



HTA Response to Draft Modern History Syllabus

General

The Modern History draft syllabus is likely to generate a good deal of discussion amongst teachers. The assumption is that BOSTES surveys and consultation will gather feedback at individual topic and 'dot point' level. This response largely focuses on broader issues. Looking at the bigger picture, it is to be hoped that what is proposed for the Preliminary Course is welcomed by teachers – as a whole it looks interesting, even exciting. The proposal for the HSC course is likely to get a more mixed response and, particularly with limited clarity around assessment, it is not easy to evaluate.

For HTA there is disappointment in the failure to take account of a number of important recommendations that have been consistently put to BOSTES throughout the curriculum development process:

- New history courses need to address the challenge of catering for the diverse range of students in Years 11 and 12, across all schools and throughout the state. (This diversity is not addressed by the three discrete categories mentioned in the draft documents.)
- There should be absolute transparency about assessment and assessment should be developed at the same time as course content, not added on at the end. (There will be changes to assessment but it is not clear what rationale these changes will be based on and the exam specifications in the draft documents give little certainty.)
- NSW history courses being developed for the second quarter of the 21st century should aim to shift students from a Eurocentric focus towards more Asian and Pacific topics. (In the Preliminary Course and at topic level there are some good opportunities for diversification but the structure of the HSC Modern History course has the potential to reinforce a narrow Eurocentric focus.)

Outcomes

Some of the outcomes need to be revisited. It is far from clear, for example, what MH12-4 or MH12-5 mean or what they might look like in practice. The concern is that there may be an unnecessary attempt to introduce an artificial distinction between the Year 11 and Year 12 outcomes. (p. 15)

Historical Concepts and Skills

While the integration of concepts and skills is likely to assist teachers in integrating both of these important components with the content of the course, it may be worth checking these areas for unnecessary complexity. The detail under 'historical interpretation', for example, is quite complex and it may be helpful to think about what this might look like in practice. Similarly with 'analysis and use of sources'. (p. 30)

Assessment

Assessment is very difficult to evaluate. There has been very limited prior discussion, no clear rationale for change has been announced and the detail in the draft document gives only a few clues about what a HSC exam might look like.

Internal Assessment

- Restricting the number of assessment tasks (3 in Year 11 and 4 in Year 12) will probably be welcomed by many who see it as a way of lessening stress on students.

- However, reducing the number of assessment tasks may increase the challenge of devising an assessment schedule that deals with all components according to the weightings specified in the tables on page 21. Indeed, given that the goal should be ‘assessment for/as/of learning’ it could be asked if these weightings tables are as helpful as they might be. There is always the danger that the mathematical juggling required to conform to the weightings means that demonstrating syllabus compliance becomes more the priority, with the result being overly-complex, multi-tiered assessment tasks.
- Specifications about formal written examinations and the weighting that can be given to them will generate concern amongst many teachers. If we assume that the apparent restriction means that students in Year 12 cannot do both a half-yearly and a trial HSC exam, for example, there will be considerable concern amongst those teachers who feel that their students need two formal exams to prepare for the high stakes HSC exam. Those students who are most likely to benefit from formal exam practice will be most disadvantaged.
- Given that a Trial is likely to be a school’s last assessment task, restricting it to a 25% weighting will mean that teachers will lose some flexibility in the weightings they give to earlier tasks. Will they be prevented, for example, from giving lower weightings to earlier assessment tasks, something that is recommended as best practice?

HSC Examination

- The proposal to make the National Study non-examinable in the HSC generated a lot of discussion in the earliest stages of consultation, with probably the majority of teachers expressing concern about the potential for devaluing this component. Whether or not this will happen is uncertain, but without access to the thinking behind the proposal or a clear idea of how it will impact on the exam as a whole, it is difficult to evaluate.
- The draft exam specifications raise more questions than they answer and this hampers evaluation of the topics to be examined:
 - The specifications for Section I look like a lot like those for the current Core. Is this the intention or will there be something completely different? Will any decision be based on extensive evaluation of the current Core or alternative models?
 - What exactly is intended for Sections II and III? The wording has raised some concern that essays will play a lesser role. Once again, will any decision making be based on a full evaluation of the role of essays in Modern History assessment?
 - There is some indication that there will be more multiple-part responses. What discussion or evaluation is this based on?
 - How long will the exam be? The proposal to not examine the National Study suggests that the exam will be shorter but this is by no means certain.
- Whether it is internal or external assessment, it is not clear that the Outcomes given are readily applicable to all sections, particularly when it is not clear how a topic or part of a topic is intended to be examined.

Timeline

It appears that the new syllabuses will be released in 2017, to be introduced in Year 11 in 2018.

- Will this allow enough time for issues with Modern History to be dealt with AND sample assessment and support material to be developed in plenty of time to assist long term planning, programming and the development of assessment schedules across Years 11 and 12?
- Would it be wise to build in time for a thorough evaluation of as yet unseen HSC assessment and sample assessment material before these areas are finalised?

- It will be important not to overlook the special circumstances of schools that use a compressed or accelerated model for the HSC. Will the timeline, and the production of support material, take account of their need to plan for an earlier transition?

Preliminary Course

The Preliminary Course has been refreshed with a range of new topics and ideas. While they present some initial challenge in terms of resourcing and programming, many teachers will be excited by the challenge and the new mix has the potential to better engage students and add more coherence to the Year 11 course. Some may see the course as being ambitious in terms of the areas to be covered but this is balanced by the range of options and the flexibility teachers in Year 11 have to adapt coverage and depth to the needs of their students. Content outlines in the draft appear to offer more guidance for teachers, something that will assist beginning teachers.

Investigating Modern History

This looks really interesting, with the options for the first section being particularly well thought out. There may be some potential for overlap with either Elective or Extension but this may be addressed by the concrete examples nominated for each option or school programming. There is certainly potential to generate interest in History Extension. The Case Studies offer a mix of old and new topics or teachers may develop their own. This will be welcomed.

Historical Investigation

This already works well, it develops good skills, assists in preparing students for the Extension Project and can be programmed flexibly.

The Shaping of the Modern World

Again, this looks well thought out, giving students the opportunity to do a major study as a foundation for later 20th century studies. The range of options, from the Enlightenment through to World War I, allows good choice and each can be approached as a significant and well-developed study. The unifying question, 'What is modernity?', adds an interesting dimension.

HSC Course

Core: Power and Authority

- BOSTES consultation is likely to reveal widespread concern about the proposed Core. A sample early reaction: 'it has been concocted without any consultation, has no obvious rationale and includes the prospect of teaching personalities without context'. Unfortunately, it is not clear where the proposal has come from or what the thinking behind it is. There is no clarity about how it will be examined and this makes it very difficult to evaluate. While the assessment and pedagogy thinking behind the current Core may be worn out and long overdue for evaluation, there is a clear pedigree to it and it was once innovative and exciting. What is the thinking behind the proposed Core that will engage, excite and drive pedagogy and assessment?
- There are major concerns about a lack of coherence and how this might impact on teaching and assessment.
- There are some concerns about how two personality studies will work (one here and one in Change in the Modern World), why they are necessary and how it will affect assessment.
- It is likely that the focus on Nazi Germany will be popular with many. At the same time, there may be despair amongst those who see a missed opportunity in a Core that firmly anchors the NSW

Modern History course in Berlin. Even though there are some attractive alternatives, it is hard not to see the majority of students continuing with a narrow Eurocentric program that includes, for example, the German National Study and Conflict in Europe. (Conversely, see the last point under National Studies.)

National Studies

- India has disappeared. To some extent, the content of this topic has been used elsewhere.
- Despite its very low candidature Indonesia has been retained. This is a good thing but it needs to be accompanied by efforts to encourage more schools to take up the topic. The content outline could include a focus on Australia's relations with Indonesia.
- Iran is an interesting and potentially popular new topic.
- The popular German topic has been cut in half but comparability may not be an issue if the National Studies are not externally examinable.
- A potentially significant outcome of the National Studies not being externally examinable may be more willingness to experiment with new or traditionally low candidature topics such as Iran or Indonesia.

Peace and Conflict

- Largely unchanged from the current course, this section is likely to be popular with teachers.
- Conflict in the Gulf is an interesting addition that has obvious relevance and may attract a significant candidature. There are some curious omissions in its content outline. Would terrorism be a relevant key feature and issue? Perhaps also American exceptionalism? Are the events of 11 September 2001 relevant?

Change in the Modern World

- This section is new and potentially interesting but each topic and its outline may need a good deal of scrutiny and refinement before any final draft is presented. Each topic would also need to be carefully checked for feasibility against intended exam style questions when these are developed and before the syllabus is finalised.
- Some of the content outlines are quite wide-ranging, it is difficult to anticipate how the personalities will fit, there may be some comparability issues and the exam specifications do not make the intentions of the HSC clear.
- Despite differing content outlines, there may be potential for overlap with Stage 5 topics or Peace and Conflict topics. At the very least, the Cold War would set students up with a handy background for the Nuclear Age and the New World Order.
- While there is some scope for the study of social and economic history in these topics, some will also see a missed opportunity for an option that focuses more directly on social and economic history relevant to the modern world.