

EARLY CAREER HISTORIANS



TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years teaching has often appeared to be the poor relation of research in the context of the academic career. An essential part of the profession, yes; but one not calculated to deliver significant career advancement. Moreover, in the form of the 'teaching-only' contract to which those deemed ineligible for Research Assessment Exercises could be consigned, or an early career historian appointed to a temporary position which terminated at that point of the year at which sustained research activity became possible, its inferior status seemed confirmed. Universities and the education press spoke of and highlighted 'research stars' on lucrative contracts which freed them from the burdens of the classroom. But times have changed. It remains more difficult to identify a 'teaching' than a 'research star', and it undoubtedly remains the case that the high-flying academic career and professional reputation of a historian will depend substantially on his or her research record. Nevertheless, the increasing significance of the core market in undergraduate education both nationally and internationally in the reputation and financial viability of universities, combined with the imperative in the UK to be seen to deliver 'value for money' to fee-paying undergraduates, has led to renewed emphasis on the importance of the teaching academics deliver, and a concern that time and effort invested in this aspect of the profession should both be demanded and properly rewarded in career progression. Look around at the middle reaches of the profession, and you will increasingly see historians whose promotion depended to a significant degree on their track record in and commitment to the classroom.

And, in the earlier stages of the historical career, in fact it was ever thus. While a strong research record might be a prerequisite for getting a place on a short list for a permanent academic position, few heads of department have ever been prepared to commit themselves to the appointment of a future colleague without being confident that they would be a successful, enthusiastic and willing teacher of undergraduates. This, of course, is the key purpose behind the 'presentation' element of most appointment processes, even where the topic to be discussed is the candidate's research. Can the candidate take a subject about which they could be said to know too much, and make it accessible, exciting and stimulating to a non-specialist audience (which will often include students who will be quizzed about this afterwards)? If they can't, chances are they won't be appointed. So, how to ensure that you will be in a position to pass the 'teaching test'?

Teaching Experience

A permanent post in a history department (and also many temporary ones) will almost certainly want to see evidence of teaching experience on a candidate's CV, and quite possibly some formal qualification. One of the key skills of the academic historian's life is achieving a good balance between teaching and research, and it has to begin at the outset of your career. Teaching opportunities need to be carefully assessed in terms of their suitability for building a convincing case that you will be an asset in this respect for any department with the wisdom to offer you a job. There is no one way to do this, although important considerations at different points of your early career are outlined in more detail below. But ideally the record of your experience when it comes to applying for a permanent or fixed term position in a department will demonstrate that:

- You have a genuine enthusiasm for teaching, and can offer some form of proof that you are reasonably good at it
- You are sufficiently well organized to be able to handle the demands of teaching alongside sustaining a research career

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- You have some understanding of common challenges facing teachers of undergraduates (teaching students of varying ability; dealing with different types of class; the need to convey complex information and arguments to students unfamiliar with a topic etc.)
- You have administrative skills which may well be useful to a department in other ways as well, but should at least ensure that marks are recorded, feedback supplied and a module/course is well managed
- You are capable of and interested in teaching topics and classes not immediately related to the current focus of your research
- You are capable of working as part of a team

Teaching while a PhD Candidate

A PhD candidate ought to undertake some teaching. Such experience not only provides a welcome diversion from research (on which it also offers new perspectives) and offers its own intellectual rewards, but can be a useful (though too often paltry) source of income. Teaching also gives early indications of your aptitude for this aspect of the profession, and whether you enjoy it – and not everyone does.

Most departments now have policies on at what stage and how much postgraduates should teach. Don't underestimate the commitment it involves – not only contact time, but preparation and training. It is important not unthinkingly to take on the maximum permitted load even if your supervisor approves it. Avoid doing it solely for 'the money': in CV terms, the quantity of teaching you do is less important than that it is sufficiently well prepared and executed that it generates approval from both students and the department. If you get the chance to teach in more than one year of your studies, carefully weigh up the benefits of repeating teaching a second year (which may well but will not necessarily reduce the preparation involved) against those of expanding your repertoire (which may make you look more attractive to a future employer). You are unlikely to be designing your own module at this stage, but you will almost certainly have the opportunity to demonstrate that you can plan a class imaginatively around the topics you are assigned to teach, and it is important that you do (training helps here).

In an ideal world, by the time students receive their doctorates, they should have added much of the following to their CV/portfolio:

- Evidence that they have experience of leading seminars, and planning the sessions (such as trying out different ways of increasing student engagement, thinking how to tackle a tricky topic)
- Evidence that their teaching has been well received by students in the form of feedback comments/scores
- Evidence that they have experience of teaching undergraduate students on courses which extend significantly beyond the specific focus of their research (e.g. 'Europe in the Twentieth Century' rather than 'The German Economy in the interwar period')
- Evidence in the availability to obtain a reference from someone who knows not just their research but also their work as a teacher and how effectively they have acquitted their responsibilities
- Evidence they have undertaken appropriate training

In addition, where the opportunity arises to give a lecture as part of a course, or participate in a session related to your research on someone else's MA module, for example, it is a good idea to take that up to broaden the range of your teaching portfolio.

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Teaching after the PhD /as a Research Fellow or Assistant

For the unemployed PhD, teaching can of course be one means of keeping body and soul together. Many institutions will not recruit all the teaching assistants they need from within their own student body, and opportunities are readily available particularly in places like London, where there is a concentration of History departments in a small geographical area. Opportunities can arise quite suddenly and at a late stage of a year for a whole variety of reasons, so even a speculative enquiry accompanied by a CV may sometimes yield results – more importantly, look for opportunities advertised on departmental websites. In this situation the same sorts of considerations apply as already indicated for the PhD student; in particular, it remains important to ensure that your research is not allowed to come to a standstill even if you need to undertake significant amounts of teaching. There may now be additional opportunities to take sole responsibility for a whole module to cover research leave, however; having a doctorate opens up new opportunities which provide the chance to broaden a CV in the ways recommended below for research fellows and assistants.

If you are lucky enough to be awarded a research fellowship or obtain a position on a funded research project, do not allow your teaching CV to gather dust. Funding bodies and institutions will have their own rules about the amount of teaching they regard as compatible with the position they have funded, or about the responsibilities of host institutions to offer you opportunities to teach as part of your career development. Assuming that you have acquired some experience by this stage, it makes sense to seek out opportunities to broaden and deepen your portfolio at this point. Ways to do this might include:

- Contributing to core courses/modules on themes such as historiography/skills where you may have complete control of the content of your session
- Seeking opportunities for experience of MA level teaching and undergraduate lecturing if you have not done it before
- Contributing to postgraduate research training
- Designing and delivering your own module (though bear in mind that departments may be wary of investing in the start-up costs for a module that will only endure as long as your association with the institution – the best that may be available may be taking sole responsibility for an existing module)
- Acquire further teaching qualifications
- Also be aware of any elements in a research post that provide evidence of teaching ability- this can especially be the case with impact-related activity

More generally, it is important for a research fellow not to get a reputation for being overly protective of their research time or unwilling to contemplate anything not immediately related to their research – a willingness to contribute to the wider life of the department will be something those making permanent appointments will be looking for in your CV at the next stage.

Terms of Employment

In 2014 a flurry of articles and correspondence highlighted the issues around the employment of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) in British higher education generally. Discussion is likely to be ongoing as universities enter a period of significant financial pressures for retrenchment at the same time as many experience growing student numbers (not least in History) and are being encouraged to improve student experience through increasing contact hours while preserving quality.

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The precise terms and conditions of employment for GTAs vary considerably from institution to institution. Rates of pay may also reflect the qualifications of the GTAs (with those with PhDs receiving a higher rate) and the levels of responsibility they are assigned in particular roles. Almost all GTA work will be paid at an hourly rate with a set number of hours assigned to the role to cover all or some of direct teaching time, feedback, preparation, assessment and training, although where marking is involved this may attract a different rate per script.

As a generalization, it is clearly the case that what is often very demanding work is not well paid, and pay may not take account of all the work that is required to execute the role effectively. Those becoming GTAs need to go into the role with their eyes open and ensure they acquaint themselves with the terms and conditions to which they are signing up (and in some cases they may be obtaining employment at more than one institution simultaneously). Issues to bear in mind are discussed further [below](#).

At the postdoctoral level, a certain amount of teaching may be built in to the terms of a funded research fellowship or other position, in which case there is unlikely to be any additional income stream associated with the teaching. But for those taking over someone's teaching in the form of a temporary appointment there will be important considerations to bear in mind, which are discussed [here](#).

Issues for GTAs

Any one taking on a GTA position needs to ensure that they have established a clear understanding of the terms and conditions associated with employment at a particular institution. In many universities, such conditions are the subject of ongoing discussion at both department and institutional level, and it may well be worth seeking out 'shop-floor' views from those already engaged as GTAs before committing yourself, especially if you are seeking a position outside your 'home' department. The following list indicates some points on which you might seek clarification if it is not apparent from the details supplied by the department.

- If the pay is hourly, what does the contract cover: does it include adequate preparation time, feedback, assessment work etc? If you are teaching seminars associated with a lecture course, are you expected to attend lectures and if so, is this paid or unpaid?
- What support is provided from senior academic staff? Will a module leader offer peer observation, for example? What teaching materials/access to virtual learning environments are provided? Who will carry out assessment, or address complaints about teaching?
- What space and facilities are available to GTAs to carry out their duties? (Not just teaching rooms, but appropriate places to prepare/relax between teaching sessions, to deliver feedback, or to be available to students)
- What training is required/provided by the institution?
- What expectations are there regarding the role of GTAs in student support?
- What form of representation is provided for GTAs in departmental governance?

Two important contexts for GTA roles are employment law and universities' responsibilities towards their students. The first sets certain basic parameters for terms and conditions, but also has implications for the number of times a person can be asked to deliver the same teaching without the university incurring additional obligations to that person. The second means that the university has a responsibility to ensure that the teaching delivered by GTAs meets professional standards. This means that training will be required, and a GTA should expect to have their teaching observed and marking monitored (and this is in the GTA's interest in any case).

It is important also to clarify what role if any a GTA is required to play in pastoral support of students. Generally both support such as reference-writing and identifying or dealing with the consequences of students' disabilities or personal circumstances fall outside the responsibilities of the GTA, but this will not stop students' approaching

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them as a first point of contact or the GTA being the person first to identify an issue. It should be clear what an institution expects of its GTAs in such circumstances.

Issues for Postdoctoral teachers

Whether postdoctoral teachers are engaged in teaching as part of a research post or employed on a temporary contract to augment or cover some aspect of a department's teaching, it is important that they establish clearly the context for their work in this respect.

The terms and conditions for teaching activity as part of a research post will vary depending on the funding body, and it is quite possible that a department may inadvertently assume that your particular post fits a pattern with which it is familiar from other funding bodies. How many hours are involved? Are the stated hours a ceiling above which you should not teach, or an entitlement which you can demand? How will such opportunities fit with the demands of your research in terms of archival research? You may be able to negotiate concentrations of teaching in particular semesters/terms or even years to create a rational fit with the demands of your research project. Both research fellows and those on temporary teaching-focused contracts may need to be more proactive than GTAs to seek out opportunities for formal training and access to [teaching qualifications](#) as part of their career development.

For those not on research projects or research fellowships, predictably enough the injunction to read the small print is the most helpful advice. Employment law is a key consideration in the way contracts are worded by HEIs, who are often mindful that the role specified in the contract must be such so as not inadvertently to create any obligation to the person employed which might tie their hands when appointing to a permanent position or require them to continue to employ them after the date at which the post expires. Another issue is access to redundancy payments. It is particularly important in posts defined as a percentage of a position to note whether or not an obligation or opportunity to engage in research is envisaged (does it only cover term time, for example?) and what can be asked of you beyond teaching itself (pastoral responsibilities, administration?). Will you be provided with a room or other facilities such as IT? (this may not be in the contract itself, but you need to know). Can you concentrate your teaching on to a single day or in appropriate blocks?

Any postdoctoral teacher hoping to deliver a module of their own also needs to be mindful of the often extremely bureaucratic procedures and long lead in times that may be required to get a new course onto the books and available to students with appropriate resources in place. You may need to do significant work on this before your appointment formally commences, and to plan well ahead for any new initiatives during the course of your tenure.

Teaching Qualifications

A feature of university life in recent years has been an increasing focus on the quality of teaching undergraduates receive, especially in the light of the new fees regime. This has raised a concern about the historic failure of the higher education profession to develop professional teaching qualifications of the kind standard for schoolteachers for some time now. In 2003 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) was founded from a merger of several predecessor bodies to support the sector in maintaining professional standards, offering teachers in HE a variety of ways of accrediting their professional activity and resources to improve their pedagogy. The HEA went through further change in 2014 ([see below](#)), but it has retained its role in supporting professional standards.

For historic reasons there is still a substantial body of teachers in HE with no formal teaching qualifications, and it would be fair to say that the sector has not universally accepted that the model of professional recognition delivered by the HEA is the best measure of the actual teaching ability of individuals. Nevertheless, it will soon be possible for potential students to establish what proportion of staff at an HEI have teaching qualifications of this

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kind, and this is one of a number of pressures encouraging most institutions to take the issue much more seriously than in the past. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that regardless of any concrete benefit to their pedagogical practice any early career historian is well advised to engage with framework of qualifications available, as some job specifications will now include a requirement for evidence of such engagement. At the GTA level, this may well be in the form of a locally controlled training programme endorsed by the HEA which results in the award of a formal qualification such as the Statement of Teaching Proficiency awarded at King's College London on the back of attendance at workshops and peer observation of teaching over the course of an academic year. Such a programme will also contribute towards the next stage of accreditation, fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. This (highly bureaucratic!) process may well be an appropriate activity for a postdoctoral teacher seeking to position themselves for a permanent position. It is also worth noting that most HEIs will also run award schemes for good teaching practice and innovation, in some cases with the nominations coming from the student body. Such awards are quite often won by early-career teachers, and are a very strong card to have on an academic CV.

Teaching History

As a subject history is very well taught at universities – the subject is consistently among those which achieve high scores in the National Student Survey, notably for the enthusiasm and engagement of the teachers delivering courses. But it is also a very demanding subject to teach in terms of the preparation required of both staff and students to ensure that a class is a success, and in the type of feedback required to enable students from very diverse backgrounds to improve and succeed in their studies.

You will often hear sceptical views expressed about the training in teaching offered by HEIs. One issue can be that it can be too generic, with humanities trainees sitting aside those delivering vocational or science degrees with a very different pedagogy. Sometimes the professional jargon of education studies can be hard to relate to the classroom experience of the new teacher, and there can seem a perverse relationship between the tasks that you have been asked to undertake and the prescriptions for best practice you may be offered in training (some students working on lecture-based modules, for example, have found their training programme tells them more about the supposed shortcomings of lectures as a mode of teaching than how to make them more effective!). It is none the less the case that such training will offer much that is of considerable value, not least exposure to new approaches to teaching which can enliven seminars and make feedback more effective. Many institutions may also offer more focused training sessions on particular issues, notably the best use of virtual learning environments, which can of immediate practical value.

In practice most departments will supplement any institutional training model with more local support from colleagues and course leaders. GTAs and other EC historians should also expect to be assigned a personal mentor, and to be involved in processes of peer observation and review. A lot can also be learned from student feedback (painful though it can be to read!), and many teachers will build additional occasions for receiving such comment into the seminars they run, especially if they are delivering a module for the first time.

Until recently the Higher Education Academy also supported subject-specific support for History teaching. Following the changes made in summer 2014, however, it will no longer do so. Discussions are currently taking place in the subject community on how best to fill the gap this leaves in support for History teaching in HE. It is likely that the annual conference on teaching history formerly sponsored by the HEA will be revived in some form; meanwhile the historic resources it produced in the form of reports and papers on approaches to teaching History in universities remain extremely valuable, and are freely available online from the [HEA website](#).

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Some other resources

Other relevant resources can be accessed on the [Historians on Teaching](#) website, developed by Alan Booth, who has a long-standing interest in this area, and both the [Historical Association](#) (including its journal, [Teaching History](#)) and the personal websites of historians teaching in schools can offer stimulating food for thought despite a prime focus on history in the schools. In terms of thinking about what represents good practice in module design, the recently revised [QAA benchmarking statement for History](#) is a good place to start.

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