

## The Cambridge Advanced Level History Project

The advanced level examination is a national examination normally taken by students at the age of eighteen. It is run in England and Wales by eight examination groups; it serves (amongst other things) as the matriculation requirement for entry into English and Welsh universities.

Until recently, history A level examinations were traditional in form. The syllabus would usually consist of two periods of history - say British history 1485 - 1714 and a corresponding period of European history; and the examination paper would carry some thirty conventional essay questions of which the candidate would have to answer four in three hours. Developments in history assessment and, in particular, the influence of the national curriculum project, the Schools History Project which places emphasis on the need for students to address the question of the nature of historical knowledge through the use and evaluation of a wide range of historical sources, led many history teachers and examiners to reassess the teaching and assessing of history for the sixteen to eighteen age group. The Cambridge Advanced Level History Project (CHP) was established in 1985 by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The Project team believed that far too much teaching for the advanced level history examination was concerned with content, chronology and coverage; students were being given little or no understanding of history as a form of knowledge, with its own particular procedures and concepts. The CHP starts with the premise that any serious attempt to teach history must involve students in both tackling important historical questions and in the explicit reflection on the nature of the discipline. The point of historical enquiry is to give us knowledge about the past but students cannot acquire genuine knowledge without

understanding how it is grounded and this understanding involves a grasp of concepts and procedures which make history what it is. In turn, such understanding cannot be acquired without a study of some part of the past, not as a mere vehicle for the concepts and procedures at issue, but as the activity which gives them their point.

The broad aim of the CHP, therefore, is to develop students' awareness of history as a form of knowledge and a mode of enquiry based on debatable sources of evidence. Assessment focusses on three areas or 'domains', as they are called in the Project. Students should be able to demonstrate, first, an understanding of the nature and use of historical evidence and methodology; secondly, a concept of how historians and contemporaries have sought to explain how and why things happen in human affairs and display an ability to generate and evaluate explanations of historical ideas, actions and events; and thirdly, to attribute significance to past events using concepts of change and continuity in order to construct accounts of historical developments through the selection, interpretation and organisation of relevant material.

The Project team decided that the focus of their first syllabus would be 'People, Power and Politics'. The course is divided into two components. There is a development study, looking at political change through time in which students are introduced to the bases upon which historians' interpretations of past political developments rest and to a methodology for interpreting the significance of events within a line of development. Secondly, there is a study in depth which takes as its theme the question as to whether there was a mid-seventeenth century revolution in England. Assessment is through two written examinations each of three hours duration; but students also have to produce three pieces of course work, one for each domain. To support

the teaching of the syllabus, the team have produced materials, both primary and secondary; the schools taking part have also been formed into 'Project Clusters', so that the history teachers can meet to discuss the teaching and assessment of the new curriculum.

Some idea of the thrust of the course can be gained from quoting one or two questions from the specimen examination papers that the project team produced. For example, question 1 in the paper which examines the political change over time study, poses two hypotheses:

'hypothesis I - The political development of the Roman empire was shaped by the need to prevent the civil wars that threatened to destroy it from inside. Hypothesis II - The political development of the Roman empire was shaped by the need to defend its frontiers against external attacks'. The question then asked: 'How valid are hypotheses I and II as general theories about the development of the Roman empire 27 BC - 476 AD? Answer this question using the material contained in the Source Booklet together with any background knowledge from your study of history'. The question clearly focuses on domain one, the nature and use of historical evidence. A question focussing on historical explanations, domain two, is as follows: "'The past is only safe in the sense that it has happened..... In fact, the past is always changing - changing in relation to the present, in relation to the view of the living" (Michael Wood, 1986) a) How can the past be "always changing" when sources of evidence stay the same? b) If the past is "always changing ..... in relation to the point of view of the living", does this mean that the 'facts' of history are neither true nor false? Explain your answer with reference to one or more of the following: the founding of the Anglo- Saxon kingdoms; the Norman conquest and its aftermath; the Tudor Revolution in government; the Restoration Settlement 1660-62 and its aftermath; British politics in the early twentieth century'.

Marking of the students' responses has been against a levels of response' marking scheme. For each of the three domains, there are descriptors in a hierarchy of five levels. For example, for domain one, evidence and historical enquiry, the level 1 descriptor is 'can evaluate hypotheses by testing them for consistency with reliable evidence derived from sources'; the level 3 descriptor is 'can propose and justify improvements to hypotheses by reference to reliable evidence inferred from sources interpreted in context and treated as a set'; the level 5 descriptor is 'can resolve conflicts between two or more hypotheses by reference to reliable evidence inferred from sources interpreted in context and treated as a set'.

The first pilot examinations were run in June 1991 and were generally deemed to be a success. Students found the course challenging and stimulating; teachers enjoyed the emphasis on historical understanding and the use of historical sources as evidence. Nearly all of them welcomed the way in which the thinking about the teaching and assessing of history which has permeated curriculum development for the younger age groups was now being adopted for the sixteen to eighteen year olds. The success of the Cambridge History Project has been endorsed by the central assessment and examinations council; from September 1992 the syllabus will be available for all schools in England and Wales. A second syllabus focussing on technology in history is being developed. Further details of the project and specimen materials can be obtained from: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 1, Hill Road, Cambridge CB1 2EU.

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