History in Practice

History in Practice is a distinctive, compulsory 20-credit course that provides important training and experience in the practical skills of researching historical subjects using original primary source materials.

**School/Subject Area:** History, Classics and Archaeology

**Target Audience:**Year 3 History students

**Staff Involved:** Course Organisers, multiple academic staff (workshop leaders and project supervisors), Careers Adviser, guest speakers

**Dates/timings:** Annually; lectures and workshops in Semester 1, project in Semester 2

Key features

History in Practice is a distinctive, compulsory 20-credit course that provides important training and experience in the practical skills of researching historical subjects using original primary source materials. It deals specifically with the location of sources (in archives and libraries as well as on-line); how to frame historical questions; methods of analysis; and, finally, how these elements are connected through project design.

The course provides an important building block for the Year 4 dissertation but also enables reflection on the wider arena in which history is researched and produced: within the media or cultural industries and through family or community history.

The emphasis on research and project-design encourages the development of skills and attributes that are highly relevant to a range of career paths. To support this, two sessions delivered by the Careers Service are also promoted as part of this course, linking the subject and career choice – picking up the skills focus of the course and identifying the skills developed within the curriculum and beyond, strengthening these, and supporting future career planning.

The course stretches across both semesters: a series of lectures and workshops in Semester 1 are followed by supervised work on a project in Semester 2.

Planning

Along with the usual initial course approval procedures, particular attention was required for the Semester 2 project component of the course. Each student is expected to undertake a supervised project that is directly linked to a History Honours course from Year 3. Annually this requires coordination of students identifying preferred projects/supervisors (up to four) and the final allocation of project/supervisor to individual students.

School staff plan and deliver the lecture and experiential workshop programme in Semester 1. In addition, external speakers such as those from the Careers Service or the University Special Collections, develop and deliver inputs that should link with and support the wider course and its aims.

Components

In Semester 1, History in Practice comprises a lecture programme and optional workshops aimed at offering training in historical research methods for the Year 4 dissertation. In Semester 2, the focus in on supervised project work.

The **lectures** are designed to fulfil a different purpose than that for other courses. Lectures are introductory and illustrative; they aim to provide an overview of key issues in historical research, as training for the Year 4 dissertation. Students’ knowledge of specific research methods is deepened through their choice of workshops (Semester 1) and through further specialisation for the project (Semester 2). The lectures are led by the Course Organisers or by guest speakers.

**Workshops** are led by subject specialists from the History staff and are designed to be interactive and experiential; the emphasis is on ‘doing’ rather than listening to a lecture. All workshops involve critical engagement with primary source materials or artefacts in some capacity, and provide opportunity for students to select new skills to develop.

As part of the Semester 1 programme, two career specific sessions are provided that seek to link the course to students’ wider experiences and aspirations:

* **What can I do with a History degree?** This session looks at some of the career areas History graduates have entered, and careers related to this subject. It encourages students to consider the practical skills they are developing throughout their studies, and a skills audit is provided in WebCT for further reflection. Consideration is also given to what employers might be looking for, and how the students can begin to build on this alongside their studies, to increase their chances of success.
* **What do I want to do with my History degree?** There are a huge variety of career opportunities available to History graduates, which can seem daunting. This session looks at how the students can begin to figure out what they might want to do after University, and how to get there. It discusses the career planning process, and provides a framework and some strategies for moving forward with their career development.

The **Semester 2 project** is based on personal study supported by tutor supervision. It is an opportunity for each student to show that they can use a body of primary source material to answer a clearly formulated question or hypothesis. It allows reflection on, and application of, the skills and methods encountered in other parts of the History in Practice course (lectures or workshops). The project acts as a bridge to the lengthier Year 4 dissertation.

Resources

The course is supported by the History in Practice course handbook, with specific course materials available as appropriate. The handbook and materials from the careers sessions are made available on WebCT.

The allocation of project/supervisor to each student must be coordinated annually. Information is provided to students, through WebCT, about the full range of project choices - with supervisors - that are available. Projects are linked to Year 3 option courses; each organiser of such a course also offers a project which they supervise.

WebCT is also used to facilitate workshop choices in Semester 1, places allocated on a first-come, first-served basis (most workshops can accommodate up to 20 students).

Along with preparation and delivery time for the lecture and workshop programme, staff time is required for the project supervision. Students meet with their supervisor for consultation up to three times during Semester 2 as they work on the design and research of the project. These meetings may be individual or in small groups.

Evaluation / Impact

Development of this course has targeted students at a key stage in their undergraduate curriculum and provided a valuable opportunity for them to:

* develop understanding and experience of historical research design;
* gain an important grounding in the intellectual and practical skills that are required for the Year 4 dissertation;
* develop wider transferable skills in project design and presentation, information literacy and analysis, intellectual independence and decision-making; and
* appreciate the relevance of these skills and attributes to students’ wider experiences and futures.

Key contacts

[Dr Adam Fox](mailto:Adam.Fox@ed.ac.uk), Course Organiser

[Dr Julian Goodare](mailto:J.Goodare@ed.ac.uk), Course Organiser

[Helen Whitham](mailto:Helen.Whitham@ed.ac.uk), Careers Adviser

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/employability/staff-information/how-employability-addressed/good-practice/hss/history-in-practice>