Preparing for the new GCSEs

An open letter to all history subject leaders

Dear subject leader

As we approach half term, you and your colleagues will be contemplating a number of issues not least of which will be which GCSE specification to adopt. Those who lead departments in schools which have a three year GCSE will already have had to start with one of the draft specifications. At the time of writing (end of January 2016), all but one of the draft history specifications have been approved by Ofqual. As a result, you will now know whether much has changed in the final specification as opposed to the draft. The specification that remains a draft is OCR’s specification B. So if you are teaching this course you will have to wait a little longer until the approved specification is released.

As you compare the various specifications on offer and come to a decision as to which one to adopt, it is worth considering how and why we have come to this position. Read on for my background to the changes and checklist of the points I think you should consider before you make your final choice of specification.

It’s going to be a busy year and I hope it goes well. Good luck!

Yours faithfully

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How did we end up with such fundamental change?

The background to explain how we have come to have such fundamental specification change for history at GCSE is a complex one. All I want to do here though is to provide you with the big picture. Essentially there are three major pieces in the jigsaw:

- The first piece of the jigsaw is the long-standing concern in England at the narrow range of topics studied at GCSE and the increasing concern that more and more students were studying little else than twentieth century history during and beyond the last year of their Key Stage 3 course, whether that be Year 8 or Year 9. In the latter years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century, such criticisms had become increasingly common in the media.

- To this must be added a second jigsaw piece, namely the evidence from Ofsted’s subject inspections. Amongst many things, this showed that most students who take history at GCSE and most who take history at A level study modern world history. Following the report History for all (2011), the inspectorate argued for a broader history curriculum for all students and especially at GCSE level. In addition, many teachers also commented that there was too much modern history.

- The third piece of the jigsaw was the arrival of Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education in 2010. The new Education Secretary was determined that more students would study history at GCSE and that a review of the criteria was required to ensure a greater emphasis upon developing breadth in historical knowledge. The review started in 2012 and the new GCSE subject criteria were published in 2014. It is these criteria that the Awarding Bodies have used to devise their new specifications. If you have not looked at them, they are worth a read as they help to explain what underpins the specifications that have been developed.

Visit: www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcse-history
Of immediate concern for you though is that final decision as to which specification to adopt. Here are my top ten tips to consider before you make that final decision.

1. Do not assume that familiar themes in the specifications have the same emphasis. The differences between the new and the old specifications are profound; the similarities are limited.

2. Compare the specifications carefully. Consider which depth, period and thematic studies produce the best course for you and your students. Think about which historic environment proposal is most appropriate and weigh up the assessment structures so that you choose the course that will suit your students best.

3. Consider the relationship with Key Stage 3: the impact upon what is studied and how it is studied. Whatever specification you adopt, you will have to review your Key Stage 3 schemes of work so that you can ensure that Key Stage 3 is an effective foundation. Perhaps it’s time to think in terms of a five year course for every student entering Year 7.

4. If you work in an 11-18 school, consider the impact of your choices at GCSE on your A level courses that you started teaching last year – would it help to make your GCSE courses a foundation for A level?

5. If you teach a two-year GCSE, don’t rush your decision. Consider all your options carefully – there is still time.

6. If you teach a three-year GCSE – with not all specifications fully approved, tread carefully.


8. Consider your context – what is best for your students?

9. Take into consideration government policy: how might Progress 8 impact on your choice of course and what will be the impact of a large majority of students taking History or Geography at GCSE?

10. Consider how what you teach at GCSE in history will contribute to highly significant whole school issues such as students’ social, moral, spiritual and cultural development, the promotion of British values, and the prevention of radicalisation and extremism.