history department**

a) The attributes of the history teachers in the department

Unsurprisingly, those interviewed regarded the quality of the teachers working within the history department as the most important determinant of how many pupils would opt for the subject at KS4, in terms of ‘things that are in our power’. One advisor (whilst acknowledging factors which were beyond departmental control) said:

*‘There are probably around 10.... a dozen schools where the take up at KS4 is markedly high..... with over half the kids opting to do history at GCSE, where they’ve got 3 or even 4 GCSE sets in years 10 and 11... it’s about the extent to which the department has teachers who are particularly talented and creative... enthusiastic and able to pass that on to pupils in a relaxed way.’*

The following attributes and characteristics are those that came out most strongly and frequently from the interviews:

i) Pedagogic subject knowledge and ‘*a sense of audience*’

In terms of their descriptions of teachers who would be likely to contribute to good take-up of the subject post KS3, the most commonly ascribed attributes related to the

quality of their interaction with pupils, rather than the depth and breadth of their subject content knowledge. It was generally felt to be more about their ‘pedagogic’ subject knowledge, in the sense of how adroitly they related their historical knowledge to the pupils they were teaching, rather than their pedigree as ‘academic historians’. ‘A *sense of audience*’ is one way of encapsulating these comments. As one advisor put it, ‘*It’s about how they approach the content... the topics, the course. Whether they think about how to make it meaningful to the kids... how it might have some sort of relevance to their lives.*’

## ii) Interaction with pupils

Another quality which emerged strongly from interviews was the extent to which teachers possessed or had developed good skills of interaction with pupils: the skill with which they talked to them, ‘drew them out’ of themselves and involved them in contributing actively to the lessons. There were many respondents who stressed that it was important to be ‘good with the kids’, as well as being ‘good with the history’. In terms the ‘ordering’ of teacher characteristics likely to aid post-14 take-up and pupil commitment to the subject more generally, the following extract from a London head of history is not unrepresentative of respondents’ views:

*‘If you were to ask me what was the most important factor in kids’ choice, it’s the personality of the teacher and their relations with the pupils, the way they get on with them, then their pedagogical skills, and subject content probably below that.’*

This comment corroborated the views of many of the pupils who were interviewed in phase 1 of the research (QCA, 2005).

## iii) Having teachers who were in relaxed and assured control of their classes

Good classroom management skills and the ability to control the classroom and sustain a calm and purposeful working atmosphere, where the teacher was in relaxed and assured control of proceedings was another factor which was mentioned as contributing to high take-up. This echoed some of the feedback from pupils in the previous phase of the research, where a preference was expressed for teachers who were able to effect ‘light touch’ control of their teaching groups. Two examples from advisor’s responses are given below:

*‘Departments where the teachers are in control of the class, pupils are not messing around, everyone just getting on with it in a relaxed but purposeful manner.’*

*‘It’s a bit about teachers being able to create or manufacture a nice relaxed environment for talking about and doing history... getting past the “us versus them” or “I’ve got to keep them under control”... keep them busy with writing and tasks mentality.’*

## iv) ‘Scavenging’ for ‘impact’ resources

Feedback from advisors, university curriculum tutors and heads of department suggested that another characteristic of history teachers who were likely to generate high take-up at KS4 was the degree of initiative and resourcefulness they exercised in planning learning experiences for pupils, and getting hold of ideas and resources that would make it easier to get pupils intrigued, motivated and engaged in the lessons. It was apparent that some teachers went to extraordinary lengths to provide 'impact' learning for pupils, whether through special events, invited speakers, ideas for activities from history websites or trawling of the internet for images and moving image clips, so that whatever the topic, there would be some components of the lessons which had an impact on pupils. The continuum between teachers who '*went with what the department had in the stockroom*', and those who were constantly on the lookout for 'impact' resources is described by a history advisor:

*'Some are a bit lazy over planning, and less proactive in getting hold of the fantastic resources that are now so much easier to get hold off than they used to be pre-internet... and networking with other teachers.... either on the net or in cluster groups and keeping in touch with history teachers outside their department... using their memory sticks... making use of the best websites to get hold of powerful bits and pieces... High uptake departments have a critical mass of teachers who are up to date, who are aware of new ideas and approaches... read Teaching History, go to things like SHP (the annual Schools History Project conference)... use the forums on School History, are proactive generally in terms of continuing to develop.'*

#### b) Teaching approaches

Nearly all the heads of history who were interviewed saw teaching approaches as an important factor impacting on pupil take-up of the subject post KS3, and most departments actively pursued policies to develop schemes of work which involved pupils actively in their learning, which required them to think, talk and work collaboratively with other pupils. There appeared to be a general awareness of recent research and inspection findings which suggested that over reliance on the use of text books and work sheets, and excessive teacher exposition, had a negative influence on pupils' engagement with the subject (Ofsted, 2005, QCA, 2005). Many respondents mentioned *Teaching History* as an important influence on the sorts of activity which pupils undertook, and several acknowledged that their department had extended the breadth of activities which pupils were likely to undertake in history lessons, in a way which had improved pupils' disposition towards the subject. 'Thinking skills' approaches, the 'Thinking History' website, and the active learning approaches of Ian Dawson and Ian Luff were mentioned by a number of interviewees. In the focus group responses, 20 out of 21 respondents mentioned the use of roleplay as a teaching approach which was felt to have enhanced pupil motivation in history. In terms of the 'weighting' of factors within departmental control which were thought to influence take-up, teaching approaches emerged as second only to the calibre of staff in the responses of those surveyed.

#### c) Use of ICT

Linked to teaching approaches is the use of ICT in school history. The most recent Ofsted report on history (Ofsted, 2007) raises the question of the extent to which history teachers are making the most of the potential of new technology for improving teaching and learning in history. The skill with which new technology is deployed at KS3 may be one of the factors influencing pupil choice at 14, with some research from the United States arguing that pupils are starting to opt for subjects where they feel there will be a strong ICT 'input' (Phillips, 2002).

Extensive use of ICT was not seen as the *sine qua non* for high take-up of the subject at KS4. Advisors were keen to stress that there were many history departments with strong take-up post 14 who were not 'advanced' in ICT terms. The point was raised that it is partly about how adroitly ICT is used, rather than how much it is used. One head of history reported that pupils at his school had petitioned the head to protest at the over-use (and abuse) of PowerPoint.

There were some advisors and some heads of history who felt that use of ICT at KS3 had helped with take-up at KS4. One curriculum tutor saw it primarily as a 'sub-set' of the question of initiative with resources:

*'Some departments make the most of the internet, get hold of good ideas from the best history websites, images and clips to brighten up PowerPoint... the internet is now a godsend for history teachers but there are still some departments who are reliant on text books, worksheets and teacher talk to a depressing extent... there's just less effort and initiative going into planning lessons... it's not as if you have to generate all your own ideas these days... there's plenty of stuff out there.'*

However, in another case, a head of department felt that more advanced use of ICT had boosted the department's profile, 'image' and take-up at KS4:

*'We have got some teachers who make good use of the internet, who can use the interactive stuff on School History, Active History and so on creatively, and who can use PowerPoint well.... We are starting to see a difference in terms of take up at Key Stage 4.... We are all pretty good with technology, the kids use moviemaker to make their own films and presentations... which they really enjoy... we have a revision website which we launched with T shirts and publicity posters... the pupils use it a lot, our take up is very healthy, we are one of the biggest option groups in the school now. It's not just about ICT but ICT has helped.'*

Although responses indicated that it was possible to get high take-up for history without extensive development of the use of ICT, the question of how ICT might be used to enhance pupil motivation and engagement in history seems a pertinent one for history departments to consider.

#### d) Departmental presence and energy

This was thought by some respondents to be more about energy and drive than cohesion and consensus. Several advisors mentioned the word 'buzz' about high uptake

departments; collaborative planning, good sharing of ideas and resources, more than one excellent teacher within the same department... sparking ideas off each other, high-quality and high profile trips, visiting speakers and 'special occasions' lessons, departmental revision websites, twilight GCSE sets and lessons for parents were all mentioned as examples of activities which high energy departments engaged in, but there was also a view that it was not principally about 'one-offs' and special events but about the energy and creativity that went into planning learning experiences for pupils, with powerful resources and varied, stimulating activities, day in, day out.

It seems possible that some departments have responded more vigorously, proactively and creatively to the challenge of history being made optional at KS4, and to the change factors which most respondents seemed to feel meant that history was 'swimming against the tide' in current circumstances and prevailing trends. Although some advisors mentioned dynamic and high calibre new teachers from strong ITE providers as being a catalyst for departmental energy, another felt that '*good "buzzy" mid-career teachers*' were often at the heart of the most successful departments.

#### e) Content

This was generally felt to be less important than teaching approaches but some departments had experimented with recasting their schemes of work, particularly in year 9, to try and present the subject in a way that would appeal to pupils.

Some advisors saw this as part of the continuum between those departments who were constantly and energetically thinking about how to make the study of history as positive as possible for pupils and those who were delivering or 'rolling out' a curriculum and teaching topics they, as teachers, liked and were familiar with. Some heads of department felt strongly that teachers should be responsive to what their pupils were interested in. Some departments had feedback systems to explore what pupils had and had not enjoyed about studying history. In one county, the advisor reported that in two high take-up departments, pupils were given a say in possible content options and timings of topics. In one school, the department adapted the questionnaire used in the 2005 survey on pupil perceptions and added a question asking why pupils had chosen to drop the subject at the end of KS3. Some departments seem to attach more importance to, and make more effort to find out, what pupils might find interesting and/or important in history.

#### f) Dialogue with pupils about the purposes and benefits of school history

This is another area where there may be a wide variety of practice. Several recent surveys suggest that many pupils have only a very limited understanding of why they do history in school (Biddulph and Adey, 2001, Fink, 2004, QCA, 2005). Many of the teachers involved in the first phase of the research expressed surprise at the number of their pupils who did not appear to understand why they had to do history, and said that they had paid more attention to this in curriculum planning, often with pleasing and positive results in terms of pupils' responses. However, we are aware that not all teachers will have read the recent research findings on pupil perceptions of the purposes of school history.

Whereas nearly all history departments seem to have taken a keen interest in the effect of teaching approaches on pupil engagement and KS4 take-up, it seems that far fewer departments have extensively explored the possible benefits of being more explicit with pupils in discussing the purposes of school history, both in terms of the overall benefits of studying history, and in terms of the benefits of studying particular topics. This might be one way of improving take-up rates post-14, and improving pupil dispositions to history more generally.

### **3.4. Parental influence on take-up at KS4**

Most history teachers reported that parents had differing views on the worth of pursuing history beyond KS3, with some replicating the commonly held pupils' view that it was not useful unless you wanted to be a history teacher or an archaeologist (Adey and Biddulph, 2001, QCA, 2005). However, several heads of history felt that parental background made a difference, with parents from middle class backgrounds being more likely to support their pupils in taking history at KS4 (and in some cases, overruling their offspring and insisting they did history). In some cases this was felt to have reduced the total number of pupils studying history, but improved the ability profile of the KS4 cohort. This also raises the question of whether schools in more affluent catchment areas will have larger history cohorts at KS4 than in less affluent areas (or indeed, whether this is already the case).

### **4. Concern over the limited time available to effectively deliver all aspects of the National Curriculum for history at KS3**

One of history teachers' major concerns was that even within the framework of a three year KS3, the limited time allocated to history on the timetable at KS3 meant that departments struggled to deliver all aspects of the National Curriculum for history in a satisfactory way. In terms of the history teachers surveyed, this appeared to be a more urgent concern than the question of whether history should be compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 16. Many respondents felt that if pupils could drop history at 14, it was all the more important that every pupil should at least have a proper 'grounding' in history by the age of 14.

### **5. History teachers' views on compulsory history to 16**

A majority of respondents had reservations about making history compulsory to 16. All those surveyed acknowledged the existence of a group of pupils who were profoundly disenchanted with history by year 9. Several respondents felt that pupils should have some form of historical education up to the age of 16, but that current options post-14 were not appropriate. Some teachers felt uneasy about forcing pupils to do history post-14 but thought that pupils should have to do at least one humanities subject (of their choice) post-14.

### **6. Does research make a difference?**

We interviewed 12 of the teachers who had been involved in phase 1 of the research. Most of them felt that involvement in the research had led them to review what they did to commit pupils to the study of history in school, both at KS3 and beyond, and several

of them expressed surprise at the extent to which pupils seemed to lack understanding of why they did history in school. In the words of one Head of Department:

*'I was surprised how many of them don't understand why they are doing it... perhaps we take it for granted. It has made me more aware of this in my teaching.'*

In some cases, departments had adjusted their approaches to planning in order to be more explicit about why particular topics, and history in general, were pertinent to pupils. Repeat surveying of pupils using the original questionnaire showed that more pupils were able to give responses to the questions about the purposes of school history which bore some relation to those detailed in curriculum specifications. One department which had looked at the research on the QCA website surveyed the whole of their year 9 cohort, amending the original questionnaire to include a question asking pupils who were dropping the subject at KS4 to give a reason for their decision.

But even some of those involved in the initial research acknowledged that not all the department had read the report, and many of the teachers not involved with phase 1 of the research admitted that they were not aware of the findings, and found it difficult to make time to look at either the QCA or Ofsted websites.

There is a body of research about pupils' responses to history in secondary schools, and there are probably very few history teachers who are indifferent to pupils' regard for their history lessons, and about post-14 take-up of the subject. This raises the question of how the evidence base in this field might be rendered more accessible to teachers.

## **7. Conclusions**

a) The overall picture of around 3 in 10 pupils pursuing history post KS3 conceals massive variations in take-up. There are many schools where history is the biggest option choice and the subject appears to be thriving.

b) Take-up of history post KS3 is affected by a range of factors and numbers post-14 are not simply a reflection on the strength and quality of the history department. There is a strong 'school effect', influenced by factors such as tradition, socio-economic background of pupils and the 'steer' which SMTs put on recent curriculum initiatives. However, advisors and ITE curriculum tutors believed that there were things that 'smaller' departments could learn from departments with high take-up.

c) Although history numbers are not 'in freefall', and the decrease is less than in some other subjects, most history teachers shared the concern recently expressed by Ofsted (2005, 2007) that there are currently several curriculum pressures leading to a marginalisation of history, and the humanities in general. The five heads or assistant heads who contributed to the survey all envisaged fewer pupils taking history at KS4 in forthcoming years, mainly because of an increase in vocational pathways.

d) The move away from the comparatively uniform 'entitlement' National Curriculum Mark 1 has resulted in very different patterns at KS4, depending on SMT policies and preferences. There appear to be some schools where heads and SMTs do not feel that a humanities subject post KS4 is a necessity, for some or even all of their pupils. In spite

of the high profile of the Ajegbo Report and political and media coverage of 'Britishness', identity and citizenship issues, there is a need for history teachers to make the case for history to parents and SMTs as well as to pupils. We appear to be moving more and more to a situation where some pupils receive a 'liberal' education, and others a more utilitarian one, depending on which school they go to.

e) There is evidence to suggest that in some schools, less able pupils are being counselled away from taking history at KS4. Many respondents felt that in some cases this was motivated by a concern to improve the school's public examination profiles.

f) There were several factors relating to the characteristics of the history department which were thought to contribute to high take-up in the subject. Pedagogic subject knowledge was generally thought to be more important than subject content knowledge, with teachers having '*a sense of audience*' to approach the subject and individual topics in a way that related to their pupils' lives and interests, and linked the past to the present. Good skills of interaction with pupils and the ability to secure a relaxed but controlled working atmosphere in the classroom were also felt to be key factors. Consistently high quality planning at KS3 was also felt to be important, both in terms of initiative with resources, and active, varied learning experiences which required pupils to think, discuss and contribute, rather than a staple diet of teacher talk, text books and worksheets. Some departments had high-take-up without being in any way 'advanced' in ICT, but in some cases, skilful use of new technology appeared to be helpful to high take-up, and how to make best use of ICT was felt to be a pertinent question to consider by many respondents.

g) Nearly all departments had considered the effect of teaching approaches on pupil engagement and take-up post-14 and were working hard to develop schemes of work with incorporated stimulating and varied activities for pupils. However, there appeared to be fewer departments which gave as much consideration to developing pupils' understanding of the purposes and benefits of history, and the particular salience of topics within it. Many of the departments involved in the first phase of the research, which suggested that large numbers of pupils 'don't see the point' of the subject, had made an attempt to address this in their subsequent planning, with positive results. Making the purposes of history more explicit to pupils, both in terms of the subject as a whole, and the particular topics and themes which are taught, may be one of the ways of improving pupil attitude and commitment to the subject, both at KS3 and beyond.

h) Most of the teachers involved in the first phase of the research had reviewed some aspects of their departmental practice in the light of the findings. In particular, teachers were surprised at their pupils' views on why they did history at school, and had taken some steps to address these in their subsequent planning. However, in spite of the fact that there is now a substantial body of research about pupils' responses to the enterprise of school history, it is often difficult to disseminate these findings in a succinct and effective form given the 'busyness' of teachers' lives. One way of addressing this might be for QCA to e-mail to ITE providers and history advisors bulletins and executive summaries of recent research and inspection findings (with links to fuller versions for those who want to access them). History curriculum tutors in ITE in particular are often looking for 'new' items to enliven and make more purposeful their regular meetings with mentors, and this would be a more direct step, compared to simply having such materials on the QCA website.

i) There have been several calls for subjects to be taught in a way that is ‘more relevant’ to pupils’ lives (Rammell, 2006, Ofsted, 2007), and the issue of relevance has become a contested issue in school history. This raises the question of ‘relevant to whom?’ There is a tension here between what ‘the grown ups’ think is relevant (and the ‘what every child should know’ approach), and what pupils think is relevant. There is some recent research (Ribbens, 2005, Grever, 2006) which shows that pupils are interested in their family history, and in issues/events such as 9/11, terrorism, migration and recent social history. It is less certain that they are interested in (or that they find relevant) the constitutional landmarks of the national past, and issues such as relations between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Many high take-up departments had taken into account and been responsive to pupils’ views and interests, tried to ‘mediate’ the National Curriculum in the light of these, and placed pupil motivation and engagement very high in their priorities for planning.

j) The variation in take-up of history post-14 suggests that there are things which departments can do to engage pupils in school history and to get beyond desultory compliance and task management. There would appear to be ‘a lot to play for’ in terms of the position of history on the school curriculum, given the ‘opening up’ of the KS4 curriculum and the competing pressures on policymakers and school leaders.

## The context of the research

The first phase of the research focused on pupil perceptions of history at Key Stage 3, and in particular, their views on what they liked and disliked about the way the subject was taught, and why they thought history was part of the school curriculum. The report added to the evidence base in this area (see, for instance, Aldrich, 1987, Adey and Biddulph, 2001, Biddulph and Adey, 2001, Hooper, 2001, Fink, 2004, Haydn, 2004, Lomas, 2005, Harris and Haydn, 2006).

The second phase of the research has focused on the views of history teachers on the issue of post-14 take up of the subject, and in particular, their views on the school and departmental factors which influenced the number of pupils opting to take history at Key Stage 4.

The research was undertaken at a time when concern has been expressed about history's position on the school curriculum. The status of the subject has fluctuated considerably since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1991. Initially compulsory until the age of 16, the Dearing Review in 1994 and subsequent revision of the National Curriculum in 1995 made it possible for pupils to drop the subject at the age of 14, since when, significant numbers of pupils have availed themselves of that choice. After a drop in numbers opting to take history between 1995 and 1998, numbers increased both at GCSE and AS/A2 level up to 2004 (Freeman, 2004). Since then, a succession of HMI reports have painted a worrying picture about the prospects for the subject's status on the secondary curriculum. The 2004/5 Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of schools stated that:

There is evidence that history is playing (and will play) an increasingly marginal role in the wider curriculum as schools give greater emphasis to literacy, numeracy and vocational subjects. Compared with these other subjects, history is seen as less important and relevant to many pupils. Only three in ten pupils continue with the subject post-14 and even fewer post-16.

(Ofsted, 2005)

The 2007 Ofsted publication *History in the balance: history in English schools 2003-7* (Ofsted, 2007), as its title suggests, confirmed these concerns, and provides substantiation for them. The headline statistic that has probably evinced most public attention and concern is the report that 'in secondary schools, only just over 30% of pupils study the subject in Key Stage 4 and fewer still post-16, which means that a substantial number never consider important historical issues when they are mature enough to do so' (Ofsted, 2007: 4). In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of current provision, the report concludes that 'the biggest issue for school history is its limited place in the curriculum (Ofsted, 2007: 28).

It is worth noting that concern about history's place on the secondary curriculum is not limited to the issues of pupils 'voting with their feet' against the subject. Nicolas Kinloch, Deputy President of the Historical Association talked of history teaching and teachers facing 'some significant problems and challenges over the next few years' (Kinloch, 2006), describing history's place on the curriculum as 'desperate but not critical.' Kinloch is one of several commentators arguing that the limited uptake of

history at Key Stage 4 was not due to pupil antipathy or indifference to the subject, but to pressure from school management teams:

In some schools, heads are only allowing students to study history if they are likely to get a high grade: history is under pressure from 'easier' subjects and may be in danger of relegation to an academic ghetto.

(Kinloch, 2006: 76)

David Nicholls, Professor of History at Manchester Metropolitan University talks of 'an insidious campaign being waged in schools to dissuade youngsters from taking the subject after Key Stage 3', claiming that 'in some schools the timetable is structured so as to make history unavailable to many students', by headteachers 'anxious to secure the best results in the league tables' (Nicholls, 2004). In a keynote address to the HTEN Conference, Chris Culpin, Director of the Schools History Project also noted the existence of schools 'where it is not possible for all pupils to do history post Key Stage 3', and where pupils were in effect being told by the school that 'yours is a different path...' (Culpin, 2006).

In addition to the question of whether there is 'an entitlement' for pupils in English schools to do history post Key Stage 3, concern has also been expressed about the time allocation for history at Key Stage 3 (Freeman, 2004, Mynard, 2005, Culpin, 2006, Ofsted, 2007), with some departments reduced to a timetable allocation of only 50 minutes per week. Concern has also been expressed about the move to a two year programme for Key Stage 3, meaning that a historical education for some pupils ends at the age of 13.

There is a degree of irony or paradox in some elements of the current concern about history's place on the curriculum. Against the prediction that a 'dark age for history looms' (Lepkowska, 2004), numbers of pupils taking history at GCSE and A level are not 'in freefall' (Freeman, 2004, Ofsted, 2007, Daily Telegraph, 24 August 2007). Political support for history as a school subject is still robust from all political parties (see, for example, Meikle, 2006, Lightfoot, 2007), particularly in view of the high profile of citizenship, identity and 'Britishness' issues. Ofsted (2007) also point to the high profile and popularity of history programmes on television, and the first phase of this research found that in answer to the question, 'Are you interested in history outside school (reading about it, watching history programmes on TV, exploring history on the internet?)', 49.3 % of the 1,740 pupils surveyed responded 'yes'.

And yet, in spite of the comparative stability of numbers opting to take history at GCSE and AS/A2 level, there appear to be major concerns about history's future on the school curriculum, both within and beyond the history education community. This may be in part due to the significant 'change agents' relating to the school curriculum, which have only recently emerged, and whose effects may at this point be difficult to ascertain with any degree of confidence or accuracy. These include the question of how school management teams envisage history contributing to the imperatives of the *Every child matters* agenda (DfES, 2004), the current debate over the relative merits of 'competence' versus discipline based curricula (see, for example, Lambert, 2006), the introduction of vocationally oriented specialist diplomas at Key Stage 4, the lure of what Lambert (2004) terms 'predator' subjects, and the effect of some schools moving to a two year Key Stage 3 curriculum. There is some evidence to suggest that these

changes are viewed as threats rather than opportunities for school history, with Ofsted noting that ‘there is evidence that the subject is becoming even more marginal with some schools’ introduction of the two year Key Stage 3 curriculum and the increased interest in vocational subjects’ (Ofsted, 2007: 28).

One further factor which had an influence on the research design and the questions posed to history teachers and advisors was the recent concern about pupil disaffection and disengagement from learning (Elliott and Zamorski, 2002, DfES, 2005, Kinder and Kendall, 2005, Lord and Jones, 2005). There is evidence to suggest that poor pupil performance in some school subjects stems primarily from lack of effort and interest rather than lack of ability. Haydn (2004) and Lord and Jones (2005) found subject dimensions to pupil disengagement from learning, with pupils having views on subject status and utility. A DfES report on ethnicity and education found that history was one of the most frequently cited ‘least favourite’ subjects on the curriculum for pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds (DfES, 2006). The question of ‘relevance’ also features prominently in recent Ofsted reports on school history, and in political discourse generally. This raises the question of what policy makers, history teachers, and pupils in schools consider to be relevant in terms of a historical education. Phase 1 of the research (QCA, 2005) suggested that there are many pupils who regard school history as both boring and useless (although seemingly fewer pupils than in previous comparable surveys). This phase of the research focused on history teachers’ responses and reactions to the challenges of motivating and engaging pupils, and persuading them to commit to the subject beyond Key Stage 3.

There are probably few Heads of History who are indifferent to the number of pupils choosing to opt for the subject at Key Stage 4 in their department. Also, given the high profile of recent public statements on the marginalisation of history in the school curriculum, there are probably few history teachers who are not concerned about take-up of history post-14 (and the ‘health’ of the subject pre-14). One of the main aims of the research was to provide further insight into the factors which influence whether pupils choose to study history beyond the age of 14, but in interviews with history teachers and advisors, there was also an attempt to gain insight into other factors which history educators felt were relevant to the quality of how history was taught in schools, and to the status of the subject and the morale of those who taught it.

## **Research design**

Post 14 take-up of history was analysed across two counties in different areas of the country and 37 individual interviews were conducted, in schools in London, the South Coast and the East of England. Eight of the interviews were with history advisors or ITE curriculum tutors for history. In both cases, the advisors and curriculum tutors had a degree of familiarity with a wide range of history departments across the county over a period of time and had to at least some extent, an overview of the history departments they worked with.

Some of the Heads of History interviewed were those who had taken part in the initial survey of pupil perspectives on doing history at Key Stage 3. In these cases, part of the interview focused on whether on not involvement in the research had any influence on departmental policy. With one exception, the remainder of the interviews were with history teachers who worked in departments where take-up of the subject was strong. In

one case, the interview was with a Head of History who had come across the phase 1 report on pupil perspectives on the QCA website, and who had replicated the survey with his year 9 cohort, with the addition of a question which asked pupils whether they had opted for history at Key Stage 4 or not, and why. The outcomes of the survey, and the interview with the Head of History are detailed later in the report. The other form of data collection was through the use of focus group interviews with two groups of history teachers, 21 teachers in all, who were asked to discuss and note in what ways their departments attempted to make particular topics a) ‘interesting and enjoyable’ to pupils, and b) ‘important/relevant/meaningful to pupils’. In the course of the interviews, we also spoke to five head teachers or assistant heads who gave their views on how they saw history contributing to their school curriculum in the near future. Although these numbers are clearly not an authoritative picture on national trends, they do provide some pointers to the current state of affairs in school history, and possible areas for future research.

As with the first phase of the research, the survey was based on schools in London, the South Coast and the East of England, and within the constraints of the numbers of schools involved (37), an attempt was made to make the sample reasonably representative of secondary schools in the UK, in terms of rural/urban, ethnic minority background of pupils and different types of schools, although there were no academies involved in the sample.

## **Summary of findings**

### **Variations in take-up of history at Key Stage 4**

The ‘headline’ statistic of only around 30% of pupils continuing to take history post 14 disguises a much more complex picture when figures are disaggregated for individual schools. It is not a case of a fairly standard general decline, with nearly all schools travelling in the same direction in terms of history take-up post 14.

In county A, the overall number of pupils taking history in state maintained schools between 2003 and 2006 remained fairly stable (ranging from 2804 pupils in 2003 to 2883 in 2006). However, within this overall picture, there was a degree of volatility and fluctuation. Six schools more than doubled their uptake in history between 2005 and 2006, and several others increased their uptake substantially. In one comprehensive school, history was compulsory across the cohort until 2006, with this school entering 242 candidates. In two schools, over 80% of pupils opted for history. In six other schools, over half the year cohort was entered for history GCSE, and in all, 14 of the 52 schools in the survey entered more than 40% of the cohort for GCSE history, significantly above the ‘three in ten’ figure cited by Ofsted. Given the proliferation of new subjects offered at Key Stage 4, and the fact that history was in some cases competing against up to nine other subjects within one option pool, the ‘3 in 10’ figure seems a slightly less startling figure. In several of the schools surveyed, history was either the most popular or next to most popular option choice at KS4.

At the other end of the spectrum however, were schools with very few GCSE history entries. In 2005, there was one comprehensive school where history was not timetabled

at GCSE level. One school had only one GCSE entry and another only 9. In 2006, out of 52 secondary schools, four had less than 10% of the year cohort entered for history GCSE, and 13 schools had under 20% entered for history.

A similar picture was presented in County B, with overall numbers entered for history PGCE remaining fairly stable, but wide disparities between individual schools. Although there were some fluctuations in departmental take-up over the 3 years surveyed (2004-6), as with County A, the majority of departments followed broadly similar trajectories in terms of GCSE entries, with some departments appearing to be 'traditionally strong' in terms of Key Stage 4 numbers, and others consistently returning lower numbers. In 2006, out of 37 schools, GCSE entries for history varied between 126 to 12, with three schools entering over 100 pupils, and three schools entering under 20 pupils.

It is important to stress that although as a generalisation, strong take-up of history post Key Stage 3 may in some cases be a positive indicator of the quality of history teaching in the school, it would not be a safe or valid way of assessing the quality and effectiveness of history departments as there were clearly factors influencing take-up which lay beyond the control of the department. One history advisor spoke of inspirational Heads of History heroically keeping the subject alive in their school '*against considerable odds and often also as solo subject specialists*'. There was an acknowledgement that it was '*not a level playing field*' when it came to Key Stage 4 take-up of history, and that whereas some SMTs structured the options system in a way that was '*sympathetic*' to history and/or the humanities generally, in other schools, history departments were going '*against the grain*' of the way the SMT wanted to move the curriculum. It was felt that some heads and managers had a stronger commitment to the humanities than others. One advisor reported that:

*'Option systems are changing in very different ways... some schools are managing to sustain and gain figures while others are facing different challenges and competition elements... changing curriculum priorities and pathways, narrowing of options, targets for courses in specialist schools etc.'*

In one school, until recently history was compulsory to the age of 16 for all pupils, so the fact that over 400 pupils took history at Key Stage 4 could not be attributed solely to the excellence of the history teaching in the school. However, even now that history is no longer compulsory, the head of department acknowledged that there was a strong tradition of taking history at the school which meant that numbers remained very high, even when the subject was made optional. One school which had an excellent Ofsted report for the quality of history teaching, and which has an advanced skills teacher (AST) with a national reputation as head of department had quite modest take-up of history post 14; not far from the 30% figure cited by Ofsted (2007). The nature of the school's intake appeared to be a factor in some cases. Several respondents felt that schools with a lower socio-economic intake were likely to have smaller history cohorts post-14. The type of school was also felt to be a factor. A Head of History at an independent school acknowledged that history's position was safe and secure, not just because results were good and the department was well staffed, but because the head and parents valued the subject, it had high status and a generous time allocation at Key Stage 3. History was the most popular option both at post 16 and GCSE:

*'Over half the year group take history at AS... and we offer 23 subjects at AS... Take up has always been strong but is gaining ground. Parents still see history as a strong academic subject, and often pupils doing 3 sciences on track for medicine do history as a fourth subject because the exam grades are good. It's a similar story at KS4... there is free pupil choice... no obligation to take history but over 75% of pupils have opted for the subject over the past two years.'* (Head of History at an independent school)

However, some schools were clearly not immune from the change factors described earlier in the report. A Head of History at a southern grammar school reported that history numbers had fallen by roughly 50% after the school achieved specialist status in Business Studies.

One of the main aims of this phase of the research was to find out what factors explained the wide variation in take-up for history post-14. Although nearly all respondents – teachers and advisors - were keen to stress that national policy developments and head/SMT 'steer' on the curriculum were important factors, they also believed that in most cases, the actions of the history department could also have an influence on post-14 take-up of the subject. Having detailed the range of factors influencing take-up which were beyond the control of the history department, one advisor went on to add that *'large cohorts are traditionally entered from our strongest departments.'*

## **Respondents' views on variations in post-14 take-up of history**

In terms of the outcomes of the interviews, interviewees views on the factors influencing pupil take-up of history post Key Stage 3 can be divided into four main categories:

- national policy developments and trends (such as the move away from the 'Mark 1' National Curriculum, increased emphasis on vocational subjects and on literacy, numeracy and ICT, 'choice' and personalisation, specialist school status, increased pressure on heads to improve examination performance)
- factors deriving from whole school/senior management team policy and their interpretation/steer on national policy
- factors which were within the compass of the history department.
- parents' views about the usefulness of history as a school subject

### **a) National policy developments and trends**

Respondents' views on these are detailed in pages 3-5 of the executive summary.

### **b) 'School effect': whole school and SMT policy influences on post-14 take-up of history**

i) Senior Management Team perspectives on history at KS4

The 'steer' or direction given to the curriculum by the Head and Senior Management Team of the school was, not unsurprisingly, thought to be a major factor influencing take-up of history post 14, with many interviewees expressing the view that their SMTs did not regard history or the humanities as an essential component of the post-14 education of all pupils. Interviews with a small number of heads and assistant heads seemed to support this concern, although the numbers involved were clearly not large enough to draw firm conclusions in this area.

One head at a school which had over 50% of its pupils on the Special Educational Needs Register admitted that:

*'It is envisaged that many more pupils will do a curriculum which has at least some vocational elements... to the extent that those pupils studying a curriculum of entirely 'traditional' subjects will be in a minority. This will obviously have implications for options subjects such as history and geography.'*

Two other headteachers believed that the introduction of specialist diplomas would have an adverse effect on history take-up post Key Stage 3:

*'There is going to be a shift.... More pupils at KS4 taking some vocational subjects and therefore correspondingly fewer pupils taking more traditional subjects, those subject will occupy less space on the timetable. In this situation, with more subjects within KS4 option pools even apart from vocational options, history and geography may struggle to stay viable.... I can easily see around half of our pupils on primarily vocational options post KS3.'*

*'At present 40 to 50 of our Key Stage 4 pupils have some F/E based provision but this "entitlement" is to be extended, and it is expected that many more pupils will be going down this route.'*

One Assistant Head acknowledged that the pressure to maximise the 'headline' A\*-C pass rate at GCSE was a factor which militated against humanities subjects:

*'Another thing that will affect take-up in subjects like geography and history are things like the Allen course for maths and English, the latest GCSE fiddle.'*

In one school, recent curriculum changes had already eroded the staffing and timetable allocation for history:

*'We are a big comprehensive school (over 1,500 pupils) and a few years ago there were 4 to 5 teachers whose main teaching subject was history. This has now changed to a position where there is now only one teacher whose main teaching subject is history, the head of department, and there is not now a Head of Humanities.'* (Assistant Head)

Another Assistant Head talked of the practice of employing history PGCE students who had proved to be capable whilst on school placement to teach other subjects:

*'We've employed history trainees in the past who've worked here on school placement and done well to teach other subjects if we haven't got a job going here... which we usually haven't as we are a pretty stable department.... Mainly in the Humanities area... RE, English... if they have learned to be good history teachers we think with the right support they are likely to be able to adapt to teach other subjects where teacher supply is not as strong. We are thinking about doing it again this year... we have got a very good history trainee who is exemplary in his professionalism and conscientiousness... we would like to keep him and the way things are going in this school, we are going to have a lot more call for flexible and adaptable teachers who can turn their hand to teaching new subjects and courses.... There is unlikely to be more history on the timetable and probable there will be less as the 14-19 changes take effect.'*

The emphasis which heads placed on forthcoming, as against past curriculum changes, perhaps goes some way to explaining the recent concerns about history's place on the curriculum, in spite of relatively stable take-up over the past decade (with much smaller recent falls than French, German, ICT and Geography).

It is important to note that this very small sample of Heads and Assistant Heads may be unrepresentative, and there is obviously scope for further exploration of Heads' and SMT's views on what form a humanities entitlement for pupils post-14 might take.

The most recent Ofsted Report on history (Ofsted, 2007) acknowledges the possibility that many heads and senior managers are not convinced of the virtues of history post-14, and notes that in some cases, this is because of a perceived lack of relevance in the form which current post-14 history provision takes:

It is also important to acknowledge that some policy developers, senior school managers, parents and pupils do not perceive history as either relevant or important compared with other subjects. Many see it as 'bookish', aimed only at the more academic pupil and too concerned with detail about the Romans, or the Tudors, or Hitler to be really helpful in developing pupils' understanding of today's world. One headteacher interviewed during an inspection offered a view of what needed to be done to make history more relevant. He had little time for the subject, but acknowledged that it could be useful to his pupils if teaching focused on 'functional' history that would help them understand how values have developed, would tell the stories of the communities they will work in, and would fill in the historical background to what they read in newspapers and elsewhere.

(Ofsted, 2007: 29)

It is also important to stress that in both the counties surveyed in this study, there were several history departments which had expanded substantially over the past several years, both in terms of staffing and in the numbers of post-14 history groups

timetabled. The current position is not one of steady and ineluctable attrition of history across the board and there must be many heads and SMTs who are happy to sustain a large history department and cohort of pupils doing history post-14.

One advisor spoke of a '*polarisation*' of history uptake across schools in recent years:

*'In some schools it is flourishing, partly because there is a really strong department but it also depends on the SMT... and that might be a bigger factor overall.. whether they believe in the humanities... whether they are keeping some concern for balance or whether they are really pushing the core, ICT and vocational to maximise the indicators.'*

The combination of national policy initiatives relating to the 14-19 curriculum, and differing school implementation of these initiatives means that we appear to be moving more and more to a situation where some pupils receive a 'liberal' education, and others a more utilitarian one, depending on which school they go to.

## ii) The changing pattern of school options systems

The way that options systems operate in schools was a factor cited by all of the history teachers interviewed, as a factor that could either support or restrict pupils' ability to study the subject beyond the end of Key Stage 3. The 'ring fencing' of some subjects, the introduction of new subjects, the setting of options blocks where history is competing against more subjects can all have a major impact on the position of the subject. The traditional competition and rivalry between history and geography was felt to be less important than in the past, given that in many schools, pupils could opt to do both or neither, but there were still some schools where geography and history were in competition for pupils at Key Stage 4:

*'The uptake within the school for history is quite high, but this is due to the options block where pupils have to choose between history and Geography.... Geography in the school is described as dire so for many pupils History is the lesser of 2 evils, so for many pupils opting to do history is a negative choice.'*

*'We have a new Head of Geography, she is definitely competition for us, she, her option numbers went up last year from about sixty to about a hundred and twenty.'*

A recurring theme, mentioned by nearly all the teachers interviewed, is the introduction of a growing number of subjects available at GCSE; one teacher referred to 'shiny subjects' such as Media Studies, Sociology and Critical Thinking; subjects that have not been studied previously and perhaps have a natural appeal due to their newness. In the words of one respondent, '*It doesn't matter what you do at KS3 to attract pupils if "shiny subjects" are on offer at KS4.*' The gathering momentum to introduce vocational subjects into the curriculum at Key Stage 4 was also viewed as a concern.

In several schools, recent revisions to the options system meant that pupils did not have to take any humanities subject post Key Stage 3. The effect of this on the size and

nature of the Key Stage 4 history cohort was described as follows by a London based history AST:

*'Three years ago they did either history or geography, now they can do both or neither. The effect of opening up the options instead of insisting on "broad and balanced" is that the more able kids pick up academic subjects, the middle band do a mixture, guided into it and the bottom end do vocational. Our KS4 intake has improved as a result of this. Numbers may have gone down but we get a stronger cohort.'*

Schools have much more control over the structure of the post-14 curriculum compared to the 'Mark 1' National Curriculum which was introduced in 1991, and are exercising this control in very different ways. The growth in the number of subjects being offered at Key Stage 4, particularly what Lambert (2004) has described as 'predator' subjects, such as Media and Business Studies, and Psychology, has also threatened the 'traditional' humanities subjects of history and geography, as has the promotion of more vocational options post-14. In one school, history was only offered in one option pool and was in competition against nine other subjects. This puts a different complexion on a take-up rate of 'only' three in ten pupils. As one Head of History argued, *'In our pool, we are in competition with PE, music, drama, art, business studies and media studies... plus for obvious reasons perhaps.. kids with very poor literacy tend to drop history.. so given the competition, we feel that 3 or 4 history sets in years 10 and 11 is not bad.'*

Though there is an entitlement placed upon schools to *offer* history or geography post-14, which is being met in nearly all schools, competition from other subjects and the thrust towards more vocational provision post-14 seems likely to have a growing impact on the position of subjects like history, unless the option system is used to protect such subjects. Clearly the options system alone does not explain why only a third of pupils study history beyond KS3, but in only one case was the options system seen as positively supporting history; in many cases, respondents saw history as having to 'sink or swim' against the tide of most recent policy initiatives and trends, with humanities subjects seen as being 'bottom of the pile' in terms of subject priorities apart from their contribution to the school's external examination profile. The curriculum 'beliefs' of SMTs, their 'take' on national policy initiatives related to the school curriculum, and their subject background loyalties are obvious influences on whether the options systems will be sympathetic, neutral or slanted against history at KS4. One Head of History felt that *'the subject is pretty secure here... two of the SMT have a history background and were heads of history so we are protected perhaps because of that.'*

Interview responses suggested that the differences between history take-up at KS4 were influenced not just by the structure of the options systems set up by school management teams, but the extent to which there was 'free choice' within that system. In some schools, it was felt that within the constraints of the options system as it stood, pupils simply picked which subjects they preferred, as in the following responses:

*'There's a free choice here... kids are not stopped from doing history but for obvious reasons perhaps, kids with very poor literacy tend to drop it. But we do get some kids who will do well to get an F or a G.'*

*'There's an open choice here, they can do both history and geography or neither.... Certainly some kids have found it difficult to do history but they are not blocked from doing it.'*

*'We have day release schemes at KS4 for kids who are seriously disaffected across the curriculum but kids are not prevented from opting for history.'*

In other schools, respondents felt that strong pressure was applied to some pupils to direct them away from doing history. In some cases this was felt to be because of a concern with the school's exam profile (one head teacher spoke of 'the latest GCSE fiddle'). This was sometimes in the form of counselling weaker pupils towards vocational options, which had the effect of reducing numbers but enhancing the academic strength of the KS 4 history cohort. In others, it took the form of counselling or pressurising able pupils to take a subject which strengthened the profile of the school's chosen specialist status, for instance, a second language, which tended to reduce numbers and weaken the academic profile of history GCSE groups. Several teachers reported that they felt these pressures stemmed from a concern for the school's exam results or its specialist profile rather than from consideration for the needs of individual pupils. An advisor reported that in one school, boys were actively discouraged from taking history.

There was a degree of cynicism about some curriculum alternatives to 'traditional' GCSE subjects:

*'Yeah, we've just introduced these bloomin' ICT things that take up, oh I don't know, count for seven GCSEs or something ridiculous ...'*

*'This vocational thing, I mean, the biggest concern obviously is the results driven, the whole thing about results, results, results and that all these schools are trying to get round it by giving all these options that are easier, let's face it, and that History's being pushed out and I don't like that.'*

*'As in other schools they have now brought in an option which will in itself give pupils 4 GCSEs and this sounds very attractive to some of our pupils.'*

Several teachers expressed concern about the practice of 'steering' less able or disaffected towards vocational subjects and what one termed 'dodgy courses'. Three examples of such responses are given below:

*'It sounds a good idea but in reality pupils can find such subjects uninteresting and poorly taught and would have preferred to do history, despite its supposedly difficult academic nature'.*

*'We get quite a few kids coming up to us and saying that they would have liked to do history but have been "steered" towards vocational options which they often don't enjoy and which turn out to be not so good... they come up to you and moan about it in year 10 but obviously there's nothing you can really do or say at that stage.'*

*'All pupils are interviewed by SMT before the final decisions are made. The dept are not consulted about this at all and there is some evidence that a few pupils are pressured into taking subjects.... It seems that the SMT pushes some less able pupils towards geography rather than history.'*

*'A lot of the kids who chose business studies come up to me in the corridor and say that they wish they'd done history.'*

This use of the options system to advise, pressurise or even dictate what pupils 'choose' was mentioned in the majority of teacher interviews and was seen overwhelmingly as a response to a results driven curriculum rather than meeting the needs of individual pupils; though there was acknowledgment from a number of teachers that history was not for all pupils and that it presented academic barriers to many pupils. In one school, it was felt that even quite bright pupils were being steered strongly towards vocational options:

*'Some pupils are now being channelled... advised away from humanities. There are pupils who I would say in previous years were judged bright enough to go and do academic 'A' levels, do well in them and get a place in a good university who are now being advised to do vocational courses. There are some quite bright girls who enjoyed history and were quite keen to carry on with it but who are now doing things like childcare and leisure and tourism.'*

There is some evidence to suggest that the idea of a free 'market' at KS4, driven by pupil choice is a misleading one in at least some schools. It is clearly entirely reasonable for pupils to be given guidance by the school on their choice of subjects at KS4, but several respondents questioned the purity of motives involved in this process, in terms of whether the advice was in the interests of the school or the pupil.

### **iii) Two year Key Stage 3**

With the new flexibility in curriculum design being offered to schools a growing number are experimenting with a condensed KS3, whereby the curriculum is compressed into three rather than two years.

In the sample only three schools were currently teaching a two year KS3, however it was posing those departments a number of difficulties. There are obvious tough choices about what content to include within a two year course, but two of the teachers spoke at length about more pressing concerns. Both were struggling with teaching topics such as

World War One and the Holocaust, where they felt the pupils lacked the necessary maturity to fully appreciate what they were being taught. The other issue that came through clearly from these individuals was the problem of pace; as one teacher acknowledged pace can be a good thing but *'it comes at a price'*; namely a lack of flexibility to explore topics in suitable depth but also fails to allow the less able pupils the time to get to grips with a topic. The potential effect of this is that pupils will become more disengaged and possibly less likely to opt for history. This was certainly the case in one instance where a school experimented with a condensed KS3 but found that it had such negative effects on the less able that they have reverted back to a more traditional three year course. Another school in the sample also rejected the idea for similar reasons. Two other schools have also rejected a move to a compressed course much to the relief of the history teachers, whilst another department is concerned about the willingness of a new assistant head to push through such a change. The general consensus amongst those involved in such discussions is that it would be a detrimental move for history as a subject, as it needs the space and time to develop conceptual understanding and the substantive knowledge to underpin it. Only one respondent spoke positively about either the reality or the prospect of pupils being able to finish their historical education at the age of 13. The comments below are representative of the views of the history teachers we interviewed:

*'I went to SHP and there are heads of history who are quite worried... the trend is against us... 2 year KS3 would be disastrous for history. The idea of 2 year KS3 has been firmly rejected here... absolutely not'*

*'We try to get the core content into 2 years but obviously this is difficult. In year 8 we go from the Industrial Revolution onwards and get to around the war in the trenches... that's about it and even that is pushing it a bit.'*

*'We are not doing it but this is a big worry.... A new assistant head is really pushing for this... he's very bright and on the ball and he is claiming that lots of other schools are doing it and that we'll be left behind. We are very much against it... it's already quite difficult to bring the kids up to the present day in a meaningful way without missing out huge chunks or rushing through at such a pace that they don't get a real sense of the past.'*

*'Certainly we would be against it and would see it as potentially weakening the quality of history education that our pupils would get – trimming things to get more time for the Ofsted prioritised core.'*

*'KS3 became far too much of a rush and due to the time constraints there wasn't room to do interesting things. They only just managed to get up to D-Day before the end of Y8.'*

*'There's way too much to fit into, to fit into the two years, I just don't really understand the benefits and all the people I've spoken to don't seem to be very happy about it, all the people who've changed ...'*

*'We have to do everything lightning speed, so I'm like, hi kids, Black Death, oh, that was bad and it's like move on... you never kind of stop and chat or really get into something and if the kids want to do something it's always a bit like, aah, we've got three minutes.'*

#### **iv) Specialist status**

A substantial majority of respondents believed that the move towards most secondary schools having specialist status had a negative effect on history take-up post-14. Other than where the specialism was humanities, only one interviewee felt that specialist status had *'no impact whatsoever on history or how pupils perceive it'*. It was felt that in some schools with specialist status, considerable pressure was put upon pupils to follow subjects that support the status. In one school with a Business Studies specialist status, history suffered a big drop in numbers after being set against a Business Studies option:

*'Numbers have dropped quite drastically this year, we used to have 4 GCSE sets in each year and now we have just 2 and one of those is the short course geography/history option. In the options we are now in with Business Studies and as it's a specialist school in this area there is some pressure on pupils in terms of the overall ethos of the school. We are worried about the drastic fall in numbers, not least because it will affect our A level numbers where things have always been quite healthy.'* (Head of History, Southern Grammar School)

In another school, which had recently gained languages status, the Head of History believed that pupils, and in particular the more able pupils, were being pressurised to do two languages thereby restricting the possibility of studying a humanities subject, and in another school with a new performing arts status, a letter from the school explaining the significance of the move, saw a big drop in pupils doing history, another Head of History reported that *'Sports and science status hasn't helped the history department.'* The adoption of a second specialist subject seemed to be particularly threatening to history:

*'The ICT specialism has weakened our position, in 3 years they will all take it and combined with business studies, it is bound to affect our take up, it certainly has this year.. we have slumped quite drastically.'*

*'Technology status and now the performing arts specialism mean that things are prioritised and organised around this and history is at the bottom of the pile in terms of timetabling, resourcing, publicity and profile... Many of my year 9s who were intending to do history at GCSE have been seduced away after a letter highlighting the significance of the new specialism and over a dozen have now switched to performing arts options.... As with Media Studies, it is presented as a very attractive, glamorous path.'*

It was difficult to find any comments that spoke positively about specialist status, with the exception of one Head of History who worked in a school with Humanities specialist status, and acknowledged that *'this has helped us'*, but several respondents

pointed out that there are comparatively few schools who have chosen humanities as their specialist status, and even here, the lead players and beneficiaries were often in the English department.

#### **v) Parents**

Another factor which was related to ‘school effect’ was what sort of parents sent their children to the school. There was evidence from several respondents to suggest that the socio-economic background of parents had an influence on take-up of history post-14, with parents from middle class/professional backgrounds being more likely to be keen on the idea of their children pursuing an academic subject like history, and blue collar parents being less convinced about the usefulness of the subject. The following extracts from transcripts are provided to substantiate this point:

*‘Yes, we get middle class parents saying that they do want their kids to do history. Results at GCSE A-Cs have gone up into the 60s in the last two years after two years around the 50% mark, but to be honest, I think that this is largely because the GCSE cohort has become increasingly composed of pupils from middle class backgrounds. We have a core of middle class academic kids who choose both history and geography.... We get kids saying they are going to do Drama and PE and then their parents tell them that they are doing history and that’s what happens.’*

*‘It goes both ways, some are keen for their kids to do history and are suspicious of “new” subjects, others can’t see the point of it and see it as nothing to do with getting a job and therefore not useful.’*

*‘Some of the kids are quite keen on it and want to go on but some parents are resentful and can’t see why they want to do it. Our catchment area is ‘blue collar’ and a lot of parents think of education in vocational terms, equipping their kids to get a job rather than to go on into higher education. But some are just pleased that their kids are enjoying something.’*

Several heads of department acknowledged that these factors had a dual influence on the nature of history take-up at KS4; on the one hand reducing overall numbers, and on the other, improving the ‘profile’ of pupils opting for history, in that pupils from white collar backgrounds were more likely to be supported (or even compelled) to do history by their parents.

In the one interview with a head of history from an independent school, over 75% of pupils opted for history at KS4, and this was felt to be partly because of strong parental support for the subject. There were several state schools where over 50% of pupils opted for history, and these tended to be in schools with more affluent catchment areas. Schools with less affluent catchment areas and lower GCSE results seemed to have smaller take-up at KS4, but given the small scale of the survey, this is a very tentative generalisation, and clearly, it is not possible to make valid generalisations across whole cohorts of parents.

**c) Departmental effect: factors within the compass of the history department.**

i) Staffing

The first phase of the research suggested that for many pupils, ‘teacher effect’ was generally a stronger influence than ‘subject effect’ in terms of pupils’ engagement and commitment to learning. Moreover, the teacher’s ‘personal attributes’ – what they were like as a person, their interaction with pupils generally, was often deemed to be as important as their professional and ‘pedagogical’ skills (see also, Haydn, 2004).

One advisor (whilst acknowledging factors which were beyond departmental control) said:

*‘There are probably around 10.... a dozen schools where the take up at KS4 is markedly high..... with over half the kids opting to do history at GCSE, where they’ve got 3 or even 4 GCSE sets in years 10 and 11... it’s about the extent to which the department has teachers who are particularly talented and creative... enthusiastic and able to pass that on to pupils in a relaxed way.’*

The importance of staffing was highlighted by the fact that eighteen of the teachers interviewed recognised this as crucial to the success of the department in attracting pupils to the subject:

*‘It is crucial to have a teacher who can motivate and engage pupils in the subject ... you can’t afford to have a dud ... someone who is mediocre or dull.’*

*‘The kids are fairly shrewd, they are not going to take a risk if they know they might get a duffer taking them, so you can’t afford to have a weak link in the team.’*

The quality which was mentioned most frequently by heads of history, in terms of teachers who attracted pupils to the subject, was that they were accomplished in their interactions with pupils, as the following comments indicate:

*‘At our place you have got to have good relations with the kids.’*

*‘It’s certainly not just or even primarily about subject knowledge or what sort of activities they do in the lessons although variety, some active learning and steering clear of the obvious dreary stuff like overdosing on worksheets helps... It’s partly about the teacher’s personality and how well you can get to know them.’*

*‘There are some who will take history mainly because of who will be teaching it. If you were to ask me what was the most important factor in kids’ choice, it’s the personality of the teacher and their relations with the pupils, the way they get on with them, then their pedagogical skills, and subject content probably below that.’*

*'It's a subtle mixture of things... having subject specialists definitely helps but it's not just that and it's not just what sort of activities they do in lessons... it is partly a personality thing.. the bottom line is their relations with the pupils, whether they get on with them at a human level.. every time.'*

*'Interaction with pupils is very important. I had one member of the department who had good subject knowledge, he did all the right things in terms of activities, active learning, variety but the kids couldn't stand him. Perhaps he was not confident enough to let them discuss things, there was no discussion in his lessons. I've now got someone who is exceptionally talented in terms of getting on with the kids and take up has improved as a result of that.'*

*'Pupils opt for the subject because the staff are enthusiastic, get on well with pupils, at KS3 lessons are very interactive and pupils are encouraged to think for themselves. The staff are relaxed and laid back and pupils seem to respond to this attitude, as well as enjoying how the subject is taught.'*

*'There's an issue of warmth towards the pupils.... Just general relaxed friendliness. Some departments get across to pupils 'We care deeply about what we are doing and about the quality of what you get.'*

Two examples are given here from history advisors:

*'It's not just about how they handle the content, it's about whether the teachers are good at interacting with the pupils... with strong departments who attract big post 14 cohorts, there is a buzz in the classrooms... a chemistry between the pupils and the teachers... good control... order... but in a laidback and relaxed way. One sign is the extent to which the kids contribute, open up, actively join in, are willing to contribute... even as they are coming into the room and going out.'*

*'50% of take up issues are not about history, not about the subject, it's about the teacher, and the personality of the teacher, being able to make it fun at least some of the time, having a good atmosphere in the classroom, being able to have a bit of a laugh but also being work focused most of the time.'*

In some schools, good class management skills and the ability to secure a relaxed and assured climate for learning were clearly felt to be important assets in securing pupil commitment to the subject. One head of history felt that pupils enjoyed history lessons partly because it was 'a safe zone', compared to other areas of the school. The following extracts illustrate the importance which advisors attached to departments having teachers who were in relaxed and confident control of their teaching groups:

*'A key question is whether people can get beyond defensive teaching... containment through giving them lots of written work. Worksheets every week.... defensive teaching just turns them off.'*

*'It's not just about good subject knowledge... or even knowing what to do with difficult topics like the industrial revolution... in some cases it seems to be about teachers who are "good with the kids".... in a general sense, they have well ordered, calm and relaxed classrooms where kids can learn and talk and discuss... classroom climate... in one school... a quite challenging one, the history department is particularly good at class management, the pupils can see that.'*

*'With strong departments who attract big post 14 cohorts, there is a 'buzz' in the classrooms... a chemistry between the pupils and the teachers... good control... order... but in a laidback and relaxed way. One sign is the extent to which the kids contribute, open up, actively join in, are willing to contribute... even as they are coming into the room and going out. It's a bit about teachers being able to create or manufacture a nice relaxed environment for talking about and doing history... getting past the 'us versus them' or 'I've got to keep them under control... keep them busy with writing and tasks mentality.'*

*'Kids aren't really fooled by trips and videos... they want teachers that they can get on with and that have, you know, are firm and they know where they are with and like me and X are kind of are like that, so...'*

Initiative with resources and high quality planning skills were another attribute which featured prominently. This was particularly evident in the testimony of history advisors:

*'They care about what they are doing... they don't just churn out what they did last year.... same old stuff... no tweaking or adding new resources and experimenting a bit.... Some departments are a bit lazy over planning, and less proactive in getting hold of the fantastic resources that are now so much easier to get hold off than they used to be pre-internet... and networking with other teachers.... either on the net or in cluster groups and keeping in touch with history teachers outside their department... using their memory sticks... making use of the best websites to get hold of powerful bits and pieces.'*

*'Some departments make the most of the internet, get hold of good ideas from the best history websites, images and clips to brighten up PowerPoint... the internet is now a godsend for history teachers but there are still some departments who are reliant on text books, worksheets and teacher talk to a depressing extent... there's just less effort and initiative going into planning lessons... it's not as if you have to generate all your own ideas these days... there's plenty of stuff out there.... It's good for departments to be proactive in hunting out what's out there. Even things like Youtube have made a difference.... If just one*

*bit of the lesson is interesting or enjoyable..... film, music, vivid and clever collections of images, cartoons and animations from the net... making stuff, experimenting with kinaesthetic learning... the pupils are active in the lessons, not passive.'*

One further quality which was mentioned by several respondents was the quality of teachers' pedagogic subject knowledge, in the sense of being able to present topics in a way that made sense to pupils; what one respondent termed *a sense of audience*'. It appeared to be more about how adroitly they related their historical knowledge to the pupils they were teaching, rather than their pedigree as 'academic historians'. As one advisor put it, *'It's about how they approach the content... the topics, the course. Whether they think about how to make it meaningful to the kids... how it might have some sort of relevance to their lives.'* This was echoed by a head of history who gave the following hierarchy of teacher characteristics in terms of 'what influenced take-up':

*'If you were to ask me what was the most important factor in kids' choice, it's the personality of the teacher and their relations with the pupils, the way they get on with them, then their pedagogical skills, and subject content probably below that.'*

### **Staffing constraints**

Some factors relating to the quality of history teaching in a school are clearly not within the control of the department. This was another variable, with some departments having a tightly-knit group of full-time history specialists, and others having several 'bits and pieces' teachers and non-specialists.

Some departments had staff that were either part of the senior leadership team or had other substantial responsibilities; these were often seen as strong teachers, however their responsibilities meant their classes were more likely to be disrupted:

*'Both the senior teachers are outstandingly good teachers but inevitably they are very busy and can't always make every lesson... there's lots of supply and that can... does affect take up... I try not to give them year 9s.'*

Aside from strength of the teachers, stability of staffing was mentioned by several teachers, so that pupils knew who would be likely to teach them in future. This represents a view where pupils place considerable trust in teachers; one teacher quoted a pupil as saying *'We feel happy here... (in history)... This is our safe place'* as an example of the relationships that strong, stable staffing permits.

The use of non-specialists is a moot point. It is clear from this sample that non-specialists can successfully teach the subject, but equally several departments had found this caused difficulty. Of those interviewed, only three reported having to make extensive use of non-specialist staff and in each case this had caused problems. In two departments this was exacerbated by the fact that there was only one full time history specialist. In one case this had drastically reduced the numbers of pupils opting for GCSE, whilst in the other numbers had only remained buoyant due to the dire quality

of the teaching in those subjects history had been set against. Several heads of department mentioned the use of non-specialists as a problem:

*'It's not their subject so they don't, it's just natural isn't it, you just don't care about it as much, and you don't have a good understanding about it and we don't get any time to sit down and talk to them'*

*'The dept has 6 people teaching history, but only one history specialist. The rest do bits and pieces. These teachers want something straightforward to teach, i.e. turn to page x in the textbook and answer questions y to z.'*

An advisor pointed to what he termed a 'boom and bust' effect on uptake of using non-specialists to cater for increases in history take-up:

*'Good leadership and quality teaching enable a dept to flourish but there can be a boom and bust cycle, where popularity at KS3 leads to more pupils at KS4 and so the dept needs to use non-specialist teachers at KS3 so the subject becomes less popular.'*

Overall it seems safe to agree with one teacher's comment:

*'You can get some able and talented non-specialists but on average a good history specialist will generally be better than a good non-specialist.'*

Strong staffing however is not guaranteed to attract large numbers of pupils at GCSE as the availability of staffing also can restrict pupil choice. In four cases departments had been told they would only be allowed two groups at GCSE because of staffing numbers and that pupils would be directed into other subject areas if numbers were too large; this is in stark contrast to another department who had recruited two additional staff due to the growing popularity of the subject. Some schools appear to lack the flexibility to account for shifts in pupils opting for particular subjects, and prefer to 'cap' history numbers rather than expand staff capacity in the subject:

*'It is difficult.. we have been hoping to build up the numbers as they have historically been quite low for a school of this size but there are timetabling constraints due to current staffing realities. As heads of faculties, we are told how many timetabled periods can be allotted for year 10 groups. So if there are too many to fit in 2 groups, some kids will be counselled away from history rather than setting up a third group.'*

*'We've generally done well here, numbers taking history not a problem because a lot of them enjoy the subject.... 5 GCSE groups at the moment but they don't get a free choice, things are limited by staffing and timetabling considerations. I was told there would be a maximum of 2 groups for history next year in year 10. If there are too many for the two groups, some pupils will have to study something else. I do think that we have lost quite a few bright girls as a result of this.'*

Unsurprisingly, the quality of the teachers who were taking history classes emerged as the most important factor contributing to high take-up of the subject. In terms of the characteristics of teachers who were likely to motivate and engage pupils, and contribute to good take-up at KS4, pedagogic subject knowledge, interaction with pupils, good control skills, high quality planning and initiative with resources were seen as particularly important, both by advisors and heads of department.

## ii) Teaching approaches

In some cases, heads of history believed that their contribution to whole school teaching and learning development had strengthened history's position on the timetable, and that being proactive and taking a lead in staff development in areas such as ICT, assessment for learning and general active learning approaches had 'protected them from attack'.

*'We are seen as helping with literacy and pupil engagement and we do some whole school stuff on pedagogy, we've piloted lots of stuff...'*

Several advisors stressed the impact of teaching approaches on pupil take-up, particularly in terms of the promotion of what was often termed 'active learning' and limiting the use of text books, work sheets and activities such as 'reading round the class':

*'Where departments were interested in developing active learning approaches... Ian Dawson's session had a big impact on some departments.... Departments where there was regular use of group work and pupils talking in lessons... being made to think.'*

*'Teachers who are prepared to try things out, get things from the net, initiative with getting hold of killer resources... just a broad range of active learning approaches... something different... rather than a staple diet of reading round the class, text books worksheets and so on.'*

*'It's not that "SHP departments" are more successful than others... or even that SHP ethos and approach are superior... we have some departments that are quite conservative and traditional in approach but they still attract lots of pupils because they do what they do well.... The kids still get 'active learning' not because they are doing kinaesthetic activities... roleplays etc.... but they are being made to think, and to contribute .... Topics are being problematised in a thoughtful way that gets their attention and gets them involved. There is an emphasis on whole class teaching, teacher exposition and questioning but it is skilfully done, the pupils are challenged and made to think and there is still a lot of pupil talk as well as teacher talk.'*

This echoed the feedback from heads of history:

*'Pupils opt for the subject because the staff are enthusiastic, get on well with pupils, at KS3 lessons are very interactive and pupils are*

*encouraged to think for themselves. Even pupils who tend to be in trouble elsewhere get on well in history as a rule. The staff are relaxed and laid back and pupils seem to respond to this attitude, as well as enjoying how the subject is taught.'*

### iii) Content selection

From the sample it was clear that many departments consider carefully what content they choose to teach and at what point they teach it as a means of attracting pupils to study the subject beyond KS3. Eight departments explicitly addressed this issue, discussing a combination of topics taught whilst pupils are making their options choices and what pupils will study at GCSE and clearly felt that it mattered. Several departments had revised year 9 topics (and in some cases, year 7 and 8 topics) with a view to providing content that would either be more accessible and interesting to pupils, and/or more 'relevant'. Two examples are given here:

*'Topics also make a difference... we've now got a nice year 9 course, 6 half term units... we've moved votes for women because it had a negative effect... we will do the Nazis at year 9, and the Holocaust and Civil Rights in America because they do engage the pupils... they enjoy the discussions and it seems to get across how important history is.'*

*'Pupils tend to be interested in the end of Y9 topics... Jack the Ripper, JFK and a new unit on terrorism.'*

Some respondents mentioned the tension pointed out by Byrom and Riley (2003) between covering 'important and relevant' and 'intrinsically more interesting and appealing' topics (the Industrial Revolution is a topic that is generally regarded as difficult to make interesting by History PGCE trainees):

*'They find slavery more interesting than the industrial revolution but you've got to do it because you can't understand anything about modern British history without some knowledge of the industrial revolution.'*

Many topics that are positioned to coincide with GCSE options selection appear to have a particular gravitas about them: World War One; the Nazis; the Holocaust; the Civil Rights movement in the USA; and terrorism. Other topics are chosen for their drama or element of intrigue. One department has even gone a stage further and is involving pupils in rewriting the department schemes of work and some individual lesson plans to improve the likely impact of their teaching. Obviously though it does matter what pupils study prior to this point as well, as they are unlikely to be seduced by one particular topic having been disengaged for the previous two years by the subject. A few teachers also spoke about the impact of what pupils were likely to study at GCSE. In two schools, pupils are able to study either the Modern World or SHP specifications. The impact of offering both seems to attract more pupils. A new head of department who introduced a Modern World course to run alongside the SHP course saw a dramatic increase in pupils opting, particularly from the more able boys. Another school, serving a poor socio-economic area, had introduced a course on Classical

Civilisations to go alongside the more traditional Modern World, and saw an increased uptake as a result. Whether it is the appeal of something new or whether pupils genuinely respond to particular topics is unclear, but a willingness to be flexible in what is offered appears to be attractive to pupils. One teacher was also very careful about which examination board was chosen. Though the content is similar to other exam boards, she felt the exam papers were particular difficult, purely in terms of how they were worded:

*'We did that because it's easier basically ... although actually it was to be fairer to the kids because the questions are so much more accessible and I think the AQA and the OCR are just wanting to weed out the bad ones with the question. I mean, just on the literacy level the questions are ridiculous.'*

This research does not show that teachers normally take such care over the selection of particular examination boards, though anecdotal evidence from one of the researchers suggests that this is a growing trend within one of the regions covered in this project.

Content selection and syllabus choice were generally felt to be less important than teaching approaches but some departments had experimented with recasting their schemes of work, particularly in year 9, to try and present the subject in a way that would appeal to pupils.

Some advisors saw this as part of the continuum between those departments who were constantly and energetically thinking about how to make the study of history as positive as possible for pupils and those who were delivering or 'rolling out' a curriculum and teaching topics they, as teachers, liked and were familiar with. Some heads of department felt strongly that teachers should be responsive to what their pupils were interested in. Some departments had feedback systems to explore what pupils had and had not enjoyed about studying history. In one county, the advisor reported that in two high take-up departments, pupils were given a say in possible content options and timings of topics. In one school, the department adapted the questionnaire used in the 2005 survey on pupil perceptions and added a question asking why pupils had chosen to drop the subject at the end of KS3. Some departments seem to attach more importance to, and make more effort to find out, what pupils might find interesting and/or important in history.

#### **iv) Use of new technology**

Linked to teaching approaches is the use of ICT in school history. The most recent Ofsted report on history (Ofsted, 2007) raises the question of the extent to which history teachers are making the most of the potential of new technology for improving teaching and learning in history, and the skill with which new technology is deployed at KS3 may be one of the factors influencing pupil choice at 14, with some research from the United States arguing that pupils are starting to opt for subjects where they feel there will be a strong ICT 'input' (Phillips, 2002).

Extensive use of ICT was not seen as the *sine qua non* for high take-up of the subject at KS4. Advisors were keen to stress that there were many history departments with strong take-up post 14 who were not 'advanced' in ICT terms. The point was raised

that it is partly about how adroitly ICT is used, rather than how much it is used. One head of history reported that pupils at his school had petitioned the head to protest at the over-use (and abuse) of PowerPoint.

There were some advisors and some heads of history who felt that use of ICT at KS3 had helped with take-up at KS4. One curriculum tutor saw it primarily as a 'sub-set' of the question of initiative with resources:

*'Some departments make the most of the internet, get hold of good ideas from the best history websites, images and clips to brighten up PowerPoint... the internet is now a godsend for history teachers but there are still some departments who are reliant on text books, worksheets and teacher talk to a depressing extent... there's just less effort and initiative going into planning lessons... it's not as if you have to generate all your own ideas these days... there's plenty of stuff out there.'*

However, in another case, a head of department felt that more advanced use of ICT had boosted the department's profile, 'image' and take-up at KS4:

*'We have got some teachers who make good use of the internet, who can use the interactive stuff on School History, Active History and so on creatively, and who can use PowerPoint well.... We are starting to see a difference in terms of take up at Key Stage 4.... We are all pretty good with technology, the kids use moviemaker to make their own films and presentations... which they really enjoy... we have a revision website which we launched with T shirts and publicity posters... the pupils use it a lot, our take up is very healthy, we are one of the biggest option groups in the school now. It's not just about ICT but ICT has helped.'*

The accessibility of ICT, (in terms of having data projectors and interactive whiteboards in history classrooms as much as access to computer suites) was mentioned as a helpful factor in delivering stimulating and engaging lessons:

*'We would like to have more interactive whiteboards as these might give more appeal to the subject.'*

*'One teacher now has a data projector and this is seen as enhancing the delivery of the subject.'*

Although responses indicated that it was possible to get high take-up for history without extensive development of the use of ICT, the question of how ICT might be used to enhance pupil motivation and engagement in history seems a pertinent one for history departments to consider.

#### v) Departmental leadership/vitality

Perhaps stating the obvious, it was pointed out that it was important for the head of history to get on well at a personal level with the head teacher:

*'It's crucially important to get on with the head.... There's a judgement call about being proactive and energetic on behalf of your subject and your colleagues, without being pushy, self-serving and a nuisance... it's about energy and diplomacy... good judgement.'*

There was an acknowledgement that this relationship depended on the strength of the teaching in the department and the department's exam results. Being energetic, imaginative and proactive generally as a department (either the Head of department or the department as a whole) was seen as being important, in terms of morale as well as relations with the school's SMT. Two departments ran a 'twilight' GCSE option to accommodate pupils who had wanted to do history but who had been unable to reconcile this with other option choices. Another laid on a history lesson for parents. Good departmental or history revision websites were also mentioned as being helpful, with SMT, pupils and parents.

*'Initiative with resources was seen as being part of this; We tend to use Teaching History, other books, like Enlivening Secondary History or bouncing ideas off colleagues for new ideas.'*

*'Setting a good example' as a head of department, 'leading from the front', and 'just being generally positive and energetic' were seen as being qualities likely to result in departmental presence and profile within the school:*

*'This year will be the first time that the HOD is involved in KS4 options so will be doing plenty to attract pupils to history. She teaches lots of top sets and will be targeting pupils. She has run a trip, does lots of 'hands-on' history, projects, is covering C20th and does a lot on literacy. At parents' evenings and options evening she will present it as an exciting option, wants to focus on post-war Europe, e.g. Germany and likes to include proper historians. Tries to find things that will be relevant to the pupils, e.g. votes for women leads into issues of feminism and ethnicity, often identifies a current problem and looks back to its roots.'*

*'The pupils opt for history because they like the teacher, how it is taught and the topics. Pupils value the subject if they see a teacher working hard to make it interesting... the head of history makes use of film, photos, painting and music, and many pupils want to be taught by HOD. The pupils also like to see their work displayed, have work that is marked and valued.'*

Several respondents felt that the subject was secure in their school, but primarily because of the quality and 'delivery' which the department ensured, rather than SMT's intrinsic belief in the value of the subject:

*'We've got a good department and we've got a shared kind of ethos and things are going quite well and year on year our results are getting better and I think we're being more respected by the Head and so I do feel quite secure.'*

*'They're definitely supportive, we're kind of in with the Head I think, and he likes what we're doing, I think that's ok.'*

Several advisors felt that it was not just about 'heroic' leadership but having a group of creative and proactive classroom practitioners who kept up to date with recent developments:

*'They have a critical mass of teachers who are up to date, who are aware of new ideas and approaches... read Teaching History, go to things like SHP... use the forums on School History, are proactive generally in terms of continuing to develop.'*

*'SHP seems to have a big effect where members of department had gone to it.... When I think about it, a lot of the departments with high take up are ones where someone from the department has been to SHP, although obviously it's hard to prove a link... there is one department where going to SHP had a really big influence on a department – apart from the difference in planning and teaching approaches, the GCSE A to Cs went up by over 20% the year after.'*

*'It was interesting to me to see that several of the departments with high take up had got into assessment for learning..... pupils knowing that they are making progress and getting better even if they weren't heading for the top grades.'*

*'It's a mistake to think they have all got to get on well and work as a perfect team and agree about everything... We've got departments where the teachers don't all get along amicably but there is still that core of them all being creative and imaginative in their own right... all being really enthusiastic about history and how vital it is to the kids they teach, even though they might have different ideas and approaches... and also... really caring about the pupils and wanting to do their best for them.'*

In terms of leadership, many heads of department made the point that it was helpful to have a designated history advisor for the county, and that advisors were often extremely helpful in terms of providing high quality in service training sessions and facilitating collaborative work between departments.

#### **vi) Dialogue with pupils about the purposes and benefits of school history**

Another strand of data collection entailed giving groups of history teachers (21 teachers in all) a list of commonly taught topics in the history curriculum and asking them to detail what they did a) to make the topics 'interesting and enjoyable' for pupils, and b) to make the topics 'important, relevant, meaningful' to pupils. With both groups of teachers, there was much more detailed and extensive feedback on the first of the two questions, much of it focusing on active learning strategies and teaching approaches (with 20 out of 21 teachers mentioning the use of roleplay).

In one case, observing the teachers as they completed the task, and analysing the

written responses revealed a difference in response to the two parts of the task. They were able to explain with ease and in considerable detail the various approaches they used to engage pupils, but the second part of the task was met with a degree of reticence, and in some cases, almost puzzlement. A tentative hypothesis is that in attempting to motivate, engage and commit pupils to the study of the past, some history teachers may be concentrating primarily on teaching approaches, and giving less time and attention to explaining the purposes and benefits of school history, and the ways in which particular topics and issues in the history curriculum contribute to an understanding of the world they will live in outside and beyond school. (The first phase of the research found that many pupils seemed to have a very limited understanding of the aims and purposes of school history as outlined in curriculum specifications, a finding that echoed earlier research by Biddulph and Adey 2001). As a result, some teachers seemed to be considering this further but have not yet followed this through in detail:

*'In some ways history is a 'grey' subject, this thing about there being "no right answers" ... the kids don't like that, they can't see the point of it if it doesn't give you answers.. you need to explain to them that most of the questions or decisions they will face in their lives are like that... it's about weighing evidence, balance, skills of judgement.'*

*'We have done a lot about, at the start of year 7 about why History's important and mostly to elicit their responses about why it might be important, so we've done that. I'm also working on a, my own questionnaire to ask the kids ... this thing with pupil voice... I think it's important as well and we learnt quite a lot from that'*

*'I ask... do you know why on earth I'm teaching this and I will say it as bluntly as that, do you know why we're doing this? I say to them, right, there are some people who think that History should be like got rid off, so you wouldn't necessarily learn about this, tell me why it's important that you've learnt about it.'*

*'We try and relate a lot to the present...I think everything I do says to them History's important... Fly the flag... we did the Human Rights day, the kids are off timetable and they're looking at contemporary issues, they're looking at Bosnia, so I linked it to the Holocaust ... it's about making the kids realise that what we're doing is relevant, is important.'*

*'We do some stuff about 'What is history... and why bother, at year 7 but then it dies, we don't follow it up.'*

Comments from history advisors also suggested that time and attention given to explaining the relevance of history to contemporary events and things which would influence pupils' lives when they left school were helpful, both in terms of take-up at KS4, and in terms of general motivation and engagement of pupils at KS3:

*'Making links to the present.... Talking about what has been in the newspapers.... A bit of flexibility but bringing it back to the history... not just talking about things that have nothing to do with the history they are doing... just a bit more of an eclectic approach... leading them into it... opening topics up.'*

*'Good planning... good schemes of work with good, thoughtful enquiry questions... where thought had been given to linking to the present... trying to make topics relevant or powerful in some way.'*

One head of history reported that he told pupils about the high proportion of directors of top British companies who had history degrees:

*'Their ideas about history and employment are quite naïve and they don't realise that history helps you in all sorts of way in relation to many high quality jobs... I show them and discuss with them a Guardian article (Barry, 1999) which points out that large numbers of company directors have history degrees, and why this is the case... and about history giving you skills of judgement... which is what most real life decisions require.'*

#### **vii) Strategies to promote take-up post 14**

One advisor stressed that high-take up departments had very different approaches to encouraging pupils to commit to the subject,

*'Obviously, a bit of it is how enjoyable the lessons are at KS3, but there are different factors.... Departments have very different approaches... one department has a wide range of out of classroom activities others are just good at collaborative planning.'*

All of the heads of history involved in the survey acknowledged that take-up at KS4 was an issue that concerned the department, and that some thought was given to how to encourage pupil take-up at KS4:

*'You try and put your strongest teachers on in year 9.. I have traditionally taken the top set in year 9... didn't this year and have regretted it in terms of take up.'*

*'I'm ashamed to say that we do some things to help take up... you try and put your best team out for year 9... people who are good with the kids, who make it lively, where they get a wide range of activity and the kids are actively involved and challenged.'*

*'To promote the subject at options the dept has a flashy presentation, through their teaching, especially in Y9 they attempt to relate current affairs to the past so that pupils see the relevance of the subject (they adopt a present then step into the past approach), they have displays on why history matters and why choose history, with mind maps linking history to jobs (they get pupils to create these mind maps during lesson*

*time). They also offer one to one sessions to discuss the history option for pupils.'*

There was some concern about very low ability pupils taking the subject: this was couched in terms of the effect on pupils rather than on the department's results, with the feeling that there was no appropriate history course for such pupils at present :

*'Obviously I want as many kids to take History as possible but we had a kid last year who turned up to every lesson, every... you know, revision lesson, did his coursework and he got a U and it's just horrible for everyone involved.'*

'Special events', including trips, fieldwork and visiting speakers were mentioned as factors which were likely to have a positive influence on take-up, but with some caveats:

*'The sudden appearance of trips just before option time in year 9 doesn't fool most pupils.... They can tell when teachers and departments are consistently and passionately concerned to give them a good deal... a rich variety of experiences... and when there are 'patches' of good stuff in the light of some temporary expediency.'*

*'It's not just doing trips. Some departments make more of them than others.... There are reunion evenings.... Buffet supper and slide show follow up. There was one school where it had real social benefits... it helped to stop bullying because there was a sense of solidarity amongst the kids who'd gone on the trip. There is pre-trip publicity... a buzz goes round the school, the department gets a bounce out of the trip.'*

### **viii) Examination performance**

Several Heads of Department expressed the view that history's position on the curriculum was safeguarded in part by the strength of the public examination results, and that this was protecting them from radical revision of the options system in a way which might weaken history's position in the option system. In some cases, the Head of Department expressed the feeling that only good exam results were protecting the position of the subject from 'further marginalisation'.

*'History's position is helped by the fact that the A-Cs are good.. they have gone up from under 20% to 60% and that is above the average for the school so the head is not going to mess with an area of the curriculum that is doing well in terms of the way that the school is judged. It strengthens your position in all sorts of ways... in terms of getting some of the things you want.'*

*'The results help and I'm sure this helps at the level of the pupils as well as the parents. We got 86% A to C last year with lots of As – over 50% and we've had consistently good results at A level as well. We make sure the results are up on the wall at parents' evening. The results are sustaining us, not just in terms of pupils' and parents'*

*perceptions of the subject but also the senior management team leave us alone... the results protect us to some extent. I don't think any of them have any great commitment to the subject philosophically, or even a commitment to the idea of a liberal education, but as long as the results are as good as they are, we are OK.'*

However, in some cases, even when results were good, it was felt that this was not a factor in pupil choice, and the department made no effort to exploit this:

*'Results have no impact on options choices as pupils are not told about results nor do they appear to ask.'*

*'Little pressure is put on pupils to opt for history at GCSE. Dept shows a PowerPoint and has a wall display, but HOD is not competitive and does not believe in forcing pupils to opt if they don't want to.'*

## **Other concerns**

### **Time at KS3**

This emerged as one of the most important issues for history teachers; the feeling that if history was not going to be compulsory until 16, at least there should be enough time at KS3 to give all pupils a reasonable grounding in the subject. Many felt that present time constraints made this very difficult and that in spite of the 'freeing up' of content selection since the original National Curriculum, it was difficult to cover all elements of the curriculum (in terms of coherence, the Key Elements or KSUs, citizenship and so on) in a satisfactory way. One advisor felt that time allocation to history influenced take-up:

*'Time allocation is also an issue.. time at Key Stage 3 varies and there is clearly a strong correlation between the most successful departments at KS3 and GCSE and time allocation. The most popular model is 3 hours a fortnight for years 7,8 and 9 but several departments are facing issues due to lack of time.. only have 1 hour a week at KS3. Also, departments which have a rota system within Humanities faculties have issues in terms of continuity and planning.'*

This concern was echoed by several heads of department:

*'At the moment we see them for a one hour lesson and a half hour lesson a week and I'm worried when I go he (head) will try and get rid of the half hour lesson... seeing them twice a week is crucial, it makes a massive difference, not just in terms of homework setting but in terms of how well you get to know them, momentum, getting to know them, and getting time to reflect on what they learned last time.'*

*'What we want more than anything, it more time at KS3, so that we can do a decent job on delivering the basic National Curriculum.'*

## Status/facilities/morale

Responses to questions about the overall morale of history departments in the current climate were ambivalent or mixed. The following comments are fairly representative of the responses we received:

*'Plus we are put on last on the timetable... science, maths and English go on first and we are left with the scraps... so we get a poor timetable.. I get the year 7s twice on the same day and that's it. When Ofsted came we didn't get looked at... no history lesson was seen.. all the focus was on the core subjects... we still got downgraded from very good to good.'*

*'Working with good strong colleagues makes up for a lot of things, the A-C pass rate is strong and that is also good for morale but yes, I am worried about humanities getting marginalised, there is no pressure here from the SMT, no talk of 2 year KS3, if anything, history and the humanities have stood up well in this school recently but the broader picture is less encouraging... it's all about the core, ICT, vocational subjects.'*

*'Pupils on the whole are positive about the subject. On a national level there's a tension between public demand for history and the pressures on history in the curriculum created by things like a results driven agenda which may undermine the subject.'*

*'History teachers still enjoy teaching their subject, and history teaching is very strong at the moment... but increasingly I can see the overwhelming majority of the history GCSE entry becoming dominated by private school entries. Increasingly, it's not seen as an important subject in the state sector. There is a real danger that when specialists retire there will be a temptation for heads to say that it's OK for non-specialists to take history classes at KS3, it will be like who picks up General Studies on the timetable.. it will be the last bit to be filled in with bits and pieces and whoever has got slack on their timetable. I am really worried about the place of the humanities on the curriculum... One member of the SMT actually said that "we're turning this place into a secondary modern"... It's not just humanities that are threatened, it's things like MFL and music.'*

*'I am really depressed and concerned about the way things are going in general... There is more and more emphasis on core subjects, the rationale behind doing things is either to please Ofsted, to meet narrowly defined targets and education as something to prepare them for employment.'*

It should be borne in mind that nearly all the schools surveyed in phase 2 of the research are schools where history is *currently* quite strong, with take-up significantly

above the 30% mark at KS4. These are schools where history is ‘doing well’. The following extract epitomised the ambivalence of heads of history about morale:

*‘In some ways I’m very happy with things in terms of how things are going for history, we’ve got a really good department, I work with very helpful and committed colleagues and the subject is doing well in the school. Almost half the pupils who do the subject at GCSE take up the subject in the sixth form and we have large groups at AS and A2 level – up to 25 in some cases. This is partly because the subject is well taught so they enjoy history, and the results have been very good over the past few years both at GCSE and A level so pupils feel confident that they will do well, and sometimes they are advised to do history because of our good results. GCSE numbers have also been good but I am quite worried about recent developments. We’ve all worked really hard to get where we are but things beyond our control are starting to affect things. The options system has been changed and there is now no compulsion to study any humanities subject, there are now around 30 subject options at GCSE and some pathways are promoted more vigorously than others, especially new options. I am worried that take-up will drop this year and that in due course that will feed into the A level numbers. I very much like working in a big department and don’t want to be a head of department with just 2 people in it.’*

Although morale often seemed good in terms of good exam results, high-calibre colleagues and good pupil response to the subject overall, there was a feeling of unease about the future – that things were OK at the moment, but only as long as the history department continued to be so strong in terms of exam results, lesson quality and pupil response that they would be left reasonably intact so as not to jeopardise these assets.

### **Views on whether history should be made compulsory to 16**

It might be thought that history teachers would be keen to support a return to history as a compulsory subject to the age of 16, as was the case between 1991 and 1995 in English state schools. However (in line with a recent online poll conducted by the Historical Association, June 2007), opinion appeared to be divided on the desirability of this move. All those interviewed acknowledged that by year 9, they had at least some pupils who were either really struggling to ‘get much out of the subject’, or who disliked it very strongly, or both:

*‘I actually think it would be disastrous to make it compulsory to 16, it would be utterly counter productive. We still don’t have anything meaningful outside GCSE at KS4 and there are some pupils who just can’t access the sources... as you know we have a lot of EAL kids. Kids with massive literacy problems get fed up with just feeling lost in the subject. We are not unusual I guess in having some kids who are definitely switched off from the subject by year 9, who have a profound dislike for the subject, even with teachers who are considered to be quite good at motivating pupils and getting the rest of the class quite enthusiastic about the subject... there is definitely a “Subject effect”, it’s not just about the personality and skills of the teacher.’*

*'We've got plenty of them who hate it by the end of year 9. I'm not convinced about making them all do it to 16.'*

*'We have perhaps 15 to twenty who are terminally disenchanted with history and have made their minds up firmly that they hate it.'*

*'We have a few in each of the year 9 groups who are completely switched off... I have mixed feelings about making it compulsory to 16... partly a concern for my sanity especially if it's just more of the same. There is something to be said for the status quo.'*

*'Sure we've got kids who are really turned off the subject by year 9 there are always some kids that you can't reach. We handle it in different ways. I think we all think about how to make the kids aware of the relevance of history to their lives but I'm torn, you come back to this thing about us being the only country apart from Albania that doesn't have history to 16.... On the other hand, most history teachers are not educational fascists and do care about the kids enjoying school, especially the ones who perhaps have a hard time and struggle because they are not clever... but even the less able pupils can see that history is helping them to write better.'*

*'The HOD would welcome making history compulsory to the age of 16, because many pupils do not understand politics, issues in the news and don't engage with these. However if history were to be made compulsory the GCSE would have to change as many pupils struggle with the literacy demands of the subject and so if the subject was watered down would it lose its value?'*

*'I suppose I, I like the idea because obviously I think it's important that everyone should do History but on a practical level I wouldn't want to teach kids who didn't want to do History, I wouldn't want to teach them in the classroom when they've, look as, the classes I've got now are really enthusiastic about History ... that's what part of what makes GCSE so much fun because you've got a load of kids who are already kind of converted really and you, you work with them and so I, I'd be wary of it.'*

*'Mixed feelings, on the one hand I think there should be an entitlement to a proper education in history so that pupils understand that dimension which a reasonable grasp of the national past can give them, on the other hand, I can see that these kids have really made their minds up that they hate the subject and you would be some extent forcing very unwilling pupils to do it.'*

Whereas nearly all teachers wanted more time for history at KS3, opinion was much more divided about whether history should be compulsory to the age of 16. Several respondents felt that pupils should have some form of historical education up to the age of 16, but that current options post-14 were not appropriate. Some teachers felt uneasy

about forcing pupils to do history post-14 but thought that pupils should have to do at least one humanities subject (of their choice) post-14. Some teachers felt that there were some advantages to be derived from the fact that the pupils they were teaching at KS4 had chosen to do history.

## **Does research make a difference?**

We interviewed 12 of the teachers who had been involved in phase 1 of the research. Most of them felt that involvement in the research had led them to review what they did to commit pupils to the study of history in school, both at KS3 and beyond, and several of them expressed surprise at the extent to which pupils seemed to lack understanding of why they did history in school. In the words of one Head of Department:

*'I was surprised how many of them don't understand why they are doing it... perhaps we take it for granted. It has made me more aware of this in my teaching.'*

In some cases, departments had adjusted their approaches to planning in order to be more explicit about why particular topics, and history in general, were pertinent to pupils:

*'I read the report and passed it on to the department... you obviously tend to look at your own results and I was a bit disappointed... you always want to think that kids enjoy your lessons more than any others... we came out OK in terms of them enjoying the subject but I was surprised how many of them don't understand why they are doing it.. perhaps we take it for granted. It has made me more aware of this in my teaching.'*

*'I read it and the department read it.. it confirmed our suspicions in terms of what the kids enjoy and what they don't enjoy. In terms of persuading pupils about the importance and relevance of the subject, the links to citizenship are crucial... we've added more bits that make links to the present, equal rights over time, democracy issues past and present... the role of religious belief over time. It's just in your mind a bit more that a lot of them don't get the big picture in terms of what history is about, why it is relevant to them in terms of their lives, what sort of people they will be.'*

*'To be totally honest, I just looked at the data for our school.. I meant to read the whole thing.... Good intentions but it ended up on the shelf, I wouldn't say that everyone in the department was familiar with the findings. There's just so much that you've got to read... that are urgent... stuff for Ofsted... that some things get squeezed out. The stuff on what kids like and don't like didn't surprise me but I suppose I was a bit surprised by their responses about why they think they are learning history.'*

*'I read the full report, perhaps not surprisingly since we took part in the research but I'm not sure that X (other member of department) read it, but we did talk about some of the issues arising out of the report. Some aspects of the report mainly confirmed what you already know or suspect – kids don't like too much written work, don't find text book work exciting, there is a danger of the teacher talking too much or for too long, but the extent to which they don't know why they are doing it.... Some of the quotes stick in your mind, like the kid who said "no one lets you know..."'*

*'It (the phase 1 research) has promoted some thinking about issues like significance... the dept has created a skills sheet and included a section on significance.'*

One school came across the report on pupil perceptions of history on the QCA website, and surveyed their year 9 cohort using the instrument used in phase 1 of the research, but adding a question asking pupils who were not pursuing history at KS4 to explain why:

*'I came across it when I was looking for something else on the QCA website, started reading it and found it really interesting... we talked about it in the department and agreed to survey our year 9s using the questionnaire that was used in the research, with addition of one question... "If you have decided not to study history at GCSE please explain why?" There were some interesting responses... so many of them were saying that it was for people who wanted to be history teachers or work in museums. It made us realise that we have to explain to parents as well so we are trying to educate the parents about it as well, we put up a display at parents' evening about it. The bit on how little kids understand about why they are doing history did surprise me and we've tested it out on our pupils and get a lot who are saying that "history won't help get me a job"'*

(The survey revealed that out of 95 pupils opting to drop history: 11 felt the subject was too difficult, 20 felt the GCSE topics did not interest them, 22 felt that 'history won't help me to get a job', 12 felt that the options system made it difficult for them to do history, 25 felt that they had not enjoyed history at KS3 and 5 felt that they would not get a good grade).

There was repeat sampling of pupils in six of the schools which had taken part in phase 1 of the research, using the same questionnaire. In some of the schools, many of the pupils' responses to the question on why they thought they did history at school were more sophisticated than in the initial survey. In one school, where 'don't know' and 'if you want to be a historian or archaeologist maybe' responses had been particularly prevalent, there were far more responses which were more in line with what history teachers might have hoped for, and which bore some relation to those detailed in curriculum specifications. The following are a few examples:

*'History is useful as we can have a better understanding of the future by analysing the past, we learn from a wide range of sources.'*

*'Helps to see why the world is as it is, helps you to be open minded and give your opinions.'*

*'Useful so I can argue using sources and learn to balance evidence' and help form current ideas and opinions by seeing what has and hasn't worked.'*

*'Opens your mind about what has happened in the past and why. It makes you think about lots of issues.'*

*'So students can understand how the things that happened in the past made things as they are today.'*

*'History is important because it involves politics and knowledge of the world which is useful for our lives.'*

But even some of those involved in the initial research acknowledged that not all the department had read the report, and many of the teachers not involved with phase 1 of the research admitted that they were not aware of the findings, and found it difficult to make time to look at either the QCA or Ofsted websites.

There is a body of research about pupils' responses to history in secondary schools, and there are probably very few history teachers who are indifferent to pupils' regard for their history lessons, and about post-14 take-up of the subject. This raises the question of how the evidence base in this field might be rendered more accessible to teachers.

## **Conclusions**

The survey revealed massive variations in KS4 take-up of history. It is not a case of a standardised pattern of gradual decline in history numbers across schools. Many of the schools surveyed had significantly increased their take-up over the past three years.

Take-up of history post KS3 appears to be affected by a range of factors and numbers post-14 are not simply a reflection on the strength and quality of the history department. There is a strong 'school effect', influenced by factors such as tradition, socio-economic background of pupils and the 'steer' which SMTs put on recent curriculum initiatives. However, advisors and ITE curriculum tutors believed that there were things that 'smaller' departments could learn from departments with high take-up.

In spite of the relative stability of take-up of history over the past decade (although there have been some fluctuations, it is difficult to argue that history numbers are 'in freefall' at this point), there was a sense of unease and pessimism amongst a majority of respondents about the medium and longer term prospects for history on the secondary curriculum, which mirrors the recent comments made by the History HMI (Ofsted, 2007).

Many of the teachers interviewed expressed concerns about the growth of vocational subjects and their actual or potential impact on the place of history. Partly the concern

stems from the nature of these subjects but there also seemed to be a more general concern about a perceived decline in the role and status of the humanities on the secondary school curriculum, in spite of the high profile of the recent Ajegbo Report and media focus on issues of Britishness, Identity and Citizenship.

*'What I worry about is all this business and computers, and you know the Nazis could read and write but they had no moral code and I think History's about the person. It worries me that a lot of this education ... is pretty soulless in my opinion and it doesn't really get them to think about why and challenge stuff which we've got to get our young people doing ... they are learning about skills and about preparing for working life but not about being human beings.'*

*'I am really depressed and concerned about the way things are going in general... There is more and more emphasis on core subjects, the rationale behind doing things is either to please Ofsted, to meet narrowly defined targets and education as something to prepare them for employment.'*

In several cases it was felt that history's position on the timetable was felt to be protected and cushioned by either very strong exam results, or SMT respect for the quality of teaching and teachers in the history department and positive feedback from pupils and parents about how much they, or their children enjoyed history.

One of history teachers' major concerns was that even within the framework of a three year KS3, the limited time allocated to history on the timetable at KS3 meant that departments struggled to deliver all aspects of the National Curriculum for history in a satisfactory way. In terms of the history teachers surveyed, this appeared to be a more urgent concern than the question of whether history should be compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 16. Many respondents felt that if pupils could drop history at 14, it was all the more important that every pupils should at least have a proper 'grounding' in history by the age of 14. This appeared to be a more common concern than whether history should be compulsory to the age of 16; several respondents expressed reservations about this.

The move away from the comparatively uniform 'entitlement' National Curriculum Mark 1 has resulted in very different patterns at KS4, depending on SMT policies and preferences. There appear to be some schools where heads and SMTs do not feel that a humanities subject post KS4 is a necessity, for some or even all of their pupils. In spite of the high profile of the Ajegbo Report and political and media coverage of 'Britishness', identity and citizenship issues, there is a need for history teachers to make the case for history to parents and SMTs as well as to pupils. We appear to be moving more and more to a situation where some pupils receive a 'liberal' education, and others a more utilitarian one, depending on which school they go to.

There is evidence to suggest that in some schools, less able pupils are being counselled away from taking history at KS4. Many respondents felt that this was motivated by a concern to improve schools' public examination profiles.

There were several factors relating to the characteristics of the history department which were thought to contribute to high take-up in the subject. Pedagogic subject knowledge was generally thought to be more important than subject content knowledge, with teachers having '*a sense of audience*' to approach the subject and individual topics in a way that related to their pupils' lives and interests, and linked the past to the present. Good skills of interaction with pupils and the ability to secure a relaxed but controlled working atmosphere in the classroom were also felt to be key factors. Consistently high quality planning at KS3 was also felt to be important, both in terms of initiative with resources, and active, varied learning experiences which required pupils to think, discuss and contribute, rather than a staple diet of teacher talk, text books and worksheets. Some departments had high-take-up without being in any way 'advanced' in ICT, but in some cases, skilful use of new technology appeared to be helpful to high take-up, and how to make best use of ICT was felt to be a pertinent question to consider by most respondents.

Nearly all departments had considered the effect of teaching approaches on pupil engagement and take-up post-14 and were working hard to develop schemes of work with incorporated stimulating and varied activities for pupils. However, there appeared to be fewer departments who gave as much consideration to developing pupils' understanding of the purposes and benefits of history, and the particular salience of topics within it. Many of the departments involved in the first phase of the research, which suggested that large numbers of pupils 'don't see the point' of the subject, had made an attempt to address this in their subsequent planning, with positive results. Making the purposes of history more explicit to pupils, both in terms of the subject as a whole, and the particular topics and themes which are taught, may be one of the ways of improving pupil attitude and commitment to the subject, both at KS3 and beyond.

Most of the teachers involved in the first phase of the research had reviewed some aspects of their departmental practice in the light of the findings. In particular, teachers were surprised at their pupils' views on why they did history at school, and had taken some steps to address these in their subsequent planning. However, in spite of the fact that there is now a substantial body of research about pupils' responses to the enterprise of school history, it is often difficult to disseminate these findings in a succinct and effective form given the 'busyness' of teachers' lives. One way of addressing this might be for QCA to e-mail to ITE providers and history advisors bulletins and executive summaries of recent research and inspection findings (with links to fuller versions for those who want to access them. History curriculum tutors in ITE in particular are often looking for 'new' items to enliven and make more purposeful their regular meetings with mentors, and this would be a more direct step, compared to simply having such materials on the QCA website.

There have been several calls for subjects to be taught in a way that is 'more relevant' to pupils' lives (Rammell, 2006, Ofsted, 2007), and the issue of relevance has become a contested issue in school history. This raises the question of 'relevant to whom?' There is a tension here between what 'the grown ups' think is relevant (and the 'what every child should know' approach), and what pupils think is relevant. There is some recent research (Ribbens, 2005, Grever, 2006) which shows that pupils are interested in their family history, and in issues/events such as 9/11, terrorism, migration and recent social history. It is less certain that they are interested in (or that they find relevant) the constitutional landmarks of the national past, and issues such as relations between

England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Many high take-up departments had taken into account and been responsive to pupils' views and interests, tried to 'mediate' the National Curriculum in the light of these, and placed pupil motivation and engagement very high in their priorities for planning.

The variation in take-up of history at KS4 suggests that there are things which departments can do to respond proactively to current curriculum pressures and school policies. There would appear to be 'a lot to play for' in terms of the position of history on the school curriculum, given the 'opening up' of the KS4 curriculum and the competing pressures on policymakers and school leaders.

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