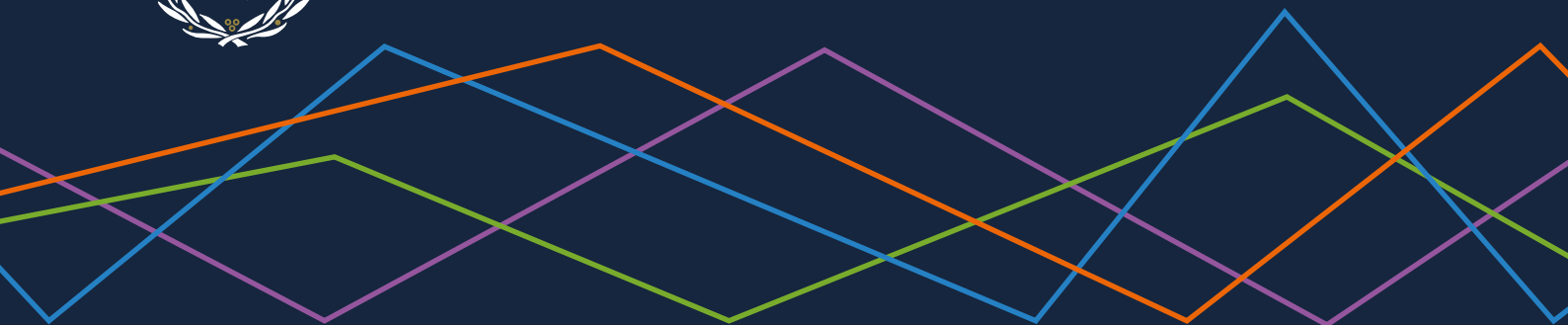




The Value of History in UK Higher Education and Society

A briefing from the Royal Historical Society | October 2024



FOREWORD

The [Royal Historical Society](#), the UK's foremost learned society for the discipline, exists to support history and historians. Our appreciation of history, and of those who study and teach the past, is closely interlinked and aligned. A vibrant discipline has traditionally indicated a flourishing profession. However, in recent years the Society has witnessed a divergence between the popularity of history – as a subject of study and public interest – and the security of historians within UK higher education.

History as a subject is in good health. It remains a major degree subject with strong student enrolment. History is likewise prominent in public life. We read history, watch programmes about the past, and visit sites of historical interest in greater numbers than ever. This is welcome.

Less welcome is the picture unfolding in history departments across UK universities. The Royal Historical Society is the organisation to which historians turn when their capacity to teach, research and communicate is at risk. Since the early 2020s, we've seen an alarming increase in the number of departments facing cuts to staffing and degree options. These cuts affect the careers of professional historians and limit opportunities for students. The Society has spoken previously on cuts and their effects. One purpose of this briefing is to summarise our data and analysis, based on the Society's daily engagement with historians.

News of cuts in history departments makes for difficult reading. But this is far from being the full story. In our support for historians, the Society is responsible for demonstrating the significance and value of history in national life. It's no surprise that these positive messages have been crowded out or negated in recent political discourse. Here, we present and remind you of these positives. As a Society primarily concerned with research and scholarship, this briefing focuses on history in UK higher education – though we recognise that the strengths of our discipline go well beyond universities.

To celebrate positives is not to deny the seriousness of our present situation. Rather it's to better appreciate and communicate history's importance, popularity and value: to current and potential students – so they may pursue their interests with confidence – and to academic historians as they provide analytical and communicative skills needed for a changing world. By highlighting the positives, we look to close the gap between history's strength as a discipline and challenges facing the profession.

This briefing also signals an enhanced role for the Royal Historical Society as a champion of history's contribution and value. The Society remains an organisation to which historians turn in need. To this we add a more proactive campaigning dimension, which the Society will develop under its incoming President, Professor Lucy Noakes. Appreciating, celebrating and communicating the value of history will involve speaking, in new ways, to new audiences. We look forward to this next phase of our work.

Professor Emma Griffin
President of the Royal Historical Society, October 2024

OUR FINDINGS: OVERVIEW

This briefing has four sections. These highlight both the threats facing history in UK higher education and the many positives of our discipline. In the UK, history has long been, and remains, a valuable and popular subject with strong graduate outcomes and student satisfaction. However, questions of student enrolments and university financing are of great concern in the 2020s. Cuts across history departments – and the arts and humanities in general – are being felt keenly, with the greatest burden falling on post-92 universities.

1. HISTORY AS A SUBJECT IS SIGNIFICANT AND STRONG

- More than 40,000 students study history each year at UK universities.
- History is consistently in the 10 most popular subjects for undergraduate study in the arts, humanities and social sciences at UK universities.
- History enrolments for A-Level and GCSE are increasing: up 5% for A-Level history (2020-24) and up 25% for GCSE history (2018-24).

2. THREATS FACING HISTORY IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

- Between 2021 and 2024, 21 UK history departments contacted the Society with concerns over cuts to staffing and course provision.
- The level of threat is greater than these direct contacts suggest. In a recent Society survey, 39 history departments report cuts to staffing levels since 2020.
- Cuts are felt most severely in post-92 departments. 88% of history departments in post-92 universities, responding to our survey, report a decrease in staffing since 2020.

3. HISTORY HAS STRONG GRADUATE OUTCOMES AND HIGH STUDENT SATISFACTION

- More than 87% of UK history graduates are in 'sustained employment, further study or both' five years after graduation.
- Earnings for history graduates are strong, relative to those of graduates in other humanities, social sciences and many non-vocational STEM subjects.
- 92% of history students, graduating in 2023, considered their degree intellectually stimulating.

4. WHAT DO WE RISK LOSING IF CUTS AND CLOSURES CONTINUE?

- Post-92 history departments have the highest intake of first-generation students. With cuts and closures particularly extensive in these departments, we risk loss of social mobility and student opportunity.
- History staff, and their students, are spending more time responding to cuts and institutional turbulence. This impedes historians' capacity for teaching and research.

HISTORY AS A SUBJECT IS SIGNIFICANT AND STRONG

History is a major subject in UK universities

History has long been, and remains, a major subject in UK higher education. For over a decade, more than 40,000 students have annually enrolled on history degree courses. Over three-quarters of these are undergraduate historians.

In a ranking of 69 'non-science' subjects, for 2022/23, **history was the 15th most popular subject** and close in student enrolments to degrees in accounting, finance, health studies and marketing.¹

Looking specifically at annual undergraduate enrolments, history is consistently in the **top-10 most popular subjects** in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and close in student numbers to subjects such as politics, education, accounting and management.

The 2020s have certainly been a challenging time for many subjects in the arts and humanities, including history. Unwelcome attacks on the merits of studying history, and other subjects, have undoubtedly deterred some from taking up the subject at university.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows an **11% decrease in history enrolments** (undergraduate and postgraduate combined) between 2019 and 2023.

While any decrease in students studying history in UK universities is unwelcome – and a subject for attention and action – history continues to perform well when compared with other arts and humanities disciplines which, regrettably, are experiencing sharper falls in student enrolments.



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Growing numbers are studying history pre-university

In schools and colleges, history is also a major, and growing, subject.

In 2024, **47,300 students sat A-Level history**. This made it the second most popular A-Level of the 29 available for study in the arts, humanities and social sciences.² In the same year, history was the fifth most studied of 34 subjects offered at A-Level, after mathematics, psychology, biology and chemistry.

In Scotland, in 2024, history was the second most studied of the 32 Highers available in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and the fourth most studied of all Higher subjects.³

In 2024, **325,400 students took GCSE history**, making it the third most popular GCSE in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In the same year, history was the fifth most studied GCSE subject after combined science, mathematics, English and English Literature.⁴

Trends for history in pre-university education are positive and reveal a growing number of students. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of **students studying history A-Level rose by 5.3%**.⁵ GCSE history is seeing a particularly strong upward trend in enrolments. In the six years to 2024, the number of **students taking history at GCSE increased 25%**, the fastest rate of growth among the top 10 largest subjects at Key Stage 4.⁶

Encouraging many of these growing cohorts of GCSE and A-Level students to carry on with history, and so become history undergraduates, is a priority to ensure our subject remains strong in higher education.



5.3%
rise in the number
of students
studying history
A-Level between
2020 and 2024.



25%
rise in students taking
GCSE history between
2018 and 2024.
GCSE history is
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THREATS FACING HISTORY IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

The Royal Historical Society is the first point of contact for many historians in UK higher education concerned about cuts to their department. This gives the Society privileged insight into the changing – and increasingly difficult and unequal – environment in which historians and their students work in UK universities.

Communication with departments facing cuts is a significant and growing aspect of the Society's advocacy work. Between 2021 and September 2024, the Society was contacted by historians from 21 UK institutions concerned about reductions in their capacity to fulfil their responsibilities as teachers and researchers. Over a similar timescale pre-2021, the Society received just one contact regarding departmental cuts.

In nearly all cases, direct communications since 2021 have focused on the loss of academic and research support staff; the ending of degree programmes; reduction in the courses and options available to students; mergers with other departments; or – in several cases – complete closure of provision for history teaching and research.

In Summer 2024, the Society undertook a survey of its members who work as academic historians in the UK. History departments from 66 universities (from a possible 105 UK institutions with history undergraduate teaching) were represented in the responses received.

The survey reveals that the extent and impact of cuts is far greater than our previous work suggests. 39 UK history departments report cuts to staffing levels while 32 departments record the loss of history degrees or courses since 2020.



39

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From the survey, for the period 2020-2024:

- **60%** of departments report a decrease in levels of academic staffing. This equates to decreases in at least 2 in 5 of all UK history departments.
- **36%** of departments report a closure of one or more degree programme. This equates to decreases in at least 1 in 4 of all UK history departments.
- **45%** of departments report the cutting of course options for students. This equates to decreases in at least 1 in 3 of all UK history departments.

The Society's survey confirms how negative change is concentrated in departments at post-92 universities, which are witnessing higher levels of cuts than pre-92 institutions. At the same time, a significant, and growing, number of departments in pre-92 (non-Russell Group) universities are also experiencing cuts.

Cuts to History Departments since 2020	Post-92 Universities	Pre-92 (non-Russell Group) Universities
Departments in the survey reporting a decrease in staffing	88%	68%
Departments in the survey reporting compulsory redundancies	30%	20%
Departments in the survey reporting a loss of one or more degree programme	58%	36%
Departments in the survey reporting a loss of one or more course / option	80%	36%

For trained historians the implications of such changes are far reaching and include: the threat of redundancy; reduced scope for innovative teaching and research; greater inequality between institutions; and a diminishing of history's influence and contribution beyond the university sector.

Furthermore, for current and future students, degree programmes risk becoming more restricted, with the cancellation of courses and loss of specialist teaching staff.

Most at risk are post-92 university departments which provide educational opportunities to the highest numbers of first-generation students and the growing number of commuting students for whom relocating to another university is simply not an option.

The Society fears that disproportionate cuts to history provision – especially in those UK regions where universities are scattered and few in number – will reduce the options available to key groups of students. More concerning still is the prospect that history becomes a subject ever-more concentrated in selected universities, and the increasing preserve of students who are more mobile, wealthier and benefit from familial experience of a university education.

“While at school I always wanted to study history at university. I’m very pleased I did: not only have I studied a degree I really enjoyed, I also gained skills and perspectives that I’ll take into my career. Far from closing down options, I see my history degree as a gateway to a wide range of professional outcomes.”

UK history graduate (2024)

“The experience of history undergraduates today is very different from that of students 10 or 20 years ago. How we study the past is becoming much more creative, varied and exciting. Students still learn to analyse texts and write about complex ideas.

But they’re also engaged in public history, in learning new communication formats like podcasting, or working with historical data sets and digital tools. New approaches, like these, ensure students are well-equipped for professional life after university.”

Academic historian at a UK university

“Recruiters for financial services and professional organisations are keen to employ history graduates. Historians are literate, used to reviewing information with a critical eye, and absorbing and synthesising complex ideas. They bring valuable and necessary skills to multi-dimensional organisations in today’s workplace.”

Employer, UK financial services industry

HISTORY HAS STRONG GRADUATE OUTCOMES AND HIGH STUDENT SATISFACTION

The Royal Historical Society identifies political decisions as a key factor in the current challenges faced by history lecturers and students in UK higher education. Along with others, the Society calls for political responses to the challenges facing history and UK higher education more broadly.

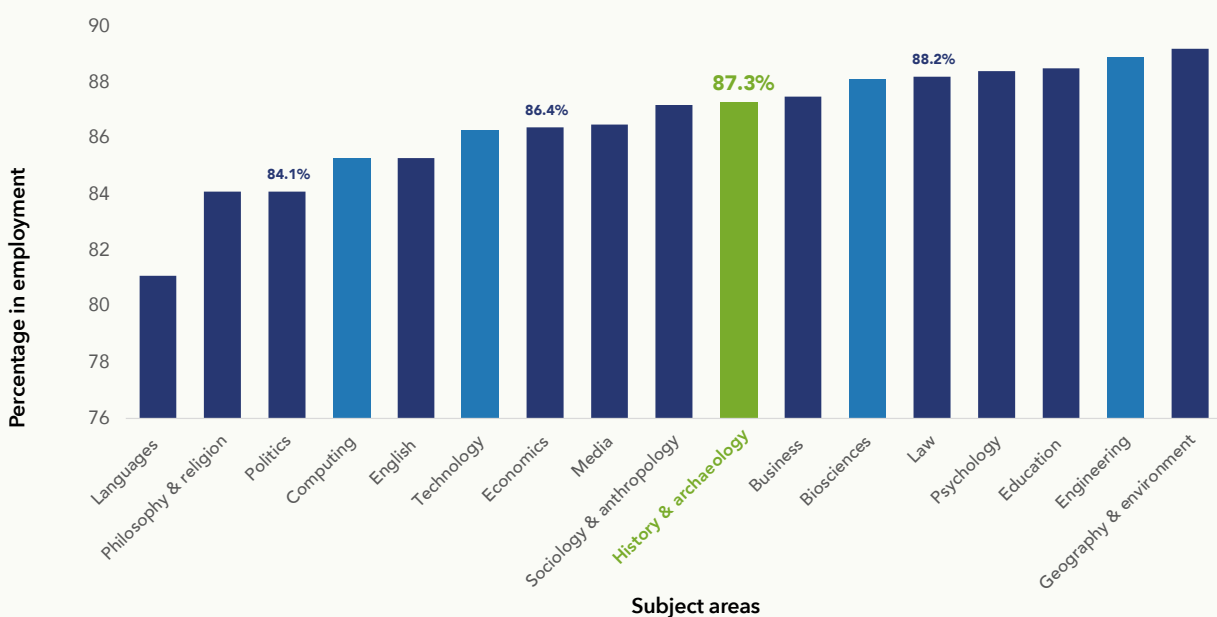
Instead, and regrettably, government engagement with history in UK universities has, until recently, focused more on questioning the value and expected outcomes for this and other humanities subjects. We sincerely hope this ‘talking down’ of history ends with a change of UK government in 2024 – not least because this message, which influences students (and their families) when choosing their degree, is based on a false premise.

Employability and earnings for history graduates are strong

Government data on graduate employability and earnings shows UK history graduates perform strongly.

More than 87% of history graduates were in ‘sustained employment, further study or both’, based on the latest available data from UK higher education providers (June 2024).⁷ History graduates perform well in terms of employment outcomes, relative to the arts, humanities and social sciences and non-vocational subjects in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

CHART 1: Median graduate employability: selected arts, humanities, social science and STEM subjects



Source: LEO Graduate Outcomes Provider Level Data, for the tax year 2021-22: UK-domiciled graduates in sustained employment and/or study, 5 years after graduation

Chart 1 shows the median percentage of UK-domiciled graduates in sustained employment and/or study, for selected subjects from the UK government’s Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO) survey five years after graduation (2016 for tax year 2021/22). ‘History and archaeology’ is marked in green; arts, humanities and social science subject areas are shown in dark blue, with selected STEM subjects shown in bright blue for comparison.

History graduates enjoy a higher median employment rate (87.3%) than those in subjects such as politics, computing and economics. In terms of employability, outcomes for history graduates are just behind those in business, biosciences, law and psychology.

CHART 2: Median graduate earnings: selected arts, humanities, social science and STEM subjects



Source: LEO Graduate Outcomes Provider Level Data, for the tax year 2021-22: UK-domiciled graduates in sustained employment and/or study, 5 years after graduation

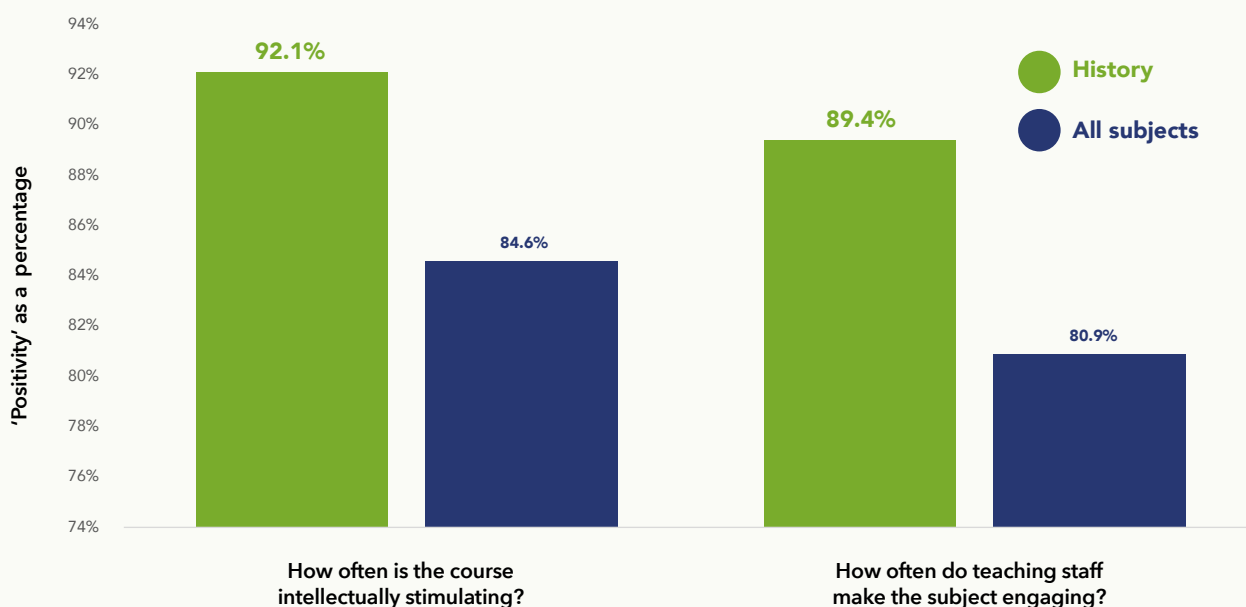
Five years after completing university study, history graduates also have higher median annual earnings (£27,200) than those with degrees in subjects including media, psychology, sociology and education. Five years after graduation, median earnings of history graduates are also close to those for a series of social science subjects including geography and environment, law, business and politics.

Students enjoy studying history

While employability and earnings are important measures of graduate outcome, those who study history in UK universities also have high levels of satisfaction in the content and provision of their studies.

In the annual National Student Survey, questions to recent graduates – on the intellectual quality, challenge, stimulation, and scope for personal development – show history performing strongly and consistently when compared to the average levels of satisfaction for all degree subjects, including STEM. History lecturers in UK universities also perform strongly in terms of student satisfaction. Questions relating to the quality and levels of engagement of history teaching are consistently high and, once more, exceed the average for all degree subjects.⁸

CHART 3: UK National Student Survey, 2024. Questions relating to undergraduate courses in UK universities: 'History' and 'All Subjects'



Source: National Student Survey, 2024, Office for Students.

Finally, and contrary to the recent views of selected politicians and commentators, 8 out of 10 history students (2024) express confidence that their degree choice has 'developed the knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future'.⁹

This is especially welcome given the understandable appeal of – and, on occasions, pressure to choose – vocational degree subjects. Relative to other subjects, especially in STEM, few of today's history students will embark on a pre-set dedicated career path. And yet, having pursued a course of their choice, history graduates enter the workforce across a wide range of sectors, well equipped to interpret, navigate, and adapt to our future world and workplace.

WHAT DO WE RISK LOSING IF CUTS AND CLOSURES CONTINUE?

Our final section brings together the principal themes of this briefing: the Society's concern at the extent of cuts in sections of UK higher education; and the value and positive outcomes to be gained from studying history at university. These two themes are at odds – with ongoing cuts putting at further risk lecturers' ability to provide the full benefits and potential of an undergraduate education in history.

This is especially so for departments in post-92 universities which are disproportionately affected by cuts. These departments play a distinctive and vital role in maximising the diversity, opportunity and value of history in UK higher education. This includes the fundamental question of which students have access, now and in the future, to a history education.

First-generation students are a significant, and growing, element of the UK student population. In 2024, 1 in 8 undergraduate applicants, regardless of subject, were from the 'most disadvantaged areas (POLAR 4 quintile 1).¹⁰ Among history undergraduates, the greatest share of these first-generation students study in post-92 departments. According to government data, of the 30 history departments with more than a 15% student intake from this group, 9 out of 10 are at post-92 universities.¹¹

Departments which educate and train the greatest number of first-generation students also feature in the top 25 UK universities for median history graduate earnings. Moreover, of the 30 history departments with the highest satisfaction ratings for teaching and intellectual challenge, two-thirds are in post-92 institutions.

Measures like these prompt us to question traditional rankings and indices of value and outcome. They remind us that history in UK higher education serves, and serves well, a broad student population who come to the discipline from diverse backgrounds and levels of educational opportunity. They show us what we risk losing and what we must work to support and retain.



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CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF HISTORY

This briefing offers selected views of the state, and value, of history in UK higher education. The Royal Historical Society has gained valuable insights into the changing experience of academic historians and students in the 2020s. Collating this data allows us to map the landscape in which historical teaching, study and research now take place.

The picture is mixed. On the one hand, recent work confirms the extent of cuts now being experienced by history departments across UK higher education. Levels of turmoil and disruption far exceed any modest fall in history student enrolments, of a kind recently experienced across the arts and humanities.

At the same time, many measures of history show a discipline that:

- Remains significant and stable
- Is growing in pre-university education
- Proves strong for graduate outcomes
- Is popular, rigorous and applicable as a degree choice.

These are positives that need to be set out and heard as a counterpoint to alternative voices.

Those working in higher education know that the problems currently faced come back to questions of student enrolments and university financing. The lifting of departmental caps on student intakes in the mid-2010s, and the lack of competition between institutions over fee levels, has resulted in a dramatic shake up in the allocation of history students, with a small number of departments growing considerably, while others are deprived of a previously healthy student intake.

Deregulation and marketisation of UK higher education is a political action and mindset. In its meetings with MPs and parliamentarians, the Society continues to reinforce the negative impact and implications of such political decisions. So too with calls for the reform of university finances, which hit the humanities hardest. These are huge infrastructural challenges to which the Society can lend its voice.

More immediate, and within our grasp, is the Society's responsibility to extend our advocacy to better demonstrate the value of history. This briefing focuses on history in higher education. There is still much in this sector we need to appreciate, for which we will draw on the expertise and advice of academic historians in the coming months.



One aim is to show potential students the benefits, and pleasures, of continuing with history from A-Level to university. By demonstrating these positives, we look to encourage more students to pursue the subject they enjoy, confident that theirs is an informed choice, with clear rewards and opportunities for professional and personal development.

Of course, history's importance extends well beyond formal education. Future work will therefore consider its value outside the university – in the intersections between academic and public historians, the public appetite for the past, and history's contribution to civic and national life.

Most importantly, we will extend our communication of history's value to new audiences: potential students, parents and teachers, the media, policy makers and those elected to parliament in 2024. Through engagement with new audiences, the Society looks to develop and enhance its support for history and historians. This work will greatly benefit from the experience and talents of the historical community in its many forms and activities. **Please get in touch, if you wish to participate.**

ENDNOTES

1. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), HE student enrolments by Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) level 3 subject 'History', 2022/23, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/what-study> [accessed 7 October 2024].
2. British Academy SHAPE Indicators <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/policy-and-research/british-academy-shape-observatory/shape-indicators/> based on the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) A-Level exam results data, 2024 (for England, Wales and Northern Ireland) <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/> [accessed 7 October 2024].
3. British Academy SHAPE Indicators <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/policy-and-research/british-academy-shape-observatory/shape-indicators/> based on the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) Higher exam results data, 2024 <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/105123.html> [accessed 7 October 2024].
4. British Academy SHAPE Indicators <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/policy-and-research/british-academy-shape-observatory/shape-indicators/> based on the Joint Council for Qualifications GCSE exam results data, 2024 (for England, Wales and Northern Ireland) <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/> [accessed 7 October 2024].
5. Joint Council for Qualifications A-Level exam results data, 2020-2024 <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/> [accessed 7 October 2024].
6. Joint Council for Qualifications GCSE exam results data, 2018-2024 <https://www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/> [accessed 7 October 2024].
7. Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO), Provider Level Data <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/graduate-outcomes-leo-provider-level-data> The measure for history on this occasion is HESA's 'Common Aggregation Hierarchy' (CAH) level 2, 'History and Archaeology'. The latest available data (June 2024) records UK-domiciled first degree graduates, five years after graduation, for the tax year 2021-22. Responses measure the median rate of employment for history from 96 UK universities [accessed 7 October 2024].
8. National Student Survey, 2024, Office for Students <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/> Responses to questions 2 and 3 in the annual survey, based on a response rate of 69% of 2023 history graduates [accessed 7 October 2024].
9. Question 9 in the National Student Survey, 2024, Office for Students <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/> [accessed 7 October 2024]
10. UCAS, applicant figures June 2024 deadline analysis <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2024-cycle/2024-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline>. Undergraduate applications from those identified as POLAR 4 Quintile 1 have risen by 30% between 2018 and 2024. The Office for Students defines POLAR 4 as a classification of 'local areas across the UK according to the young participation rate in higher education ... calculated by dividing the number of young people from each area who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 by the young population of that area ... areas are then ranked by participation rate and split into five quintiles, each of which represents about a fifth of the young population' <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/> [accessed 7 October 2024].
11. Longitudinal Employment Outcomes (LEO), Graduate and Postgraduate Outcomes (June 2024) <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/leo-graduate-and-postgraduate-outcomes/2021-22>. The measure is for POLAR 4, Quintile 1 'History and Archaeology' students, five years after graduation, for the tax year 2021/22 [accessed 7 October 2024].

Get in touch with us:

The Royal Historical Society welcomes and invites engagement with this briefing, from members of the historical community who wish to comment on specific aspects of the text and / or to propose approaches to demonstrating the value of history.

If you wish to do so, please contact:
academic.director@royalhistsoc.org.

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