



# ISSUES PAPER 8

## *14-19 Curriculum: the Humanities*

April 2008

### **Introduction**

Following its Annual Reports in 2004, 2005, and 2006, the Nuffield Review is producing Issues Papers which focus on areas of concern, with a view to widening the debate, testing tentative conclusions and seeking further evidence. At the heart of the Review must be the quality of learning which takes place, and thus the way in which that learning is organised and encouraged. The curriculum therefore is at the centre of the Review's concerns.

*Issues Paper 7* looked at whole curriculum development. Subsequent papers will examine particular aspects which give rise to public and professional debate (such as, the teaching of applied science as part of general education, the place of the arts in the learning experience of everyone, and the significance of experiential and practical learning).

This paper focuses upon the place of the Humanities within the changing 14-19 phase, especially their contribution to answering the central question of the Review: what counts as *an educated 19 year old in this day and age?*

By 'Humanities' is meant those studies which centre attention on the nature of human beings and how they interact with each other and their environment.

### **Creating an "Integrated Humanities"**

The secondary curriculum is seen as a collection of subjects, reflected in the timetable of so many schools. Indeed, the National Curriculum, established in the 1988 Education Act, divided the whole of the curriculum under ten subject headings. Such subjects organise knowledge, both theoretical and practical, in particular ways.

The Nuffield Review is an independent review of all aspects of 14-19 education and training: aims; quality of learning; curriculum; assessment; qualifications; progression to employment, training and higher education; providers; governance; policy. It has been funded for six years by the Nuffield Foundation, beginning in October 2003. Its reports and papers are available on the website [www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk) or from [info@nuffield14-19review.org.uk](mailto:info@nuffield14-19review.org.uk).

There have been challenges to that organisation within the humanities: for example, the attempts to produce more ‘integrated’ areas of study, such as:

- Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP)<sup>1</sup>.
- AQA Humanities GCSE syllabus which requires a study of culture and beliefs, conflict and co-operation, and environmental issues.
- OCR Humanities GCSE which enables students to understand how society works and how they can have effects on the lives of others.
- Bruner’s ‘Man: a course of study’ which was an enquiry-led curriculum, integrating different disciplines within the social sciences and the Humanities<sup>2</sup>.

Between 1975 and 1983 HMI tried to create ‘an entitlement curriculum’ based on nine areas of learning and experience within which the traditional subjects could be integrated. Currently the QCA’s ‘Curriculum for the Future’, though not discarding subjects, emphasises ‘topics’, ‘themes’ and ‘dimensions’ as alternative organising elements in the curriculum for the future. The recently announced extension in England of the lines of the new Diploma to 17 includes one in the Humanities, as a further example of ‘applied knowledge’.

Wales, in its Learning Pathways, has in effect developed a Humanities style context for the different pathways, integrated around the study of Wales within the wider European and global context.

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<sup>1</sup> See Stenhouse, L. *Introduction to Curriculum Development and Research*, London: Heinemann, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Bruner, J., 1966, ‘Man: a course of study (MACOS’, in *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, Harvard University Press.

## But the dominance of subjects

Nevertheless, there has remained an assumption, reinforced in England through the National Curriculum, but essentially established in the 1904 Regulations of the Board of Education, that knowledge can, and should, be divided into subjects, and thereby more effectively organised for the benefit of the learner.

For the moment, therefore, this paper defines ‘Humanities’ operationally in terms of a collection of subjects, namely, History, Geography, Literature and Religious Education (RE). It does, however, focus upon History and Geography within the Humanities, whilst bearing in mind the importance of Literature and RE.

## Current challenge to the Humanities in 14-19

The challenge is of three kinds. First, both History and Geography, once essential components of the National Curriculum up to 16, have been ‘disapplied’ in England from the compulsory core from 14 onwards. They are no longer seen to be important enough to be required in the general education of those who take the more vocationally oriented routes.

Second, the philosophical assumption of discrete subject areas, into which young people need to be systematically initiated, is questioned. Problems to be faced, and curiosity to be satisfied, so it is argued, do not fit neatly into subject compartments. We should concentrate instead upon competencies<sup>3</sup> or topics of social importance.

Third, as economic efficiency and enterprise are increasingly the dominant aims of education and training, so vocational preparation (e.g. training to

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<sup>3</sup> See RSA Opening Minds Project.

be a plumber) focuses upon the relevant skills – not on the history and geography of, or literary insight into, plumbing or other occupationally relevant skills.

## Basic Data

These concerns are supported by data. Entries to GCSE Geography have dramatically declined from 220,000 in 2001 to 188,000 in 2006, which, as a percentage of all students, represents a decline from 36% to 28% in five years. At A Level, the decline has been from 33,000 to 28,000. Integrated Humanities shows a decline at GCSE from 20,000 (3.4% of all students) to 14,000 (2.2%). Indeed, as Lambert states,

*geography as a subject discipline is being sidelined in some schools seeking to establish a ‘skills-based’ curriculum ... There are 85 schools in which not one single student sat GCSE Geography last year<sup>4</sup>*

History has, apparently, fared better. In the same period, the total number of entries to GCSE has risen from 195,000 to 208,000, and to A Level from 34,000 to 41,000. However, as a percentage of all students, there was a decline of entries for GCSE history, from 35% in 2001 to only 31% in 2006. At the same time as 85 schools did not have a single student taking Geography, 65 had none taking History.

Therefore, there is an almost spiralling decline in the popularity of Geography which, as in the sciences, could become self-enforcing as fewer enter higher education to study Geography and thus back into teaching.

Why is there this decline in the state sector if not in the independent schools and schools in more advantaged areas? Perhaps it is because subjects, unprotected by SATS at the end of Key Stage 3, are more vulnerable to the thematic approaches like *Opening Minds* or the onset of vocational and skills-based curriculum for the low attainer.

Moreover, these figures reflect only those who take the GCSEs and A level, not the increasing number who are taking more vocationally oriented courses at Levels 2 and 3, or indeed the students who will be embarking on the new Diplomas from September 2008. Detailed figures are unavailable, but the assumption is that the teaching of History and Geography is minimal, although a substantial number of Geography teachers are involved in the teaching of Leisure and Tourism, and there may well be a substantial role for geographers in courses based on the ‘Built Environment’. Similarly History teachers are involved in Leisure and Tourism and may well become involved in the Creative and Media diploma.

## In Defence of the Humanities

The National Curriculum in 1988 made History and Geography alongside Literature compulsory until 16. This was argued for strongly by the then Secretary of State, Kenneth Baker, as essential for the maintenance of a civilised society:

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<sup>4</sup> Lambert, D., 2008, 'Inconvenient truths', in *Geography*, 93 (1).

*It is my conviction that in this country, as nowhere else, the tradition of humanities teaching has continuing vitality and relevance. I am quite clear that every civilised society, to remain civilised, needs to develop in its citizens the aptitudes and intuitions which flow from engagement with the Humanities. The Humanities are an interrelated effort to give intellectual expression to the significance of what it means to be human<sup>5</sup>.*

## Aims and values

The Review, therefore, is shaped by the need to answer the question: *What counts as an educated 19 year-old in this day and age?*

A brief answer to the Review's question would be someone:

- who can (and is disposed to) make worthwhile and informed choices about the kind of life worth living;
- who can make a positive contribution to the community as a citizen, and;
- who can make an economic contribution to society as a worker.
- who has the knowledge and understanding to manage his or her life intelligently;

In sum, a rational and critical thinker, a responsible citizen, a responsible worker and a person of practical intelligence. Furthermore, that critical thinking and responsibility, that consideration of 'what it is to be human', need to extend to such areas of living as the raising of families, health care, social welfare, future employment, further education, and commercial enterprise.

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<sup>5</sup> DES press release, 7th July, 1988.

## The place of subjects in addressing these aims

To achieve all this, there is a need to draw upon the disciplined thinking embodied in the subject organisation of knowledge we have inherited. Subjects represent ways of organising and making sense of the human condition. They embody what John Dewey referred to as 'the accumulated wisdom of the race' upon which, ideally, the teacher draws in order to help young people make sense of their experience. They have, therefore, a *prima facie* role in the fulfilment of the aims given above.

The Humanities' subjects are concerned with the very issues which matter to young people (human relations and emotions, ideals worth living for, misuse of authority, the use of violence); they enable young people to make sense of the experience and knowledge they continuously absorb.

Indeed, Geography and History, as well as the Natural Sciences, are the consequences of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, of the new confidence in the powers of human reason. Between them these subjects gave us the essential and liberating attitudes, knowledge and methods for increasing and ordering that knowledge to enable us to make sense of human societies.

This is well expressed in Jerome Bruner's account of the course, *Man: a Course of Study* (MACOS)<sup>6</sup>, which draws upon a range of disciplines (history, geography, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, religious studies) to help young people understand humanity and the forces which shaped it and continue to do so. The three questions posed by Bruner, to which different humanistic disciplines contributed, were:

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<sup>6</sup> Bruner, J., 1966, op.cit.

- What is human about human beings?
- How did they get that way?
- How can they be made more so?

These questions transcend the subject disciplines, but the tools for answering the questions lie in those disciplines. They lie in an understanding of the culture which, as Bruner explains, ‘though itself man-made, both forms and makes possible the workings of a distinctively human mind’<sup>7</sup>.

## Geography and History

Understanding the ‘big ideas’ of Geography – place, space and scale and the interdependence of the physical and human worlds – are essential for all young people if they are to make sense of their experiences of the world and, through that understanding, make informed and worthwhile choices about their actions in relation to their immediate locality and to broader environmental issues. Personal experiences and sense of identity need to be related to local, regional and global scales – for example, in relation to sustainability, interdependence, uneven development, people as consumers and productive workers within the broader economy.

History similarly is a powerful instrument for comprehending human behaviour. It interrogates primary evidence and evaluates this evidence for accuracy and possible bias. The historical discipline encourages a healthy scepticism, a vital characteristic if young democratic citizens are to make informed and worthwhile choices in an age of political ‘spin’ and media

manipulation. A more detailed account and justification of the contribution of History and Geography to the Humanities from members of the Historical and Geographical Associations, upon which this paper draws, are published on the Review’s website<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, to abolish the individual subjects within the Humanities, or to diminish their importance, would be to remove access to different ways in which to make sense of experience.

## Civil Society and the World of Work

Humanities for all young people 14-19 develop their capacity to make worthwhile, informed, and rational choices, not merely in terms of their domestic and private lives, but as participants in civil society and as workers, whose economic activities have an impact on colleagues, on the public, on the environment and on future generations.

With regard to ‘civil society’, Citizenship is rightly seen to be an important aspect of the curriculum. But too often it is treated as yet another subject, as though the Humanities, properly taught, are not centrally concerned with understanding the thinking, the values, and the dispositions which are at the heart of civic responsibility.

With regard to the world of work, the future worker needs, not just employment related skills, but an understanding of the wider social and economic and cultural context within which his vocational ambitions are to be pursued, as is recognised in the vocational pathways in Germany and elsewhere in Europe<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Bruner, J. 1996, ‘Culture, Mind and education, in The Culture of Education, Harvard University Press

<sup>8</sup> [www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk](http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk)

<sup>9</sup> See Winch’s cogent argument, ch. 10, Clarke, L. and Winch, C., 2007, Vocational Education, Routledge.

## Critical Thinking

The skills of critical thinking as such might be thought sufficient for the educational aims outlined above. However, those skills are necessary but not sufficient conditions. Someone who is able to apply critical judgement to a problem does not possess a generic skill, but abilities relevant to the kind of issue that the Humanities are concerned with.

For example, problems such as whether or not our country is to go to war, or whether or not there should be collective and private action to deal with global warming, involve knowledge of many facts concerning actions carried out in the past, evidence for assertions made in the present and the ability to evaluate likely consequences of present decisions for the future. One cannot operate with generic skills to do such things; one needs the relevant facts, evidence, forms of argumentation and modes of gathering knowledge and evaluating beliefs that are characteristically organised by subjects.

As it stands, the curriculum beyond the age of 14 is not sufficient to equip our young people to do this, and it therefore compromises them as future individuals, citizens and workers.

## Rethinking the Humanities

However, the defence of subjects in general, and of Humanities in particular, does not entail that the teaching of these subjects needs no reform in order to fulfil the educational aims outlined by the Nuffield Review. The argument so far has been that these subjects reflect logically organised bodies of knowledge and disciplined thinking, which cannot be ignored. But the selection of the knowledge they contain, the disciplined thinking they represent, and the illumination which they can give, need to be carefully thought about. Otherwise,

they will be but the ‘inert knowledge’ – something to be transmitted for the sake of examinations - which makes little or no connection with the concerns, interests and choices of young people.

One difficulty with the comparative neglect of the history of education is that both policy makers and teachers have little awareness of the many successful attempts in the past to produce a curriculum within the Humanities which was both faithful to the disciplined nature of the subjects and yet highly relevant to the experiences of young people.

For example, when the school leaving age was raised in 1971, again there was the cry to abandon subjects in order to make the curriculum more relevant to the needs and the interests of young people. It was the Humanities Curriculum Project (referred to above) which proved otherwise. After all, the issues which deeply concern young people – use of violence, prevalence of injustice, relations between the sexes, deference to authority, racism, misuse of power – are the very stuff of History, Geography and Literature. The solution lay in the connecting of those concerns of young people with the illumination provided by the humane studies. Discussion was central, but discussion disciplined by the arguments and evidence found in the respective subjects.

Similarly, ‘Geography 16-19’ and ‘History 13-16’ showed how these subjects within the Humanities could shed light on the concerns which young people, often reluctant to prolong their schooling, found inspiring and helpful. For example, Geography 16-19 focused upon such organising themes as ‘changing the urban environment’, natural hazards, and challenge of the environment’, all tailored to the interests and needs of young learners, yet faithful to the discipline of geographical studies.

There is nothing new in this. The medieval historian, Dr. Marjorie Reeves, showed how, in the 1920s, aspiring hairdressers in the East End could be enthralled and illuminated by her history of hairdressing.

Today all young people are necessarily caught up in the controversies arising from environmental waste and pollution, life within a multiethnic community, challenges to our democratic form of life, use and the misuse of violence within society, and changing moral and social attitudes towards sexual relationships and use of drugs. The Humanities provide the broader vision, the lessons from the past and elsewhere, the wider cultural perspective and the disciplined thinking through which young people might confront these issues.

### **Lessons from Wales and elsewhere**

The apparent neglect of the Humanities in 14-19 developments in England is not paralleled elsewhere. The Learning Pathways in the evolving 14-19 curriculum of Wales, leading to the Welsh Baccalaureate, requires modules for all young people on understanding their situation within the wider geographical and historical context of Wales and then of changing Europe. Scope is given for the creativity of teachers in adapting the modules to the particular context of young people – different in the once mining area of the Rhonda from that of the flourishing cities of Swansea or Cardiff. Furthermore, as Clarke and Winch show<sup>10</sup>, Germany and elsewhere in Europe provide a broader humanistic approach to education and training for all young people, including those on vocational and work related pathways. It is understood that the more

broadly educated, and economically and socially conscious worker, is likely to be a more intelligent and flexible employee.

### **The Future**

The humanities are essential for the continuing education of all young people 14-19. But the content and approach need to be carefully selected if they are to meet the nature of the disciplines, on the one hand, and, on the other, illuminate the issues which are of deep concern to all the young people. The following principles should be adopted throughout the 14-19 phase and particularly in the development of the new Humanities Diploma:

- *Flexibility in choice of topics.* There is a need for school-based responses to human issues which are of concern to this or that group of young people. For example, ‘community conflict’ was a focus of the influential Humanities courses in Northern Ireland.
- *Student voice.* The Humanities must find a place for the student’s voice – the experiences which he or she brings to school and which can be illuminated by the Humanities. Discussion is central.
- *Teacher’s role.* The skill of the teacher lies in linking the ‘accumulated wisdom of the race’, developed through the Humanities, to the concerns of learners.
- *Cooperative teaching.* To do this, teachers need to work together, covering the range of disciplines relevant to the questions posed by the students.

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<sup>10</sup> Clarke and Winch, 2007, op. cit.

- *Professional support.* Teachers, in developing the curriculum, need the support of their professional bodies, in particular the Geographical and Historical Associations – the guardians of professional knowledge and thinking.
- *Assessment.* Grading of what is said or written, unless great care is taken, militates against the serious reflection on, and deliberation about, matters of personal concern. Honesty of deliberation is more valuable than cleverness of argument.
- *Evidence based deliberation.* Learners need to acquire the habits, skills and dispositions to deliberate, on the basis of evidence and of the arguments and criticisms of others.

In the light of such general principles, members of the Geographical and Historical Associations have suggested to the Review the following:

- modular courses, which combine discrete geographical and historical units, developed for all pupils at each of the 1-3 Levels and have a minimum of 10% of curricular time;
- modular courses of combined Geography and History units (with units from Literature, RE or Citizenship), modules of which at Levels 1, 2 and 3 would in some cases be sufficiently broad, as part of a general education programme, to complement vocational courses, and in other cases sufficiently specialised for progression to GCSE and AS/A2. Examples have been piloted in the five modular structure of QCA/OCR GCSE in Geography and History. Similar courses could be developed for AS/A2;

- these modules cover issues or topics which are predictably of concern to young people and to society's future;
- the overall framework provides flexibility for local curriculum development;
- modules from Humanities might also be part of such 'wider skills' courses as ASDAN's Certificate of Personal Effectiveness – and assessed as such.

The Nuffield Review would welcome responses to this Issues Paper – examples of successfully integrated Humanities courses, the incorporation of the Humanities into more vocational or applied areas of the curriculum, and lessons to be learnt from elsewhere.

ii The following people have been involved in the production of this Issues Paper: Richard Pring, David Lambert, Martin Roberts, Chris Winch.

The Nuffield Review invites comments on its Issues Papers. Please send any feedback to:  
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