

Reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education: threats and challenges



General report
Third Annual Forum
for History Education

Bologna, 15-17 May 2024

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**General Rapporteur
Tony Gallagher**

French edition:

*« Revigorer la conscience et la culture historiques
à travers l'enseignement supérieur : menaces
et défis – rapport du Rapporteur général »*

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Cover design and layout: Documents and Publications
Production Department (SPDP), Council of Europe

Cover photos: © Council of Europe

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Printed at the Council of Europe

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Introduction

The European Cultural Convention was signed in 1954. Article 2 explicitly states that each contracting party shall “encourage the study by its own nationals of the languages, history and civilisation of the other Contracting Parties and grant facilities to those Parties to promote such studies in its territory”.¹

Knowing the language and history of others or being curious about them and having the opportunity to study them is undoubtedly one of the foundations of our living together as Europeans. Thus, for over half a century, through the recommendations of the Committee of Ministers, teacher training courses and the development of the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) – in which history-related competences are once again emphasised – the Council of Europe has outlined a rich vision of history, history teaching and history education, one of the cornerstones of which is the notion of multiperspectivity.²

Since 2022, this work has continued through the organisation of annual Forums for History Education. By bringing together various players – public authorities, teachers, learners, associations specialising in memory and history, formal and non-formal education players – the idea is to help re-clarify the role that history plays in our societies in order to consolidate the democratic and human rights acquis.

As part of this consideration of the role of history in our societies and on the Forum for History Education (the Forum), reflected in the first report of the Council of Europe’s Observatory on History Teaching in Europe published in 2024, the third Forum had the particularity of focusing on the specific role played by higher education. In a number of cases, higher education institutions are responsible for teacher training. In all cases, with full respect for their academic freedom and institutional autonomy, they are also the place where specific historical narratives and historiographies are developed. They have the onerous task of opening

up spaces for debate, exchange and questioning. This means putting into practice the values we stand for: tolerance of ambiguity, promotion of democratic debate and critical thinking as a pillar of education and democracy.

Reading this report should testify to the importance of the questions raised and the richness of the debates. Predominant and current issues were raised, such as: how to take popular culture into account in the formulation of a historical narrative; the role of public authorities as guarantors of the framework for the operation and funding of higher education; the role of the players involved in defining a historical narrative, particularly in terms of teaching, a role that can only be thought of in terms of respect for academic freedom; and the importance for learners and citizens of having a common historical foundation on which to live together.

This Third Annual Forum was organised in collaboration with the University of Bologna and in partnership with key players in higher education: the International Association of Universities (IAU), the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc), the European Students’ Union (ESU) and the Magna Charta Observatory. The culmination of this work will be a fourth Forum in 2025. Based on the conclusions and reports of the first three Forums, it should enable us to draft a new recommendation on history education in the digital age which meets today’s challenges. This report is therefore of the utmost importance in this context, and we would like to thank all those who have contributed to it, especially the authors of the various articles and contributions. A huge thank you goes to the General Rapporteur, Tony Gallagher, who, in the midst of the polyphony of the debates, was able to hear, if not a harmony, at least the outline of a symphony.

We hope that reading this report will inspire you and give rise to other ideas, other avenues for reflection and action, each in their own field of action and competence, but all united in the firm conviction that our democracies can only be founded on an unmanipulated history, based on a disciplinary ethic and on the curiosity of each individual to see what was. This is both a democratic challenge and a challenge to peaceful stability in Europe.

1. European Cultural Convention (1954), available at <https://rm.coe.int/168006457e>, accessed 17 October 2024.

2. The exhibition “Teaching history, grounding democracy” traces the work of the Council of Europe on history, available at www.coe.int/en/web/history-education/exhibition, accessed 17 October 2024.

Executive summary

The Council of Europe organises annual Forums for History Education to provide platforms for public authorities, teachers, curriculum developers, academics, learners and civil society to exchange their perspectives on and practices in history education, and collaboratively develop guidelines for improving history education. Three Forums have been held, in Belgrade (2022), Brussels (2023) and Bologna (2024). The theme of the Third Annual Forum was reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education: threats and challenges.

The Forum heard many examples of the threats and challenges facing history education in higher education, related to changes in higher education and wider societal and political pressures. These included concerns about the commodification of higher education and the prioritisation of a narrow economic agenda to the detriment of the wider range of purposes universities seek to fulfil.

Matjaž Gruden, Director of the Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe, highlighted the challenge of democratic backsliding and suggested that universities, as sites of knowledge and research, are important contributors to societal solutions. History education, he argued, not only seeks to record events, but offers interpretations and understanding of events so that we can learn from past mistakes.

The discussion at the Forum was organised around three themes: (1) the role of higher education in history education and research in and for democratic societies; (2) identities, roles and responsibilities of historians within higher education; and (3) the role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society.

The discussion on these themes covered a range of issues, including the role of academic freedom, the professional ethos of historians and the implications of the third mission³ for higher education. This last

theme emerged at various points in discussions on the nature and extent of the partnership between universities and communities. Much of the discussion focused on tensions, such as the need to balance academic rigour with critical reflection, the limitations of autonomy when engaging with communities and the limitations of multiperspectivity.

By the end of the Forum, the following core issues emerged: concerns about the mismatch between teaching in higher education and schools; the role and extent of multiperspectivity; the implications of the local democratic mission of higher education; and the role of public authorities. Five main recommendations are presented in this report.

- ▶ History should play a more central role in the curriculum at all stages of education, including lifelong learning.
- ▶ It is important to develop a more explicit approach to the ethics of history education, including a commitment to a more inclusive approach involving the coproduction of knowledge.
- ▶ The concept of multiperspectivity in history education needs to be developed further as part of a wider agenda for social cohesion: all communities should have the right to have their historical narrative recognised by the whole of society and reflected in the history curriculum.
- ▶ Teachers and educators should be encouraged and supported to enhance their skills in communicating about history and historical understanding. As part of this, approaches to tackling misinformation and distortion in claims about history need to be strengthened.
- ▶ Public authorities play important roles in relation to the role of history and memory in society: they need to strengthen their support for academic freedom, including access to archives, and consider the relationship between historical understanding and processes of commemoration.

3. The first two missions are teaching and research, while the third mission is about generating knowledge for social/cultural/civic/economic development beyond academia.

General Rapporteur's report

The Council of Europe organises annual Forums for History Education to provide platforms for public authorities, teachers, curriculum developers, academics, learners and civil society to exchange their perspectives on and practices in history education, and collaboratively develop guidelines for improving history education. The general objectives of the Forums include:

- ▶ serving as a central component of the intergovernmental programme on history education, drawing upon its extensive knowledge base and acquis;
- ▶ promoting dialogue and collaboration among various stakeholders focused on the theme of each Forum;
- ▶ sharing and disseminating best practices and insights from diverse aspects of European history.

Three Forums have been held so far: the first in Belgrade (2022) focused on the theme of places of memories: learning spaces for democracy; the second in Brussels (2023) on history education in the digital age; and the third in Bologna (2024) on reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education: threats and challenges. The present paper is the General Rapporteur's report on the Third Annual Forum.

Third Annual Forum schedule⁴

The Third Annual Forum focused on the threats and challenges facing the teaching of history in higher education institutions. The place of history as an academic subject is often questioned or even cut in favour of other subjects that seem more closely linked to the immediate needs of the economy. Three areas provided the main framework for discussions:

- ▶ the role of higher education in history education and research in and for democratic societies;
- ▶ identities, roles and responsibilities of historians within higher education;
- ▶ the role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society.

The conference opened on 15 May 2024 with introductory words from Aurora Ailincăi, Head of the History Education Division and Executive Director of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, Council of Europe; Giovanni Molari, Rector, University of Bologna; and Matjaž Gruden, Director of the Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe. The opening keynote presentation of the conference was given by Jerome de Groot, Professor of Literature and Culture, University of Manchester, followed by a question-and-answer session.

The second day of the conference included three plenary sessions and was opened by Giuseppe Ronsisvalle, Professor and Bureau Member of the Steering Committee for Education (CDEDU); and Raffaella Campaner, Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Bologna. The first plenary session focused on the role of history education and research in and for democratic societies. The second plenary session focused on the identities, roles and responsibilities of historians in higher education. This was followed by small group discussions on the issues raised by the presentations. The third plenary session focused on the role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society; this was similarly followed by small group discussions.

The third day of the Forum was opened by a session on sustainability and future perspectives for history education in higher education. In this session, group rapporteurs shared feedback from the group discussions the previous day. In addition, three speakers provided their reflections on some of the issues considered. The conference concluded with a report from the General Rapporteur followed by a question-and-answer session.

Threats and challenges to history education in higher education

Throughout the presentations and discussions at the Forum, we heard many examples of the threats and challenges facing history education in higher education, some of which related to changes in the working practices and priorities of higher education, such as the elevation of STEM⁵ subjects over arts and

4. See appendix for the programme of the Third Annual Forum.

5. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

humanities subjects, and some of which related to wider societal and political pressures. The Forum offered an essential opportunity to emphasise the importance of various approaches and formats, demonstrating how different perspectives, methodologies and presentation styles can collectively enhance our engagement with history, making it more accessible, relevant and inclusive for diverse audiences.

Concerns were expressed about the commodification of higher education and the seemingly relentless drive towards prioritising an economic agenda in which employment outcomes for graduates are framed as the primary outcome of education, with salary levels as the singular indicator of success. This agenda has been marked by a clear shift away from arts, humanities and social science subjects in favour of STEM subjects. In some countries, financial pressure on higher education has led to the casualisation of teaching staff and increased workload pressures.

Reports from the Council of Europe's Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTÉ)⁶ reinforce the situation by highlighting a disconnect between higher education and school teaching. National history remains the organising principle in school teaching, even though this is no longer the case in higher education. School teachers report that they understand the importance of multiperspectivity, but a focus on themes such as the role of minorities varies across countries. Textbooks remain the most widely used resource, but teachers express concerns about the representation of diverse groups and minorities in textbooks, and indicate that topics with significant relevance for multiperspectivity and critical thinking are less well represented. School teachers also report facing heavy workloads, overloaded curricula and the pressure of public examinations. A consequence of this is the common use of unidirectional instruction and less frequent use of pedagogies such as project work which relate to historical thinking and consciousness. School teachers also indicate that they need more opportunities for professional development and training. In other words, advances in historical understanding and pedagogy in higher education do not appear to have been adopted in school teaching, leading to calls for changes to the initial training of history teachers and the extent to which teachers can access professional development support.

The challenges arising from societal, cultural and political transformations were delineated clearly in the opening presentation by Matjaž Gruden, who

outlined the reasons for establishing a new Directorate of Democracy and Human Dignity at the Council of Europe in 2022. The core element of this was evidence of democratic backsliding in many European countries, which prompted the Council of Europe to organise a response. The Council of Europe was founded in 1949, amidst the landscapes of destruction following the Second World War, to achieve greater unity among European parliamentary democracies. Democratic culture and practices have advanced across Europe since that time, particularly following the end of the Cold War, but contemporary challenges have required a renewal of that original purpose. That response involves building a coalition of institutions to articulate a new approach or understanding of democracy. Education, and history education in particular, is seen as an important element of this. Mr Gruden contrasted the singular rhetoric of populist politicians, whose narratives characteristically play with emotion while seeking to blame specific groups of people for all the ills of society, with the way democrats commit to finding solutions to challenges in a variety of contexts and situations. Universities, he argued, are sites of knowledge and research, and therefore important contributors to societal solutions. History education in higher education has a particularly important role as it does not simply seek to record events, but also offers interpretations of events that allow us to learn from past mistakes and gain a deeper understanding of the present and future.

Populists show an anti-establishment narrative, often casting the establishment as unduly under the influence of foreign interests. Higher education institutions are often on the "list of enemies" because they offer critical, evidence-informed perspectives. This is even more so with history education. Populists distort and weaponise history to promote their narratives and attack democratic values. By contrast, higher education acts as a guardian of academic rigour and provides us with custodians of knowledge and critical agendas against distortion. This is only possible if the importance of academic freedom is recognised and protected.

Other speakers throughout the conference returned to this theme of societal challenges. We heard examples of the politicisation of knowledge by state actors as they weaponised knowledge for narrow national-political goals. This could occur when academics are encouraged or obliged to set aside evidence and analysis in favour of political priorities. This was illustrated by examples where individual academics were attacked if they dared to challenge or critique national myths. The role of social media in a digital world contributes to this challenge. The rapid dissemination of claims makes it harder to evaluate truth claims or challenge disinformation and misinformation. This is exacerbated further by the reality that some actors

6. OHTÉ (2023a), "General report on the state of history teaching in Europe: executive summary", available at <https://rm.coe.int/2023-executive-summary-oh-te-general-report/1680ad675c>, accessed 17 October 2024; OHTÉ (2023b), "General report on the state of history teaching in Europe, three volumes", available at www.coe.int/en/web/observatory-history-teaching/general-report, accessed 17 October 2024.

deliberately use social media to promote partisan messages. It is sometimes said that “in a flood it is hard to find drinking water”. So too in a rapidly expanding information world it is difficult to discern truth from errors, or errors from deliberate falsifications from ideology presented as truth. Critical knowledge is at the heart of the academic enterprise, and the right to maintain and present critical perspectives needs to be protected.

The response to these challenges was the central core of the Third Forum. An engaging test of this emerged from the keynote address by Jerome de Groot in which he offered an alternative approach for history education founded on three main elements: activist critiques of national historical symbols and representations; the need for higher education to collaborate with communities outside the university, especially those offering previously unheard or less heard perspectives; and using both to reframe our practice and do things differently.

Mr De Groot asked why we have history, “why we teach it in particular ways and why we teach it in particular places”. Higher education institutions can act as gatekeepers of ways of generating knowledge and seek to block change or new interpretations. More broadly, he suggested that the neoliberal university does not provide a neutral environment for teaching history. He highlighted the risks resulting from failing to see the line between “dangerous nostalgia and current racism” and used examples from Britain, such as opposition to the campaign to return the Elgin Marbles to Greece and challenges to the legacy of the National Trust or the removal of statues of slave traders, to illustrate the “curious nature of commemoration”, which sometimes seeks to preserve a version of the past that ignores the legacy of colonialism.

Mr De Groot’s proposed solution was for academic historians to recognise different forms of expertise and experience outside the university and work collaboratively with communities rather than casting them simply as audiences. He cited examples of work from public history which sought not only to be more inclusive, but also more interrogative, and to communicate about the past in multiple ways. He also cited Paul Ashton in emphasising, “[p]erhaps public history might be best thought of as an ongoing, entangled negotiation – as a set of evolving relationships – cultural, economic, environmental, political and social – involving a range of knowledges and a diversity of people, groups and organisations.”⁷

More generally, these suggestions were linked to the notion of public engagement and the increasingly porous boundaries between higher education and

communities as the former’s approach to knowledge production changes. This involves a shift away from the assumption that universities produce knowledge primarily by and for their own members; to an acceptance that some knowledge should be shared with parts of the wider society (knowledge sharing); to a recognition that some parts of society hold knowledge of value to the university and forms of knowledge exchange are of value (knowledge exchange); to a realisation that knowledge and understanding will be advanced through an active partnership between universities and society (knowledge codesign). If the notion of codesign includes a commitment to engage with traditionally marginalised communities, this can lead to a reformulation of established histories as new voices are heard and new perspectives included.

These ideas permeated discussions throughout the rest of the Forum and highlighted some scepticism about the role of popular history, casting academic historians as those who must make judgments on the accuracy or authenticity of historical claims. Popular representations of history, it was suggested, may be more likely to promote myths. While multiperspectivity is important and has its place, it also has limits – not every voice can or should be heard, and all voices should be tested by the methodologies of higher education. The controversial place of popular culture in history education was discussed; specifically, the potential risk that it can be used to oversimplify, distort, or sensationalise historical events, which may lead to misunderstandings or the perpetuation of myths. However, when used critically, popular culture engages students, making history more relatable and accessible, while fostering critical thinking about how history is represented. This is where values and ethics are crucial, as they guide historians in distinguishing between responsible interpretations and those that distort the past, but they also raise questions on how we should evaluate the integrity of claims. It was suggested that it is the job of historians to differentiate between good and bad ideas, not just on the basis of factual accuracy but also in alignment with ethical considerations. Rather than codesign, this resembles a form of knowledge exchange in which the academy acts as final arbiter.

When Robert Stradling⁸ wrote his guide for teachers on multiperspectivity, he highlighted a shift in historical understanding that had occurred because of three main factors: first, the recognition that history involved the interpretation of evidence, not just the accumulation of historical facts; second, an acknowledgement that much of history had previously been taught from a singular perspective, typically reflecting the views

7. Ashton P. (2023), “The age of public history”, *Public History Review*, Vol. 30, available at <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v30i0.8373>, accessed 17 October 2024.

8. Stradling R. (2003), “Multiperspectivity in history teaching: a guide for teachers”, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680493c9e.pdf>, accessed 17 October 2024.

and interests of those in positions of power; third, a need for history education to better prepare young people for life in increasingly diverse societies. Since this shift in historical understanding had occurred, the political and social landscape has changed still further. This has included the rise of populist political movements on the left and right, and a sometimes uneasy relationship with notions of truth or accuracy. The “massification” of higher education has not only significantly changed patterns of participation but has also provoked concerns about attempts to restrict academic freedom, critiques of woke-ism and claims of an intolerant cancel culture. If this new environment appears to have produced clouds of uncertainty, this may have prompted concerns at the Forum that new forms of arbitration of truth are required, perhaps due to unease about descending into forms of relativism in which the only arbiter of a claim is that someone has expressed it. Perhaps what is actually needed is new thinking on the nature of multiperspectivity in these new times.

As a concluding comment to the discussion on the first day, one voice offered support for Mr De Groot’s analysis and offered a reminder of the value of multiperspectivity: “history is not just about life but is in life – it is not about staying in your study or engaging with others: when you decide to stay in your study you have made a choice, and some people are kept out.”

The role of history education and research in and for democratic societies

The next plenary session focused on the use and misuse of history as a challenge to democracy, including the role of academic freedom, teaching, learning and research. Raffaella Campaner highlighted the role of history education as living laboratories in reinforcing democratic processes: “a deep knowledge of our and others’ pasts can be a tool to help avoiding any single-minded view. Good teaching brings together curiosity and vigilance, doubt and tolerance, awareness of one’s own identity and openness to intercultural dispositions.” Matjaž Gruden emphasised the role of universities in preserving the freedom of thought that underpins the capacity for critical thinking, while Giuseppe Ronsisvalle outlined the wider agenda of work on history education carried out by the Council of Europe.

Speakers on these themes focused on the importance of academic freedom alongside the need to engage with communities outside the academy. A contrast was drawn between present approaches and 19th-century historical narratives whose goal was often to “reveal the long and glorious past of peoples and nations” which fostered division and hostility by

ignoring the reality of societal pluralism. Another contrast was drawn between the experience of history education in democratic societies, as compared with a communist society in which freedom of speech and multiperspectivity were restricted: history, like the economy, was centrally planned, but in this context had the effect of ignoring the existence, still less the role, of minorities, even despite facts and evidence. Instead, opening up history education to the experiences and perspectives of different communities is what leads to democratisation: “this type of history is more conducive to some form of ethical representation ... and is a way to respond to continuing racism against minorities in Europe.”

An important framework for this discussion was provided by the Magna Charta Universitatum. Originally signed in 1988 at the University of Bologna, and affirming universities as the trustee of the European humanist tradition, the charter highlights three key themes⁹ as the living values of higher education:

- ▶ research and teaching must be intellectually and morally independent of all political authority and economic power;
- ▶ teaching and research must be inseparable if their tuition is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society and advances in scientific knowledge;
- ▶ the university is a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance.

The notion of unfettered autonomy can however be problematic, as was pointed out by Richard Evans:

“The history of high politics and international diplomacy was king. History was made by great men. They were taken to be morally and politically autonomous individuals, whose decisions reflected the peculiarities of their own personality rather than wider forces of any kind. ... The point of history was to study ‘people who mattered’ and the workers, the peasants, collectively, had hardly ever mattered.”¹⁰

A similar point had previously been made by E. P. Thompson in 1963: “I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”¹¹

9. This text is taken from the 1988 version of the Magna Charta Universitatum, available at www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta/en/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu-1988, accessed 17 October 2024.

10. Evans R. (1997), *In defence of history*, pp.186-7.

11. Thompson E. P. (1963), *The making of the English working class*, p.12.

For Thompson, this form of multiperspectivity was not just about allowing for the inclusion of different voices, but also about challenging the “enormous condescension of posterity” to which traditional history education had consigned minorities and marginalised groups, by reading history with hindsight and from the perspective of the “winners” rather than acknowledging the diversity of perspectives available in the past itself.

This challenge was addressed in a revised version of the charter, published in 2020,¹² in which the active role of universities in society is more explicitly acknowledged. The additional text states that to fulfil their potential, universities require a “reliable social contract with civil society” and a recognition of their civic role and responsibility. Universities are “part of global, collegial networks of scientific enquiry and scholarship [but they are also] embedded in local cultures and crucially relevant to their future and enrichment.”

The wider discussion around these issues returned to previous debates in the Forum on the extent to which there were, or had to be, limits on openness and what form those limits might take. One speaker suggested that some of the strongest advocates of free speech were the far right. For this reason, our understanding of free speech had to be defined within the standards of human rights and the rule of law. In this perspective, openness should not be treated as a license to say anything. This was echoed in further comments suggesting that unfettered multiperspectivity might lead to a Tower of Babel: “we should strive for polyphony, but a mild polyphony that does not seek to censor perspectives, but to avoid atomism.” Concerns were expressed about relativism, which risks historical truths becoming a mere collection of opinions. A further criticism was that popular history often reflected commercial interests and might have scant regard for historical accuracy or the rigour of historical research methods. This latter point was emphasised on a number of occasions, but perhaps with insufficiently critical reflection on the use of archives as the only source of evidence. Not all communities leave archives or records. Furthermore, archives can be interrogated critically, rather than accepted on the terms of those who left them: Thompson, for example, used archives left by elites, but “read against the grain and used archives for purposes other than those for which they were intended.”¹³

The role of values has already been emphasised by the Council of Europe in the Reference Framework of

Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC). The RFCDC outlines competences for values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding that should inform the processes and practice of education. Its primary use to date has been in school education, but there is a fourth volume¹⁴ examining the application and promotion of these competences in higher education. These considerations might usefully inform future debates on history education in higher education. The core values emphasised in this framework include: valuing human dignity and human rights; valuing cultural diversity; and valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.

Identities, roles and responsibilities of historians in higher education

This session of the Forum heard from two different contexts on this theme. Arthur Chapman focused on the role of historians in largely Western contexts where conservative and right-wing politicians were challenging attempts to offer more critical perspectives on history. In some countries, official histories are promoted through school curricula or citizenship tests, but some of these official histories reflect anti-democratic values or practices. The commodification of higher education, including the deprioritisation of the arts and humanities, makes it harder to address these challenges. The constricting algorithms of social media, and even more so misinformation, only enhanced the challenge. What was suggested by Arthur Chapman was a more activist, engaged approach to history, offering a more radical form of multiculturalism:

We should do things to engage in public debate more, to get history out there and to challenge social media hegemony ... Also, we should be more multiperspectival ... It isn't just about bringing in different histories. It's bringing in different ways of thinking about history: post-indigenous epistemologies, for example, not just the Western ones.

Gentiana Sula focused on the role of the historian in Albania, dealing with the aftermath of an authoritarian regime and the mammoth task of sorting and sifting through the voluminous records it left behind. The scale of the task was enormous, given that thousands had been executed by the regime and many thousands more jailed. Some dissident voices had literally been written out of history, while many official records had deliberately been falsified to provide misleading

12. Available at www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020, accessed 17 October 2024.

13. See also the Council of Europe Recommendation No. R (2000) 13 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on a European policy on access to archives, available at <https://rm.coe.int/16804cea4f>, accessed 17 October 2024.

14. Available at <https://book.coe.int/en/human-rights-democratic-citizenship-and-interculturalism/8438-pdf-reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture-rfcdc-guidance-document-for-higher-education.html>, accessed 17 October 2024.

data on economic and social achievements. Historians were responsible for collecting and classifying the material, which was a difficult enough task in itself, but verifying records provided additional challenges. The historians had to consider the context of documents, the author's background and affiliations and any ties they might have had to the regime. They had to look for any evidence of bias, omission or distortion, and then search for any other historical sources from the same period as a checking mechanism. When all this was completed, they had to organise the material so that individuals could access their own records and share their own stories. In this way, historians were enabling dissident and marginalised voices from the past to be remembered and morally rehabilitated.

The group discussion which followed focused on a number of themes, including finding the appropriate balance between a professional ethos for historians and the need for critical reflection, more understanding of our personal biases and blind spots, and an awareness of our positionality. The discussion also emphasised the importance of the third mission for higher education, that is, using knowledge to address growing societal and economic challenges. In this respect, some of the group discussion focused on the need to reflect on the importance of social justice as a principle. The two examples we heard, and the themes of the group discussions, reflected once again some of the dilemmas and tensions that were becoming increasingly evident in the Forum.

The role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society

In the third plenary session of the Forum, history was described as a global network for open exchange and one that could shed light on past and current societal challenges. We were also reminded that history as a discipline has its own history and has changed over time. Alongside the challenges to the discipline already considered at length in the discussions of the Forum, one speaker highlighted a consequence of the expansion of higher education in that student bodies were becoming more diverse and their voices more assertive. This was underlined by the student protests over the war in Gaza outside the University of Bologna rectorate during the Forum. There was support for the view that students should be encouraged to participate in the cocreation of a historical culture, and that higher education institutions must become more aware of the changing positionality of their students and the impact of this on institutional culture.

The mismatch between history education in schools and in higher education re-emerged as an important issue with the suggestion that history education in schools had not adequately prepared students to distinguish between historical fact and fiction, the

gap between the symbols, words and images and the hidden and naturalised meaning, and almost none has ever reflected on their own role and responsibility for democratic societies. This raised significant issues for initial teacher training, in particular the need to address ways to encourage understanding on historical consciousness rather than focus primarily on operational or technical issues in teaching. The importance of comparative research at national and intranational levels was underlined, as was the potential for new forms of collaboration with other institutions, such as museums or archives, as a further way of valuing historical culture for society.

Paul Zeleza's contribution emphasised that the sense of crisis in history education is not just a European experience but is shared also in the United States of America, where there has been a downward spiral in university enrolments, and this at a time where the culture wars have put history at the heart of public debate. "History," he suggested, "is essential for the protection, promotion and protection of democratic values and sustainable development in a world haunted by the spectre of ... interlocked crises". The discipline bears some of the responsibility for the decline in enrolments as changing student demographics – "and the systemic demands which this entails" – has not been matched by the discipline freeing itself from its "exclusionary Eurocentric enclosures to accommodate the interests and expectations of students for inclusion." Echoing points made by Mr De Groot at the opening of the conference, Mr Zeleza suggested that history "requires a multifaceted approach to promoting constructive dialogue, critical thinking and a more nuanced understanding of historical issues, ... fostering a culture of intellectual curiosity, empathy, respect for diverse perspectives and informed debate". He also stressed the importance of public advocacy of and for history, and for an approach to teaching history that would put at its core the opportunity to "learn the radical hospitality of welcoming otherness in their various spatio-temporal contexts". This would, he suggested, "reinscribe complexities and contradictions in sanitised and mythologised national histories".

Sustainability and future perspectives for history education in higher education

The final session of the Forum heard from the group rapporteurs on the small group discussions on the themes raised by the main speakers. In addition to the concerns on the changing focus of higher education, the particular impact on the arts and humanities subjects, and the weaponisation of history by populist political forces, there were also concerns about maintaining the integrity of the discipline of history. For some this might be challenged by

enhanced interdisciplinarity, even if stronger connections between history education and citizenship made sense at a time when basic democratic norms were under challenge. For others, a shift towards wider societal engagement might reduce methodological rigour even if, at times, this concern seems to arise from an overly blurred distinction between popular history, as in historical fiction in books and films, and public history, where there is an avowed commitment to public engagement and codesign. The important point about historical fiction is that it is fiction. By contrast, public historians would likely challenge the notion that a commitment to public engagement means a deprioritisation of methodological rigour.

The diverse approach to history education at national and European levels was mentioned and questions were asked on the implications of internationalising and/or decolonising curricula and classrooms for history teaching. One suggestion offered to the Forum was to place the responsibilities of historians within an explicit human rights framework, though this may already be possible within the framework provided by the RFCDC.

Conclusions

The Council of Europe has long argued¹⁵ that public authorities should ensure that higher education institutions, while exercising their autonomy, can meet society's multiple expectations and fulfil their various and equally important objectives, which include:

- ▶ preparing students for the labour market;
- ▶ supporting their personal development;
- ▶ developing a broad and advanced knowledge base; and
- ▶ preparing them for life as active citizens in democratic societies.

The purpose of higher education, in other words, is not singular, but as a public good encompasses a number of goals, all of which need to be considered in the discussions on the institutional role of higher education and the role of specific disciplines within the institutions. There were many points throughout the discussions in the Forum when the intersections of these four goals created tensions or dilemmas for history education in higher education. As was evident from many of the contributions at the Forum, however, the discipline has changed and evolved through engagement with similar tensions and dilemmas over time.

¹⁵ Bergan S. (2021), "Public responsibility for higher education in the time of Covid-19", in Bergan S. et al. (eds), *Higher education's response to the Covid-19 pandemic: building a more sustainable and democratic future*, Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 25, Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Four core issues developed throughout the discussion at the Forum.

1. History education in higher education and in schools

- ▶ A clear mismatch between history education in higher education and history education in schools was evident throughout the discussions. This was seen to have significant implications for students' sense of historical consciousness and was important because of the weaponisation of history by populist political forces. This suggests that history education in higher education should play a stronger role in initial teacher education and continuing professional development support for teachers.
- ▶ There was advocacy for greater societal or public engagement by higher education in general and by history education in particular. This did lead to some concerns about the risk to methodological integrity and inadvertent encouragement of historical myths. Addressing the tensions arising from public engagement is important, not least because history is being weaponised by anti-democratic forces whether the academy engages with the issues or not. At the same time, the primary impetus behind public engagement lies in broadening the base of our knowledge, not diluting the rigour of historical investigation and inquiry.

2. The role of multiperspectivity

- ▶ History education explicitly is about our understanding of the past, present and possible futures. Multiperspectivity has long been an accepted principle for history education, but it was evident in discussions at the Forum that views on its applicability vary: all accept the principle, but whereas some see it as a basis for liberating marginalised voices from "the enormous condescension of posterity", others advise clear limits to the applicability of the principle, with professional historians acting as the guardians of integrity. Much has changed since Stradling (2003) outlined the role and purpose of multiperspectivity, particularly in relation to the rise of populist politics and the role of social media, so perhaps the concept needs to be revisited and refreshed.

3. The local democratic mission of higher education

- ▶ Much of the discussion at the Forum focused on the discipline of history, but the wider framework provided by higher education institutions and their societal role is clearly an important issue. During the Forum we heard about important frameworks through which this wider role can be addressed, such as the

Magna Charta Universitatum¹⁶ and the fourth volume of the RFCDC on higher education.¹⁷ Frameworks such as these should be used more explicitly in deliberations on history education in higher education.

4. The role of public authorities

- ▶ The final issue was more evident by its absence than its presence in the discussions of the Forum. The role of public authorities is crucial in setting important parts of the context within which higher education operates. Representation at the Forum by public authorities was limited and this may explain why discussion on the role of public authorities was also limited, but ways should be found to foreground this more clearly in future discussions.

Recommendations

Following discussions with the preparatory committee for the Third Annual Forum, the following recommendations were agreed upon.

- ▶ History should play a more central role in the curriculum at all stages of education, including lifelong learning.

- ▶ It is important to develop a more explicit approach to the ethics of history education, including a commitment to a more inclusive approach involving coproduction.
- ▶ The concept of multiperspectivity in history education needs to be developed further as part of a wider agenda for social cohesion: all communities should have the right to have their historical narrative recognised by the whole of society and reflected in the history curriculum.
- ▶ Teachers and educators should be encouraged and supported to enhance their skills in communicating about history and historical understanding. As part of this, approaches to tackling misinformation and distortion in claims about history need to be strengthened.
- ▶ Public authorities play important roles in relation to the role of history and memory in society: they need to strengthen their support for academic freedom, including access to archives, and consider the relationship between historical understanding and processes of commemoration.

16. Available at www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020, accessed 17 October 2024.

17. Available at <https://book.coe.int/en/human-rights-democratic-citizenship-and-interculturalism/8438-pdf-reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture-rfcdc-guidance-document-for-higher-education.html>, accessed 17 October 2024.

Opening session

Inclusive history

Jerome de Groot, Professor of Literature and Culture, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

Overview

Around the world, historians are experiencing challenges. This problem is not simply local, national or regional. From Indonesia to Mexico, from Japan to Poland, history is becoming a site of discussion, debate and aggression. It has always been the case that nationalism and conservatism have been part of history. But increasingly a right-wing version, a conservative version of the past, is becoming weaponised and programmed and funded in all kinds of different spaces. We can see this in Hungary, Poland and the United States of America; and we can see this as a kind of playbook. We are seeing our national spaces and our national histories being taken over with purpose and well-funded process.

Our project, *Histories at risk*, has looked at how history is at risk of contestation around the world. In this outline I propose that historians must become more comfortable working with communities in dialogue, collaboration and coproduction. Further I submit that we need to think carefully about what history even is, why we have it, why we preserve it in particular ways and why we teach it in particular places. We need to be concerned about the way that spaces of history have acted as spaces of enclosure.

Points of orientation

I take the following to be foundational to approaching these issues.

- ▶ Alienation and marginalisation from history making

The poet and historian Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan's poem "Where is my history"¹⁸ outlines some of the key challenges that we face. In Manzoor-Khan's poem she talks about efforts to decolonise history and efforts to find a new way of thinking about the past. She particularly outlines the challenges experienced by diaspora and migrant communities in accessing and articulating historical resources. One of the key spaces that still seeks to gatekeep and control the historical discourse is the university. The type of history that is taught at universities is often felt to not be for the

community, and the type of history that is preserved and communicated is similarly alienating.

- ▶ The neoliberal university

Repeatedly over the last 10 years, scholars have discussed the "end" of the university, particularly in Western Europe and the United States of America but also in Australia and Canada. Universities have increasingly neoliberal ways of thinking, understanding and defining knowledge. We have to recognise, if we are committed to history as a thing, that it is being increasingly undertaken within these frameworks and that they are not neutral. One of the crucial contexts for knowledge production over the last 10 years and into the future is the space in which it happens, and the spaces in which research happens. So, resisting the monetisation and the utilitarian aspects of knowledge is key.

- ▶ Collaboration and activism

Raphael Samuel (1994) in *Theatres of memory: past and present in contemporary culture* said: "History is not the prerogative of the historian. It is rather a social form of knowledge: the work in any given instance of a thousand different hands." History is something which is entirely collaborative, creative, made in multiple ways in an understanding between people.

These three issues are crucial for thinking about an inclusive, progressive, ethical and effective future historical discourse.

Some responses

Here are some of the ways that we might resist, reconfigure, build and refute the challenges outlined.

- ▶ Attitude

In particular, it is crucial to recognise that the challenges of the past years, and those that are to come, cannot be answered by our silence, our disengaging, our ignoring the problem. They can also not be met by insisting on the scientific purity of history or thinking that only certain people can do this work. Such gatekeeping is counterproductive, even if it is comforting. Universities have a role in this dynamic if they resist change and fail to include diverse perspectives. Historical scholarship should break away from being the exclusive domain of universities and

18. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTi6LOACgfY&ab_channel=StuartHallFoundation, accessed 17 October 2024.

instead foster inclusive, ongoing dialogues that reflect the complexities of memory and national identity. We must look for partnership, rather than assert ourselves, be generous and open rather than close ourselves off. We need to articulate our expertise but recognise that many others have a contribution to make to historical understanding.

- ▶ New focus

The central concepts that we need to integrate into our work are activism, solidarity, intervention, collaboration, inclusion, coproduction, reflection, humility and partnership. We need to think about permeability, how to ensure that the educational space is flexible and accessible. And note the dangers if, under the influence of neoliberalism, institutions prioritise profit and efficiency over inclusive and diverse knowledge production. History shall keep its creative and collaborative nature opposed to the rigid, fact-based approach. We need to think about communities as partners, rather than as audiences. We need to think therefore not of ourselves as somehow under siege but as people who should be working in partnership and coproduction.

- ▶ Public history

There is a particular space in the discipline already devoted to engaging with and thinking about the

public aspects of the past. Public historians for many years have been talking about this. We need to think about the problem of the university as a marginalising knowledge space. These are incredibly difficult things to do and they are very time-consuming. Concentrating on approaches derived from public history will be very important for our work in the future. We need to think about how we work outside of the university or educational space. We need to answer the question “how can academics and teachers be public resources?”.

- ▶ Popular history

Another location that has been important in recent years in outlining the potential and possibility of history is popular history. It is potent, although also problematic. Films, games, TV and social media are amazing spaces of possibility. With examples throughout the United Kingdom but also in different European countries, the tension between intellectual discourse and more dismissive, populist attitudes leads to a broader trend of conservative public history, which seeks to protect traditional narratives and resist changes that challenge national identity. We need to engage with popular history rather than resist it, to use its joy and complexity to communicate what is important about history.

Opening remarks

Raffaella Campaner, Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Bologna, Italy

As the Vice Rector for International Relations at the University of Bologna I am very glad to say a few words today, at the opening of the second day of this important event on reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education. As an academic institution, we cannot but stress the relevance of democracy in the construction, development and defence of a truly democratic culture, in our own countries and worldwide. Democracy can be taken, among others, as a so-to-speak “key-node” in the design and promotion of a virtuous circle holding between knowledge and society. The pursuit of research projects and, thus, the piecemeal construction of scientific contents, modelling phenomena and shedding light on reality, needs a democratic context, in which vital communities of experts can freely act and interact. In this sense, democracy constitutes the presupposition for the thriving of any cultural and scientific enterprise: communities of peers need to work together to widen and deepen knowledge in a free context, interacting, discussing, disagreeing, developing different views and evaluating each other’s intellectual work. A deep engagement in the life of cultural institutions that warrant academic freedom and autonomy of investigation sets the ground for sound, reliable and fertile epistemic practices. Scientific knowledge must be democratic insofar as it needs to be pluralistic – not only for the sake of free cultural exchange per se, but because the world itself needs a range of different perspectives and accounts, different fields and expertise, different concepts and methods to be understood in all its multiple and intertwined facets and in its complexity.

On the one hand, democracy thus constitutes the presupposition, the general and necessary premise for the creation and dissemination of knowledge; on the other hand, what we are focusing on today is also how the latter can nurture democracy. Sharing knowledge and approaches for the benefit of communities at large can increase awareness of the different epistemic tools needed to address different topics and issues. It can encourage a proper sense of one’s own identity as well as of others’ identities, and can promote mutual recognition and respect. While culture can foster and support democratic exchange, ignorance is not just the absence of knowledge, it is not just – so to speak – an “empty epistemic state”. It leaves an empty room which runs the risk of being filled by prejudice, manipulation, distortion, division and exclusion.

In this general framework, history and history education can have a particularly important role, bringing to the foreground the crucial temporal dimension of any local and global human activity. In the current scenario of sociopolitical challenges and crises – we were all shocked yesterday by the news from Slovakia about the attempted assassination of Robert Fico¹⁹ – it is particularly relevant to discuss the role of history education in promoting democratic societies, encouraging dialogue and peace. This is a timely and urgent issue. History education can be used to reinforce democratic processes, insofar as a deep knowledge of our and others’ past can be a tool to help avoid any single-sided view. Good teaching is able to keep together curiosity and vigilance, doubt and tolerance, awareness of one’s identity and openness to intercultural dispositions.

Teaching history is clearly not per se the solution to avoid any process or situation that might not be democratic. Designing scientific knowledge always implies some specific background and some choice. When scientific evidence is collected and gathered together, when descriptions are drawn, when explanatory accounts are provided, when proximal or distant causes are identified and distinguished from correlations, scientists pursue epistemic practices by choosing what to focus on and stress, what to isolate as fundamental, what concepts to adopt. When modelling any kind of phenomenon whatsoever, selections are made: some variables are picked over others, some abstraction process occurs – by which what to put into brackets and ignore for the purpose of the investigation is chosen – and some idealisation is made – namely, some distortion, just instrumental to the investigation, is made. What do these unavoidable features of scientific practice have to do with democracy and with teaching history?

Designing and teaching historical knowledge – both as knowledge of history and as historical knowledge of literature, art, science, religion – in a democratic context is not to aim for some ideally neutral account. As was stressed yesterday by Mr De Groot, we are not in a vacuum, nor do we work as scientists and intellectuals in a vacuum.

What studying, teaching and learning need to advocate is transparency in accounting for assumptions, choices and implications of scientific work and its

¹⁹. On 15 May 2024, the Prime Minister of Slovakia Robert Fico was shot and injured in Handlová.

claims. Studying and teaching history with a deep attention to its contents and accounting for its methods can allow us to genuinely understand different phases that societies have navigated, appreciate distinctive and common features across time and cultures, understand and master different narratives, tell choices from biases, idealisations from lies, representations from over- or under-representations. Accurate accounts, promoting transparency against any sort of concealing, can hence nurture awareness and freedom of minds.

All this brings into play the social responsibility in the construction and dissemination of each and every scientific content – be it inside or outside universities. If – as highlighted at the beginning – science itself needs to be democratic and academic institutions are called to the development of scientific progress, then universities are also called to ensure democracy and freedom of research. Teaching history in scenarios which grant academic freedom and institutional autonomy is, in turn, strictly linked to citizenship education: present and future generations can be supported in becoming used to historical investigations, and to think historically at large. As we all know, academic institutions were just born for the very purpose of bringing different people together, providing some room for free and autonomous discussion between different cultures, languages and backgrounds.

Without arguing by any means for any exclusive role of universities in the construction of scientific knowledge, we can still claim that universities do play a pivotal institutional role in the defence and promotion of knowledge, culture and critical thinking – and, through them, liberty of thought. As already pointed out, controversies were and are born often within universities, to build peaceful interactions in developing knowledge, and then eventually reach a consensus when an improved, more adequate scientific account is reached, for the benefit of academic research as well as for the benefit of society at large.

So let me conclude by stressing that education – including history education – should not shy away from controversial issues, but aim at informed, critical, engaged citizens. The great added value that an event like this, and the networks of scholars, can bring is the pursuit of such a spirit not only inside but also outside and across universities. The trends of democratic erosion, decay or decline that are threatening current times can be opposed by the nourishing of genuinely democratic discourses within and between our universities and institutions, as living labs of academic and educational freedom and robust practices of intellectual, cultural and multicultural inclusion.

Plenary session 1

**THE ROLE OF HISTORY
EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN
AND FOR DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES**

The Magna Charta Observatory

David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory

By way of background, the Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU) is a document that was written in response to concerns about the erosion of academic freedom and autonomy, principally in Europe. It was originally signed by 388 rectors and heads of universities from all over Europe and beyond on 18 September 1988, the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna. The document contains principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a guideline for good governance and self-understanding of universities in the future.²⁰ It is therefore appropriate that the 2024 Forum was also hosted by the University of Bologna. The original document served well for over 30 years and the number of universities signing it has grown to over 900.

In 2018, a multinational group was formed to review the MCU in the context of changes to universities and the environments in which they operated which had occurred since 1988. This was informed by a wide consultation and a new document was adopted by the governing council of the MCU in July 2020.²¹

The new MCU removes nothing from the original fundamental values to which universities signed up. It strives to be responsive to and resonate with contemporary challenges and concerns. Its tone recognises that the pursuit of fundamental values has worth along with their actual attainment, which, in practice, is a constant quest. It recognises the more global nature of what universities do and the wider range of local responsibilities which they have. In total, the number of signatories of one or both of the MCUs is now just short of 1 000 from 94 different countries.

Of particular relevance to the Council of Europe's Third Forum for History Education, the MCU 2020 contains the following statements.

The first principle (of the 1988 document) is independence: research and teaching must be intellectually and morally independent of all political influence

and economic interests. The second is that teaching and research should be inseparable, with students engaged in the search for knowledge and greater understanding. The third principle identifies the university as a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance.

The MCU recognises that universities upholding these principles could take many forms under the combined influence of culture, geography and history.

The number of publications has increased enormously while trust in academia is being eroded by a loss of confidence in expertise.

Intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society. That independence needs to be recognised and protected by governments and society at large, and defended vigorously by institutions themselves.

As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines, and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars. Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment.

Universities embrace their duty to teach and undertake research ethically and with integrity, producing reliable, trustworthy and accessible results.

Universities have a civic role and responsibility. They are part of global, collegial networks of scientific enquiry and scholarship, building on shared bodies of knowledge and contributing to their further development.

Universities are non-discriminatory spaces of tolerance and respect where a diversity of perspectives flourishes and where inclusivity, anchored in principles of equity and fairness, prevails.

By signing the MCU 2020, universities declare their commitment to the original declaration and to upholding and advancing the principles, values and responsibilities stated above, to strengthen the role of universities in the preservation of the planet and promoting health, prosperity and enlightenment around the world.

20. Available at www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta/en/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu-1988, accessed 17 October 2024.

21. Available at www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu2020, accessed 17 October 2024.

Key elements of the Magna Charta Universitatum:

- ▶ the MCU was itself the product of history;
- ▶ one of the ways in which universities serve society is through the reliable and trustworthy study of history and the teaching of it for purposes including:
 - perpetuating culture and the development of society;
 - identifying sustainable solutions through sustainable development goals;
 - promoting informed democratic engagement;
- ▶ historians should enjoy and exercise with confidence and courage the autonomy of universities and academic freedom but should do so responsibly;
- ▶ universities should encourage critical thinking and challenge dogmas but should do so in a way that is tolerant of and shows respect to different viewpoints;
- ▶ history is a valuable element in multi-disciplinary studies and should be included in them;
- ▶ the study of history is likely to be enriched through the collaboration of universities from different countries and cultures.

Plenary session 2

**IDENTITIES, ROLES AND
RESPONSIBILITIES OF HISTORIANS
IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Contemporary history education: threats and opportunities

Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, United Kingdom

Introduction

In today's academic landscape, it is crucial to strategise how history is defended and promoted as a subject, emphasising its unique methodologies and ethical considerations in understanding human experience. Public engagement, interdisciplinary debate and cross-references between countries are key, as historians must challenge prevailing narratives and explore the "who", "what" and "why" centred in such narratives across various geographical contexts – local, national, regional/Europe and international. Documenting minority and marginalised histories is imperative for a more inclusive historical culture, sparking dialogue on history education's ever-changing landscape. What threats and challenges do historians in higher education face today, given the evolving nature of historical inquiry and how to navigate them?

The discipline of history

"The study of history instils ways of thinking and habits of learning which are intrinsic to the subject ... These include an appreciation of the complexity of the past and historical enquiry; a respect for historical context; the ability to conduct robust, rigorous analysis of historical evidence; a raised awareness of the historical processes unfolding in the present time; and a deeper understanding of why the world is as it is today. Questioning, exploration, debate, and discovery through independent engagement with sources and scholarship, and the ability to formulate independent arguments are integral to the study of history."²²

Contextual challenges to historians and history education

These challenges stem from various sociopolitical, cultural and institutional pressures, ranging from censorship to the undervaluation of humanities in a neoliberal educational framework. Historians today operate in a context where freedom of expression is

at risk and in a culture where individuals who express unpopular perspectives on the national past are often stigmatised and subjected to personal criticism. Examples were shared illustrating how discussions on the imperial legacy or marginalised histories can provoke personal attacks and threats, dissuading historians from exploring these critical topics.

This issue is not confined to the United Kingdom. Similar concerns have been raised in the United States of America with controversies like Donald Trump's critique of the "1619 Project", as well as in Poland, where historians have at times faced legal constraints. These examples highlight the growing politicisation of history. In schools, curriculum reforms often reflect this trend. School-based national histories are often expected by policy makers to present simplified, positive narratives, as can be seen in the United Kingdom's citizenship test, where national history is described as "long and illustrious"²³ This test omits significant social movements and historical truths but also shows the place and importance of history in society.

It is one thing to highlight the power of historians as advocates to strengthen democracy, but what happens when democracy itself is undermined by practices hostile to the academic freedom of historians to present dispassionate narratives of complex national pasts? More specifically in the field of history, in many contexts, we also see the misuse of history by those in power.

Institutional challenges in higher education

The neoliberal approach to higher education further complicates the landscape for historians. The increasing reliance on market-driven metrics to assess the value of degrees has led to a devaluation of history as a subject. This perspective contributes to the idea that students could benefit from education or not, depending on the subject they choose, and this can tend to frame educational benefit instrumentally and solely in financial terms.

22. Subject Benchmark Statement: History (2022), available at www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements/history, accessed 17 October 2024, p. 2.

23. Home Office (2013), *Life in the United Kingdom: a guide for new residents*, 3rd edition, TSO.

Moreover, the precarious employment conditions for young historians, including casualised, short-term contracts, can affect the development of robust academic careers. And their role as historians – researchers who are also educators – can be challenged by the use of teaching-only contracts.

In the context of inflation, the financial contribution students make to the university's viability decreases each year where student loans and grants do not increase with inflation. As a result, universities can increasingly be incentivised to rely on attracting foreign students, who gravitate toward disciplines like science, engineering and medicine, whose fees can, in some contexts, more easily be varied in line with increasing costs. The history department is unlikely to be prioritised in this context – since the “markets” for history students are often domestic – and this fact can represent a threat to the financial viability in history departments in universities.

Intellectual and cultural threats to history

Beyond these institutional and political pressures, historians often face intellectual challenges that question the foundations of the discipline itself. Post-colonial critiques, for example, call into question Western-centric narratives and suggest alternative epistemologies. These critiques urge historians to rethink the Eurocentric framework that has long dominated historical scholarship. This is a good thing – disciplines should be open and willing to examine their grounding assumptions.

Simultaneously, the rise of social media and digital platforms, it has been argued, has eroded the traditional authority of historians – a phenomenon applying to other experts also.²⁴ These platforms have led to the erosion of the past-present distinction in internet culture. Popular social media accounts that disseminate oversimplified or distorted historical narratives often reach far larger audiences than professional historians. This trend threatens the public's understanding of history, creating echo chambers and amplifying misinformation.

Strategies and ways forward

- ▶ Public engagement, interdisciplinary debate and cross-references between countries are key, as historians must challenge prevailing narratives and explore the “who”, “what” and “why” centred in such narratives across various geographical contexts – local, national, regional/European and international.

- ▶ Documenting minority and marginalised histories is imperative for a more inclusive historical culture, sparking dialogue on history education's ever-changing landscape.

Given the above challenges, historians must adopt several strategies to defend and promote history education.

1. Pluralistic approaches: expanding the scope of history to include multiple perspectives and narratives is crucial. By doing so, historians can foster a more inclusive understanding of the past. And it isn't just about including more stories but about including different kinds of ways of thinking about the past – different epistemologies as well as different narratives.
2. Digital education: to address fake news and toxic narratives, historians should actively engage with public platforms to challenge misinformation and contribute to historical debates in the digital space.
3. Democratic education: universities must resist the neoliberal tendency to undervalue humanities disciplines and instead emphasise the role of education in cultivating critical thinking and informed citizenship.
4. Political intervention is necessary to protect the infrastructure of history making at national and international levels, and to see history education as a human good.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by historians and history educators today are multifaceted, involving political, institutional and intellectual pressures. However, by engaging in public debate, promoting pluralistic historical narratives and defending the democratic values of education, historians can help ensure that history education remains a vital resource for understanding and shaping the future. History must be defended as a critical discipline, not only for its intrinsic value but also for its role in fostering informed and engaged citizens.

24. Steinhauer J. (2021), *History, disrupted: how social media and the world wide web have changed the past*, Palgrave Macmillan.

Academic freedom in Albania: communism and its legacy

Gentiana Sula, PhD, Chairperson of the Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents (AIDSSH), Albania

Introduction

Between 1945 and 1991, artistic and historical-critical writing were official professions in Albania, tightly regulated and controlled by state institutions. However, after this period, with the rise of political pluralism, these forms of writing emerged as independent activities, no longer governed by state oversight. Instead, they became part of a free market, where the relationship between authors, publishers and the public was driven solely by popular taste, without any political interference or conditioning.

This study aims to provide a comparative overview of key moments of academic freedom and censorship during the communist regime in Albania. Special attention is given to the process of “opening” or “not opening” the documents of the former Directorate of State Security or Sigurimi, until the establishment of the Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents (AIDSSH, the Authority). The study also highlights individuals persecuted by the regime for their free thinking, which set them apart from the one-party state. Additionally, it examines myths, disinformation, traditional histories, legends and beliefs crafted to manipulate, deceive or incite, often serving political, economic or ideological purposes. Some myths from that period include the cult of Enver Hoxha, the myth of Albanian exceptionalism and the myth of economic advancement.

The opening of the Authority faced numerous challenges. The institution gathered an archive of 22 million secret documents, providing access to files for research and for those affected. The Authority also engaged in various civic education activities, including exhibitions, symposia, conferences and the preservation of places of memory. These efforts aimed at raising awareness about the reality of concentration camps for the families of political opponents, documenting forced labour camps like Spaç and Maliq, and recording information about killings at the borders.

Academic freedom under dictatorships encounters unique challenges and restrictions that significantly impact its autonomy and the pursuit of knowledge. This concept paper seeks to explore how authoritarian regimes affect universities and academic institutions, examining the limitations they face and how they respond to oppressive governance.

Background

According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in Albania:

- ▶ 30% of the population claimed their family was persecuted;
- ▶ 100 000 people were jailed or sent to internment labour camps for political reasons;
- ▶ 6 000 were executed or died in jails;
- ▶ the state was dysfunctional and in economic decline.

Albania: important historical milestones

1912	Albania declares its independence from the Ottoman Empire
1928-1939	The period of King Zog I's rule: some modernisation and infrastructure development
1939-1944	Albania is occupied by Italy and then Germany during the Second World War
1940	The Royal Institute of Albanian Studies is established
1944	The Communist Party of Albania takes power, led by Enver Hoxha
1957	The University of Tirana is established
1967	Albania becomes the world's first atheist state
1972	The Albanian Academy of Science is established
1991	The Stalinist communist regime collapses; the university removes the name of Enver Hoxha in response to a hunger strike by students
1992	The first multiparty elections are held in Albania; education reforms for democratisation, de-ideologisation and decommunisation
2001	Albania joins the Bologna Process
2009	Albania joins the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

- 2014 Albania is granted candidate status for European Union membership
- 2015 Albania passes a law on opening the secret files of the political police (Sigurimi); two years later, the Authority starts its operations

The historical reappraisal and the narrative of the communist regime until 2015

Politics and secret files have been used as tools to target or control individuals, with two politically compromised waves of lustration during the transition period, resulting in limited elite circulation and a lack of meaningful change. Additionally, access to historical secret documents was often restricted and archives were either disorganised or underfunded, slowing down proper research. It is also a fact that the influence of communist propaganda persisted in historiography, though its impact is declining, whereas books, periodicals and films are still widely available. Society remains deeply divided along political lines, with debates over the Second World War and the “class war” reflecting antagonisms even on simple historical facts. Formerly persecuted groups are similarly fragmented, with limited redress, minimal financial compensation and ongoing efforts to locate the missing. However, new narratives are emerging through personal accounts, young authors and international influences, challenging the status quo and offering new perspectives on history.

Evaluating (tons of) historical works from totalitarian regimes through specific questions

- ▶ What were the historical, political or social circumstances of this document? Were there specific pressures, such as censorship or ideological influences?
- ▶ What were the author’s background and affiliations? What were the author’s personal and professional connections to the political regime in power?
- ▶ Were they aligned with or opposed to the government and how did these affiliations influence their work? Is there any evidence of bias in the work, such as the omission of critical perspectives or the distortion of facts to align with a particular ideology?
- ▶ How does this work compare with other historical sources from the same period? Are there other perspectives or accounts from different regions, groups or individuals, especially from abroad? How does the content of the work align or conflict with these alternative sources?

- ▶ What was the intended purpose of the document? Was it designed to serve the agenda of the totalitarian regime, either explicitly or implicitly? Did it aim to suppress, distort or marginalise certain narratives or groups that opposed the regime? Was it meant to influence public opinion, promote a specific ideology or maintain control over the population?

The Authority’s work in history

The Authority plays a crucial role in preserving and uncovering Albania’s historical memory, overseeing an extensive archive of 22 million secret documents. It offers access to these files for research purposes and to individuals affected by past persecution, ensuring transparency and education. Through civic engagement activities, such as exhibitions, symposia and remembrance initiatives, the Authority sheds light on the horrors of concentration camps for families of political opponents. It meticulously organises metadata on forced labour camps like Spaç and Maliq, as well as killings at the borders. The Authority actively engages with affected individuals and their families, collecting oral histories and assisting in searches for the missing. Moreover, it established a learning platform called “Learn about the past”, facilitating access to open resources, book clubs and archive open days. The Authority also collaborates with universities like University College Bedër, Logos University, the Institute of History and the European University of Tirana to promote joint research, exhibitions and internships. Together, they have launched a multidisciplinary Master of Science programme, focusing on legal studies, history and sociology to explore transformation and change in Albania’s post-dictatorship era.

What are the threats and challenges that historians or narrators face today?

Self-censorship is a growing issue, with some publicists facing threats or smear campaigns, leading them to seek political exile. Political involvement also interferes with historical research; for instance, laws on communist crimes have imposed restrictions on the time frame of study, limiting open debate on crucial periods such as the Second World War and the communist rise to power. Although universities do not impose strict barriers on research, funding remains a persistent issue as it is often inadequate to support comprehensive studies. Historians also struggle with challenges in accessing international sources, engaging multidisciplinary teams, implementing regional research approaches and utilising updated libraries. Additionally, declining student enrolment in

history programmes is causing the closure of history departments at local universities, posing a threat to democratic discourse and raising concerns about repeating the mistakes of the past.

Literature review and bibliography

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Plenary session 3

**THE ROLE OF HIGHER
EDUCATION IN VALUING
HISTORICAL CULTURE
FOR SOCIETY**

The struggles over history in the United States of America

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives, Professor of African Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, Howard University, United States of America²⁵

In American colleges and universities, history as an academic discipline, much like the other humanities, finds itself in an unrelenting spiral of declining enrolment and at the crosshairs of ferocious “culture wars” ravaging American education and public discourse. Thus, history is caught between intersected forces emanating from within and outside the academy. In this presentation I seek to analyse these forces and suggest ways to recuperate, reform and restructure history as an intellectual enterprise, which is imperative for the discipline itself and its practitioners.

More crucially, history is essential for the protection, promotion and projection of democratic values and sustainable development in a world haunted by the spectre of six interlocked crises discussed in my 2021 book, *Africa and the disruptions of the twenty-first century*: the globalisation of tribalism; worldwide democratic recessions and resistance; rising economic disequilibrium and inequalities; shifting global hierarchies and hegemonies; the emergence of digital technologies and surveillance capitalism; and what I call the rebellion of nature – climate change on steroids.

Where have the history students gone?

Student enrolment in history has fluctuated over the last few decades but overall, it has been on a downward trend. Surveys by the American Historical Association (AHA) revealed a significant drop in history degrees awarded and overall enrolment in history courses. For example, undergraduate history enrolments fell by 7.6% from 2012 to 2015 and degree completions dropped by another 6.43% in 2022.²⁶ Various explanations for this decline have been proposed, including the impact of the Great Recession, which reduced career prospects in fields associated with history, like law, and a shift away from

Eurocentric history, which some argue diminishes student interest.²⁷

Critics like David Kaiser blame the specialisation and perceived political slant of history courses for the decline, suggesting that “most history courses are now too specialised and often politically slanted to interest them.”²⁸ However, AHA surveys show that departments with more diverse specialisations have maintained or increased enrolments.²⁹ The presentation focuses on three key institutional factors that account for declining history enrolments in American higher education: the composition and content of the discipline, the triumph and disincentives of neoliberalism, and the impact of deepening political and social polarisation. These factors interact in complex ways and vary among institutions and individual students, but together they help explain history’s downward spiral that has accelerated over the last three decades.

The mismatch between diversity and decolonisation

History has not kept pace with changing student demographics and the epistemic demands that this entails. The share of minority populations among students has grown faster than history has freed itself from its exclusionary Eurocentric enclosures to accommodate the interests and expectations of these students for inclusion. The mismatch between rising diversity and sluggish decolonisation increasingly became a drag for history and other humanities disciplines. A 2016 AHA survey revealed steep enrolment declines among students of colour, with Black, Asian and Latino students making up far less of history graduates than their share of the national population.³⁰ This lack of representation extends to the curriculum, which continues to prioritise European and American history while marginalising African, Asian and non-Western histories.

25. The following text is a summarised version of the full presentation, available at <https://rm.coe.int/2024-05-paul-zeleza-the-struggles-over-history-in-the-united-states-co/1680b1c8dd>, accessed 17 October 2024.

26. American Historical Association (2016), *Perspectives on history – Perspectives on democracy* Vol. 54, issue 6.; Brookins J. A. (2024), “Tracking undergraduate history enrollments in 2023”, available at: www.historians.org/perspectives-article/tracking-undergraduate-history-enrollments-in-2023-april-2024/, accessed 30 October 2024.

27. American Historical Association (2016), *Perspectives on history – Pasts in public* Vol. 54, issue 5.

28. Kaiser D. (2020), “Why students have turned away from history”, The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, available at: www.jamesgmartin.center/2020/06/why-students-have-turned-away-from-history/, accessed 25 October 2024.

29. American Historical Association (2016), *Perspectives on history – Pasts in public* Vol. 54, issue 5.

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Efforts to decolonise history are often met with resistance within academic institutions, despite a growing recognition of the importance of diverse perspectives. America's pervasive Eurocentric historiography perpetuates the imbalances in history education. It produces and is reproduced by limited resources and expertise in non-Western history within academic institutions that reinforces the marginalisation of African and Asian history. Black history, for example, is often limited to topics of oppression and liberation, excluding themes like Black joy, identities and historical contention, as LaGarrett J. King writes.³¹ This narrow focus alienates students from under-represented backgrounds, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. The failure to diversify history education, both in terms of curriculum and faculty expertise, undermines the potential for inclusive learning environments. By embracing diverse perspectives, history education can better reflect the complexities of a multiracial society, fostering understanding, empathy and critical thinking.

The chickens of neoliberalism come home to roost

In a world increasingly focused on technology and globalisation, STEM, business and healthcare degrees are seen as offering better job prospects and higher earning potential, making them more attractive to students and parents. With the cost of higher education soaring and American student debt reaching US\$1.6 trillion by 2020, students are prioritising fields that promise stable, well-paying jobs, sidelining humanities like history, which are perceived as less vocational. This is particularly appealing to first-generation and minority students for whom a degree is a gateway to professional careers and upward class mobility.

Neoliberalism, which emphasises free markets, deregulation and privatisation, has shaped education policies, leading to the devaluation of the humanities. Universities are increasingly viewed as businesses, competing for students and funding, and prioritising programmes with high enrolments and revenue-generating potential. As a result, humanities departments face reduced funding, fewer faculty positions and limited resources, contributing to their declining enrolment numbers.

The societal shift toward vocationalism and credentialism, driven by neoliberal values, further encourages students to pursue degrees with clear career paths, rather than those in the humanities, which are seen as less directly linked to the job market. Consequently, history and similar fields continue to lose ground in higher education.

31. King L. J. (2020), "Black history is not American history: toward a framework of black historical consciousness", *Social Education* 84(6), pp. 335-341.

Caught in the crosshairs of the culture wars

The culture wars in the United States have deeply impacted history education, as political, social and cultural factors clash over how history is taught. In his book, *A war for the soul of America: a history of the culture wars*, Andrew Hartman outlines key players: Christian conservatives opposing secularisation, neo-conservatives pushing American power and educators promoting critical thinking. Republican-controlled states, particularly Texas and Florida, have led efforts to censor teachings on slavery and racism, with governors like Ron DeSantis and Glenn Youngkin facing public resistance.³²

These ideological battles reflect wider societal conflicts over identity, inclusivity and the historical dominance of whiteness. Conservatives often resist changes to traditional narratives that favour Eurocentric perspectives, while advocates for diversity push for more accurate depictions of issues like slavery and Indigenous rights. The culture wars intersect with debates over academic freedom and institutional policies regarding curriculum development and classroom instruction. Questions about who should have the authority to determine what is taught in history classes, as well as the extent to which outside influences, such as political or religious organisations, should shape educational content, are central to these discussions.

Polarisation has influenced both public funding and classroom experiences, with faculty and students of colour facing marginalisation. Social media amplify these debates and academic freedom is increasingly threatened as political forces seek to control curriculum content. This growing divide risks further undermining student engagement and the future of history education.

Public advocacy for history

Addressing the culture wars and assaults on history in the American academy, politics and public discourse requires a multifaceted approach aimed at promoting constructive dialogue, critical thinking and a more nuanced understanding of historical issues.

In the struggle against the culture wars, historians should redouble their efforts to educate policy makers, the public, university administrators and students about the intrinsic value of the humanities, including

32. College Board, "Advanced placement program releases revised African American studies framework", available at: <https://newsroom.collegeboard.org/advanced-placement-program-releases-revised-african-american-studies-framework>, accessed 30 October 2024; Traub J. (2023), "Virginia went to war over history. And students actually came out on top", *POLITICO*, available at: www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/09/09/glenn-youngkin-history-wars-virginia-00113958, accessed 30 October 2024.

history, in fostering critical thinking, empathy, cultural understanding and civic engagement.

History departments must consistently and robustly promote the value and relevance of history and humanities education through both broad communication drives and targeted marketing, showing that history contributes to a well-rounded education and prepares students for diverse career paths.

The text highlights the need for historians to advocate for the intrinsic value of history education, teaching students to critically assess sources, understand bias and engage with complex historical narratives. Promoting respectful dialogue, inclusivity and academic freedom within universities is crucial. Outreach efforts, increased investment in education and collaboration across ideological and generational lines are essential to bridging divides. Historians must actively counter misinformation, promote fact-checking and encourage civic participation, all while emphasising the role of historical literacy in fostering a healthy democracy.

Repositioning history in American academia

Repositioning history and the humanities in American academia requires concerted efforts. My forthcoming book explores how the new humanities – digital, environmental, medical and public, among others – seek to engage other disciplines, especially STEM, and address major social issues. History, with its interdisciplinary nature, should be cultivated to encourage collaboration across academic fields, creating innovative teaching and research opportunities. Historians should highlight the relevance of history in addressing real-world challenges and emphasise the value of interdisciplinary courses and experiential learning opportunities.

To reverse declining enrolments, history and the humanities must increase accessibility and inclusivity, addressing financial barriers and lack of representation for marginalised communities. Advocating for humanities in general education is vital, as is fostering partnerships with community organisations and cultural institutions for hands-on learning experiences. Fostering such partnerships and outreach initiatives can help promote public understanding of history and its relevance to contemporary issues.

The digital revolution poses both challenges and opportunities for historians. While artificial intelligence (AI) complicates historical work due to issues like misattribution and plagiarism, historians must integrate digital literacy into their field. Collaborating with AI researchers could open new funding streams for history and the humanities, supporting digital initiatives and public engagement.

Conclusion

Bills targeting how history is taught in the United States, especially the history of slavery and racism, as well as other topics from LGBTQ³³ to antisemitism, are proliferating. As of April 2024, around 250 governmental entities have introduced policies that restrict teaching on race and sex, particularly in public schools and higher education. Currently, 10 Republican-majority states have passed laws constraining “divisive concepts” in education, with others considering similar bills.³⁴

Historians must fight against this politicisation of history. James Grossman of the AHA notes that the organisation, along with others like PEN America, has publicly opposed such efforts. A coalition of 40 non-partisan organisations has also formed to defend public education and democracy from these restrictive policies.³⁵

For history to be integral to democratic education and the democratic project it must be inclusive, embrace different stories, question the blinding conceits of the self-referential epistemic gaze of the powerful, whether nations, groups or individuals. Through this approach dialogic understanding of the past and present is constructed, and the future is expansively, critically and creatively imagined. Much of the world is currently gripped by rising anger, fear and uncertainty about the future, which is fomenting authoritarian and xenophobic populisms and democratic recessions. Rigorous historical knowledge and debate has never been more crucial than it is now if this dangerous tide is to be stemmed and reversed.

33. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning.

34. Lantz P. M. and Carter E. (2024), “State bans on ‘divisive concepts’ in public higher education: implications for population health”, Milbank Quarterly Opinion, available at: www.milbank.org/quarterly/opinions/state-bans-on-divisive-concepts-in-public-higher-education-implications-for-population-health/, accessed 30 October 2024.

35. American Historical Association (2022), *Perspectives on history – Caught in time* Vol. 60, issue 6.

History education for the future

Peter Aronsson, Rector, Linnaeus University, Sweden, and Board Member of the International Association of Universities (IAU)

What role should historians and university history education play in valuing knowledge-based historical consciousness in our age?

Fundamental academic values are grounded in the free pursuit of knowledge, unbound by political and economic interests. The flow of these values is maintained through the close ties between research and research-based education, as well as through a dynamic relationship with the surrounding community. Universities harbour both the disciplinary depth and breadth needed to address complex challenges, maintaining a dynamic connection with the issues of each era. Their long-standing ability to navigate these negotiations attests to the institution's enduring power. Over the centuries, this capacity to transform change into long-term progress has become a fundamental value. The academy forms a global network for open exchange, an extraordinarily successful institutional legacy that must be defended and utilised.

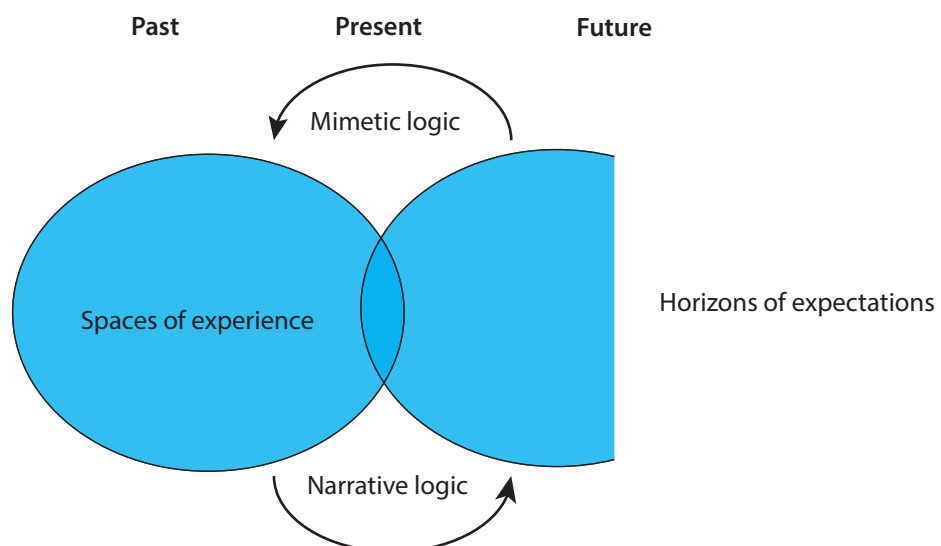
The academic system has evolved from its medieval roots, which focused on the classical age and the interpretation of texts, to the empirically based sciences of the Renaissance. By the early 19th century, the advent of cheap print heralded a second media-driven revolution. This development facilitated the rise of laboratories and seminars, adding significant value to the traditional practice of reading at home. The research-based open search for new knowledge became the heart of the university that built modernity. New digital tools can accelerate this pursuit and exchange of knowledge, structured through open

science. While this is not a fundamentally new endeavour, it is rooted in the principles of the Enlightenment and the modern university. However, it is now more essential than ever to address the immense challenges of our time.

After this crash course in university history, what is the lesson to be learnt for history as a discipline? It became a central discipline as the centre of a national resource mobilisation aimed at securing objective content for a national understanding. Historical disciplines and museums negotiated and presented an objective worldview explaining nature, technology, culture and history, along with an idea of progression. Consider the work of major museums, from the British Museum to the Berlin museums and the Prado, as well as their smaller but ambitious counterparts from Bergen to Lisbon. These institutions materialised objective facts, thereby more effectively addressing hopes and fears for the future in an increasingly secularised era. History offered a new form of immortality and direction for action in a secular age of modernity.

Horizons of expectations change over time. The hopes for industrial progress and welfare contrast with the fear of poverty and societal dissolution, varying by era and community. These hopes and fears shape what aspects of history are deemed meaningful in addressing them. They define a relevant space of experience to help meet the future. National communities were structured to inform citizens of their culture, language and duties, including working, paying taxes, and, if necessary, dying for their nation.

Linnaeus University



But historians are not alone. Historical consciousness is shaped at all levels, from the individual to the global, and across all spheres of life, by the various elements of historical culture with which they interact. The role of

history as an academic endeavour is to be more reflexive and conscious of these contexts, critically assessing the roles of academia, schools and museums within the broader realms of entertainment, commerce and politics.

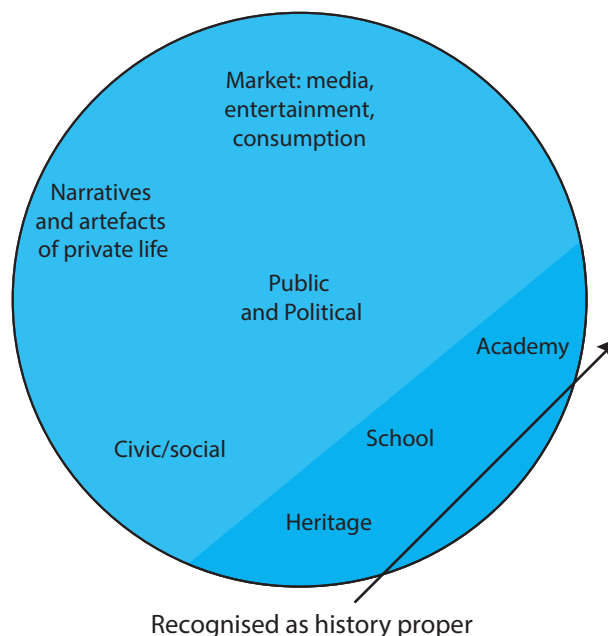
Linnæus University



The Culture of History – Spheres

Artefacts, rituals, customs and assertions with references to the past

Culture of History – Spheres



This work can be performed better or worse. When historians and history educators effectively fulfil their roles, they can help students and society use technology productively and creatively, fostering trust and well-being in a positive cycle. The ability to work through conflicts and atrocities is negotiated wisely, enabling respectful and peaceful co-existence. Conversely, if history is poorly taught or mobilised to create and enhance conflict, it could escalate from distrust between nations and states to civil war or even regional or world war.

Beyond these immediate threats, sustainability goals must inform any meaningful approach to history and provide direction for the future. Historians need to engage not only across disciplines within the university but also with the broader community, incorporating diverse historical actors into the learning process and including them in the material students learn to navigate.

Conclusion

The structure and influence of public negotiations among academia, social, economic and political spheres result in a more or less viable cultural understanding that supports society and policy,

embodying the power of a cultural constitution. The contributions of academia, research and education in history, aware of their possibilities and responsibilities within the wider context, play a decisive role in fostering a positive dynamic between the political and cultural constitution of a society.

In conclusion:

- ▶ universities are institutions that provide a long-standing cultural foundation for shared, knowledge-based progress;
- ▶ historians can develop knowledge-based narratives that contribute to the broader historical culture ecosystem, addressing contemporary fears and hopes;
- ▶ the quality and contributions of historians to a viable historical awareness can help shift the tide from destructive conflict to creative trust.

Further reading

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Fostering democratic values through history: the role of higher education from students' perspective

Lauren Pray, Magnus við Streyim and Iris Kimizoglu, additional contribution from the European Students' Union

Teaching history has been a practice in higher education since the establishment of the first universities in the Middle Ages, remaining indispensable in higher education today. The development of history teaching is synonymous with the progression of society's values, which in the European context encompasses a wider European community. History can serve as a critical lens through which students can learn about the complex European identity, the evolution of our shared values and the challenges that have shaped Europe, be it in a social, political or historiographical context.

To effectively teach history, the focus should extend beyond simply introducing the concept of democracy; it should emphasise the ongoing maintenance and advancement of democratic values, including human rights, justice and equality. Instilling these values is a core component of citizenship education, which fosters active participation and a sense of responsibility on global, national and local levels. The roots of democratic principles can be traced to ancient Greece, where citizens took part in decision making, to the establishment of the Magna Carta in England in 1215 and the French Revolution of the late 18th century – all pivotal moments in the development of European democracy. Equally significant are milestones in the history of human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and earlier legal codes like the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1755–1750 BCE). Alongside these, the fight for justice – illustrated by historical injustices like slavery, colonisation and systemic discrimination – continues to shape the discourse on equality. Key movements such as women's suffrage, LGBTQIA+³⁶ rights and the civil rights struggles of the 20th century have also been instrumental in shaping modern European values.

Understanding historical developments like those mentioned is essential to grasping the foundations of contemporary European society. The study of history not only cultivates an awareness of chronology and periodisation but also sharpens the ability to critically

analyse primary and secondary sources. These skills are vital for developing a nuanced understanding of democratic values and their relevance in today's world.

Higher education institutions play a key role in promoting this understanding and can enhance their approach by integrating historical milestones into a wide range of academic study programmes as a way to foster values, attitudes and critical thinking. This should extend beyond the humanities to include STEM fields, where ethical discussions can be woven into the curriculum – for example, addressing the moral implications of scientific advancements like the development of the atomic bomb, eugenics or non-sustainable energy practices.

For this to be successful, academic freedom is a crucial prerequisite of history teaching and the European Students' Union (ESU) strongly advocates for protecting higher education institutions to ensure that history and its contexts are neither censored nor neglected in learning, teaching and research. Students and teachers alike should be able to study and investigate in the pursuit of knowledge and truth without being restricted in this. Further ensuring institutional autonomy, promoting academic freedom by resisting external pressures, and fostering an environment where diverse ideas and critical thinking can thrive, are also imperative aspects of history which further expand the quality of education for students and teachers alike. At the same time, academic freedom highlights the responsibilities of higher education institutions to defend it as a core value that is essential to functioning democratic societies. Furthermore, academics need to uphold ethical standards in the pursuit of the truth and respect the divergent opinions of their students – as long as these are argued based on the scientific methodology – and speak within their profession without misusing their title, as academic freedom does not equate to freedom of speech.

In line with the idea of the pursuit of truth, given the increasing polarisation of societies and various forms of radicalisation in Europe and worldwide, academic history teaching can be an avenue to counteract polarisation and disinformation (especially in

³⁶. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual.

regard to the increasing denial of historical events in the context of both colonisation and the Holocaust) by fostering a deeper understanding of diverging point of views, both ideologically and interculturally speaking, while upholding the scientific method to enable the debunking of myths and distortions of history. Arguing while staying open to better ideas and dismantling disinformation are skills that can be taught by understanding others' viewpoints and debating the many perspectives and complexities tied to each historical event and innovation. These skills are fundamental to (re-)establishing the ability for members of societies, as well as societies as such, to speak with, rather than against each other, and ultimately foster the ability to find consensus rather than division, connecting and uniting people despite and in diversity.

Therefore, the maintenance and development of history education for students must be holistic, spanning all academic disciplines and prioritising history as a core subject in higher education curricula. Democratic values should be the foundation of this, with the development of a sense of belonging in the European community and the promotion of values, knowledge, attitudes and skills that foster open and free societies as a primary aim. Higher education can function as an accelerator, both through curricula and the manifold outreach activities anchored in the third mission of institutions, including their role in informing societal debates based on scientific knowledge.

Final session

**SUSTAINABILITY AND FUTURE
PERSPECTIVES FOR HISTORY
EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

A new human rights-based theory of historians' responsibilities (in a nutshell)

Antoon de Baets, EuroClio Emeritus Professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights, University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Over the years, many principles have been proposed to organise the duties and responsibilities of historians. One such organisational principle emphasised their scope and subdivided them into professional, civic, social, cultural, political and other responsibilities. A second principle highlighted the addressees and subdivided responsibilities into responsibilities toward past, present and future generations. A third principle foregrounded their performers and subdivided them into responsibilities of individual historians and responsibilities of the community of historians. Finally, a fourth principle emphasised context and distinguished responsibilities in times of war, during national emergencies and in peacetime. None of these organising principles will be used in the new theory of historians' responsibilities presented here, although they are compatible with it and many of their key elements return in it anyhow. Based on human rights, the new theory uses the nature of the historians' responsibilities as its organising principle.

The leading human rights instruments – the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights – refer to duties and responsibilities of states and individuals. Here the emphasis is solely on the duties and responsibilities of individuals, and of historians in particular. Although strictly speaking “duties” are general ethical or moral obligations and “responsibilities” are obligations that are legally binding under existing international law, both terms are used interchangeably here. The starting point of the present theory is Article 19.3 of the ICCPR which stipulates that “[t]he exercise of the rights [to freedom of expression] carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions”. This clause explains the origin of the responsibilities held by individuals: the latter have responsibilities because they have rights. Rights are prior to, and the rationale for, responsibilities.

There are two major types of responsibilities: responsibilities to oneself (or virtues) and responsibilities toward others (or relational responsibilities). As for the virtues, we might further distinguish

recommended from essential virtues. Curiosity, modesty and open-mindedness would be recommended intellectual or epistemic virtues. If historians do not comply with them, the quality of their work may suffer, but no great harm is done to others. In contrast, honesty (an ethical virtue) and accuracy (an epistemic virtue) are essential virtues because non-compliance with them (for example, when historians lie or act with reckless disregard for facts) may lead to harmful consequences for others – and for history as a discipline. Essential virtues therefore occupy a middle ground between recommended virtues and relational responsibilities.

The ethical framework, then, is clear: when historians act, they are protected by rights, guided by virtues and restricted by responsibilities. Rights set claims, virtues set best practices, responsibilities set expectations. Human rights theory distinguishes three main responsibilities of individuals according to their performative nature: a first responsibility requires individuals to respect, a second to protect and a third to promote. This theory is applied here to one specific category of individuals: historians.

- ▶ A responsibility to respect history and historians. The responsibility to respect history requires respect for the principle of scientific integrity when approaching the past as historians (the attitude of being honest and not acting corruptly). The responsibility to respect historians means respect for the rights of other historians and of students and ensuring a fair discussion of contrary views.
- ▶ A responsibility to protect history and historians. This responsibility requires historians to oppose abuses of history and attacks on historians by third parties. Such abuses and attacks have harmful and chilling effects on the entire historiographical operation. The responsibility can be broken down into a series of steps ranging from preventing to investigating, disclosing and sanctioning abuses of and attacks on history as well as expressing solidarity with those attacked.

- ▶ A responsibility to promote history. This responsibility requires the creation of favourable conditions for research and teaching, in the first place by establishing equitable research ecosystems and high-quality education curricula free from indoctrination. It also requires the arrangement, to the extent possible, of a responsible and dignified public debate about the dark sides of history.

Whereas the responsibilities to respect and to promote defend responsible history, the responsibility to protect fights irresponsible history. The responsibility to respect is the most important of all: it is a responsibility of result without which the responsibilities to protect and promote would become meaningless. In contrast, the responsibilities to protect and promote are responsibilities of effort and conduct governed by due diligence principles. Within the ambit of the responsibility to protect, the responsibility to prevent is weightier than the responsibilities to investigate, disclose, sanction or express solidarity.

The responsibility to respect is absolute: it cannot be waived under any circumstances. In contrast,

the responsibilities to protect and promote can be tempered by three factors. First, by the degree to which the rights of historians are respected. If historians' rights are not, or not completely, respected, their responsibilities to protect and promote are diminished to the same degree. Second, historians' responsibilities to protect and promote are mitigated by the degree of autonomy they are granted by society. There can be no accountability toward society without some strong form of autonomy (including academic freedom). Finally, historians' responsibilities to protect and promote are toned down by their potentially conflicting nature. Historians fulfil several social and professional roles and belong to diverse local, national and global communities – and, therefore, responsibilities emanating from these roles and communities may conflict and should be balanced against each other.

This is, in a nutshell, what a human rights-based theory of historians' responsibilities looks like. It uses the logic of human rights theory to identify three fundamental, consistent and coherent responsibilities of historians. They form the rock upon which other responsibilities can be built.

Group discussions

Hillegje van't Land and Susanne Popp, group rapporteurs

The group discussions gave way to insightful conversations and revolved around the following key points which can be grouped under eight headings.

1. Diverse approaches to history and challenges in history teaching

- ▶ Approaches to history are very diverse across Europe and beyond; there is not one single interpretation of historical facts: there is certainly not one unified approach to European history; instead, there is a need for better connection between local and national, international or global perspectives on historical facts and events.
- ▶ The discussions confirmed the notion that history teaching comes with the difficult notion of choices that historians make when teaching or undertaking research.
- ▶ One group discussion resulted in strongly opposed and non-reconcilable views on what historical perspectives allow us to do: either negotiate and interpret in light of today's context or revisit history through different lenses that are applied to historical issues.
- ▶ What are the role and responsibility of public authorities and of higher education, both in research and training for teachers, in developing historical awareness and culture for society, and could the Council of Europe play a stronger role in curriculum development?

2. History and citizenship education

One group debated the relationship between history teaching and citizenship education, with some viewing the use of history for citizenship education as an instrumentalisation of history.

3. Values in history teaching

Another group discussed the notion of values to be upheld in history teaching. The values spelled out in

the Magna Charta Universitatum are useful, but are they put into practice and if so, how?

4. Pessimism versus optimism in historical discourse

- ▶ The participants expressed surprise at the pessimistic outlook on history today and the defensive stance of some speakers and participants. Contrary to the data presented by Arthur Chapman, several participants believed that history is in good shape and could improve further through practical engagement with other educational levels and broader society.
- ▶ Others were more pessimistic, stressing the fact that today, it is not just about what historians say, but rather the credibility of historians and the entire discipline is being questioned at various levels. This is partly due to the spread of fake news and the manipulation of historical facts. The need to restore public trust in history teaching was a key concern.

5. The new and sometimes too many demands placed on history teaching and on historians as experts

This aspect raised several questions including:

- ▶ How is history to be taught at national or European level today?
- ▶ How can history be taught to a very diverse student audience? What is the impact of internationalisation of the classroom on history teaching and to what extent is history teaching able to respond to internationalisation? This echoes the need to internationalise history education curricula, to revisit teaching and learning, and to take the increased diversity of audiences and historians' tasks into consideration.
- ▶ Is curriculum transformation in different contexts actually taking place?

6. What is the impact of academic assessment on history teaching?

- ▶ The valorisation of the teaching of history as one of the missions of academia today was discussed, revolving around the questions: is the teaching of history valued properly, and does it fulfil the third mission of the university in bringing history to the broader public and society at large? It was stressed that these activities are not valued as part of the academic career; this is a barrier that prevents historians from assuming the many roles they are called on to fulfil simultaneously.
- ▶ This raises the issue of recognition for the work of history teaching in higher education systems that primarily recognise the importance and academic value of research.
- ▶ Is the system prepared to open up to a differentiation between individual and collective assessment?

7. The notion of historical culture

A next group questioned the notion of historical culture and favoured the notion introduced by Peter Aronsson in his presentation: the space of experimentation.

8. Impact of history teaching/public perception/public trust

- ▶ The impact of history teaching was debated, including the development of multiperspectivity, critical thinking, as well as utilitarian applications that can have legal implications.
- ▶ It was stressed that historians have the responsibility to preserve historical artefacts for future exploration and analyses. This raises the question of who is responsible for this aspect – historians, the academy or public authorities?

Appendices

Programme

Day 1 Wednesday 15 May

17:30 – 19:00 **Welcome words**

Chair: Aurora Ailincăi, Head of the History Education Division and Executive Director of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, Council of Europe

Giovanni Molari, Rector, University of Bologna, Italy

Matjaž Gruden, Director of the Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe

Opening session – Inclusive history

History has always valued some narratives over others, with many experiences of minority communities having not been recorded at all. More and more, history is being questioned and contested, and these debates can create tensions, as well as for some people, a will to forget. To this end, what is the role and responsibility of higher education and public authorities in promoting inclusivity in public history?

Jerome de Groot, Professor of Literature and Culture, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

Questions/answers

Day 2 Thursday 16 May

9:00 – 9:30 **Opening remarks**

As an introduction to the Forum's objectives, the opening session will question the use and misuse of history as a challenge for democracy, including the role of academic freedom, teaching, learning and research, while also acknowledging existing political reflections on academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Moderator: Jean-Philippe Restoueix, Head of Unit for Remembrance and Intergovernmental Programme on History Education, Council of Europe

Giuseppe Ronsisvalle, Professor and CDEDU Bureau Member

Raffaella Campaner, Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Bologna, Italy

Matjaž Gruden, Director of the Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe

9:30 – 11:00 **Plenary session 1 – The role of history education and research in and for democratic societies**

Higher education institutions have a central and unique role to play in supporting research and providing safe spaces for controversial debates. How indispensable is academic freedom in history education to fostering robust historical research? How does higher education in history education play a role in promoting inclusivity, multiperspectivity, non-discrimination, adherence to the rule of law and respect for human rights in and for democratic societies?

Moderator: Iris Kimizoglu, Vice President of the European Students' Union (ESU)

Raul Cârstocea, Vice-Chair of the OHTE Scientific Advisory Council, Council of Europe, and member of the Barvalipe Academy, ERIAC European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture

David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory

Pil Maria Saugmann, Vice President of the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc)

Monika Steinel, Deputy Secretary General of the European University Association (EUA)

Questions/answers

11:00 – 11:30 **Coffee break and networking**

11:30 – 12:30 **Plenary session 2 – Identities, roles and responsibilities of historians in higher education**

In today's academic landscape, it is crucial to strategise on how history is defended and promoted as a subject, emphasising its unique methodologies and ethical considerations in understanding human experiences. Public engagement, interdisciplinary debate and cross-references between countries are key, as historians must challenge prevailing narratives and explore the "who", "what" and "why" across various geographical contexts – local, national, regional/European and international. Documenting minority and marginalised histories is imperative for a more inclusive historical culture, sparking dialogue on history education's ever-changing landscape. What threats and challenges do historians in higher education face today, given the evolving nature of historical inquiry?

Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, United Kingdom

Gentiana Sula, Chairperson of the Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents, Albania

Questions/answers

12:30 – 13:30 **Group debates**

As a follow-up to the plenary session, small groups will debate the "identities, roles and responsibilities of historians in higher education".

13:30 – 14:45 **Lunch break**

14:45 – 15:45 **Plenary session 3 – The role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society**

Educators and academics navigate pedagogical challenges and opportunities when they utilise historical documents and texts in today's digital age. How can history education promote inclusive learning and instil historical thinking as a vital skill, alongside fostering citizenship education on fundamental rights and democratic values? What is the responsibility of public authorities and the role of higher education, both in research and training for teachers, and in developing historical awareness and culture for society?

Moderator: Cristina Demaria, Professor of Philosophy and Theories of Languages and Rector's delegate for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion of Alma Mater, University of Bologna, Italy

Peter Aronsson, Rector, Linnaeus University, Sweden, and Board Member of the International Association of Universities (IAU)

Iris Kimizoglu, Vice President of the European Students' Union (ESU)

Susanne Popp, Honorary President, International Society of History Didactics (ISHD)

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives at Howard University, United States of America

Questions/answers

15:45 – 16:15 **Coffee break and networking**

16:15 – 17:30 **Group debates**

As a follow-up to the plenary session, small groups will debate the "role of higher education in valuing historical culture for society".

Day 3 Friday 17 May

9:00 – 10:30 Final session – Sustainability and future perspectives for history education in higher education

For this last plenary session, group rapporteurs will share feedback from the debates about the threats and challenges history education is facing in higher education. Organisations in history education will share reactions on how to safeguard democracy through historical awareness and academic freedom.

Moderator: Jean-Philippe Restoueix, Head of Unit for Remembrance and Intergovernmental Programme on History Education, Council of Europe

Group rapporteurs

Susanne Popp, Honorary President, International Society of History Didactics (ISHD)

Hillegje van't Land, Secretary General, International Association of Universities (IAU)

Speakers

Antoon de Baets, EuroClio Emeritus Professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands

Jakub Grodecki, Project and Policy Manager, European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education (EURASHE)

Joanna Wojdon, Professor, Vice President of the International Federation for Public History (IFPH)

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:00 – 12:15 Concluding thoughts and next steps

The General Rapporteur will conclude the Forum with final remarks and insights. He will also provide valuable reflections on key elements discussed throughout the sessions, offer guidelines for the future and outline actionable steps to advance efforts in reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education.

General Rapporteur

Tony Gallagher, Professor Emeritus and Honorary Professor of Education, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom

Questions/answers

List of participants

Name	First name	Title	Country/organisation
AILINCĂI	Aurora	Executive Director, Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, Council of Europe	Council of Europe
ARONSSON	Peter	Rector, Linnaeus University, Sweden and International Association of Universities Board Member	IAU
BENCZE	Norbert	Presidential Commissioner, Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA candidates	Eurodoc
CAMPANER	Raffaella	Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Bologna, Italy	University of Bologna
CĂRSTOCEA	Raul	Vice-Chair of the OHTE Scientific Advisory Council, Council of Europe and Member of the Barvalipe Academy, ERIAC European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture	OHTE/ERIAC
CAVAZZA	Stefano	Professor of Contemporary History, Department of Arts, University of Bologna, Italy	University of Bologna
CHAPMAN	Arthur	Professor of History Education, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, University College London, United Kingdom	University College London
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DE BAETS	Antoon	EuroClio Emeritus Professor of History, Ethics and Human Rights, University of Groningen, the Netherlands	EuroClio
DE GROOT	Jerome	Professor of Literature and Culture, University of Manchester, United Kingdom	University of Manchester
DE NINNO	Fabio	Assistant Professor of Contemporary History, University of Siena, Italy	University of Siena
DEMARIA	Cristina	Professor of Philosophy and Theories of Languages and Rector's delegate for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion of Alma Mater, University of Bologna, Italy	University of Bologna
DENGO	Nicola	WG Research Assessment & Career Paths Co-ordinator, Eurodoc	Eurodoc
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GRUDEN	Matjaž	Director of the Directorate for Democracy, Council of Europe	Council of Europe
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MAZURKIEWICZ	Julia	Student	ESU
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MOLARI	Giovanni	Rector, University of Bologna, Italy	University of Bologna
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NAUDŽIŪNIENĖ	Akvilė	Assistant Professor, Faculty of History, Vilnius University, Lithuania	Lithuania
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OJA	Mare	Advisor, Department of General Education Policy, Ministry of Education and Science	Estonia
OPEIDA	Kateryna	Expert, International Department, Ukrainian Association of Students	ESU
PAROUTAUD	Xavier	Pedagogical Director, Federation for European Education (FEDE)	FEDE

Name	First name	Title	Country/organisation
PATRIARCA	Giovanni	Officer, Dicastery for Culture and Education	Holy See
PETROSYAN	Vahram	Director, Institute for Armenian Studies, Yerevan State University, Armenia	Armenia
POGGIOLINI	Ilaria	Chair, Professor of International History, University of Pavia, Italy	University of Pavia
POOLE	Robert	Emeritus Professor of History, University of Central Lancashire, United Kingdom	Expert
POPP	Susanne	Honorary President, International Society of History Didactics (ISHD)	ISHD
PRAY	Lauren	Human Rights & Solidarity Co-ordinator, European Students' Union (ESU)	ESU
RAUTIAINEN	Matti	Senior University Lecturer, Department of Teacher Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland	Finland
RESTOUEIX	Jean-Philippe	Head of Unit, Remembrance & Intergovernmental Programme on History Education, Council of Europe	Council of Europe
RONDISVALLE	Giuseppe	Professor and CDEDU Bureau Member	CDEDU Member
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SCHOCH	Hannah	Secretary, Eurodoc	Eurodoc
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WARNOCK	Barbara	Senior Curator and Head of Education, The Wiener Holocaust Library, London, United Kingdom	Expert
WIBACKE	Elis	PhD student, Linköping University Sweden	Eurodoc
WOJDON	Joanna	Professor, University of Wrocław, Albania and Member of the Steering Committee, International Federation of Public History	IFPH
ZELEZA	Paul Tiyambe	Senior Advisor for Strategic Initiatives, Howard University, United States of America	IAU

As part of the intergovernmental programme on history education, the Education Department of the Council of Europe has launched a series of forums on key topics concerning history in the first quarter of the 21st century.

The third forum was entitled “Reinforcing historical awareness and culture through higher education: threats and challenges” and took place at the University of Bologna in May 2024. This event was organised in collaboration with the University of Bologna and in partnership with key players in higher education: the International Association of Universities (IAU), Eurodoc, the European Students’ Union (ESU) and the Magna Charta Observatory.

The following themes were addressed during the Third Forum for History Education and are found in this report: taking popular culture into account in the formulation of a historical narrative; the role of the public authorities as guarantors of the framework for the operation and funding of higher education; the role of the actors involved in defining a historical narrative, particularly in terms of teaching, a role that can only be thought of in terms of respect for academic freedom; and the importance for learners and citizens of having a common historical foundation on which to live together.

At the crossroads of a reflection on history within higher education and discussions on the state of higher education, in particular the question of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the Bologna Forum provided an opportunity for very rich debates, including contradictory ones, to which this report bears witness.

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