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Focus on education: The East Midlands centre for history teaching and learning

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The East Midlands Centre for History Teaching and Learning (EMC) was founded in 2015 to address a contradiction in higher education policy. On the one hand, national teaching networks contracted in tandem with the funding of the Higher Education Academy. The History Subject Centre closed in 2011 and the HEA effectively ceased to undertake discipline-specific work after axing the post of history discipline lead in 2014. On the other hand, the Cameron governments simultaneously spoke of raising the standing of teaching in universities. The 2011 White Paper promised to place 'students at the heart of the system' by ensuring that teaching achieved the 'same prestige as research.' The Conservatives demonstrated the value they placed on teaching by nearly tripling its cost to undergraduates and then vowing in their 2015 manifesto to ensure 'the best possible value for money to students.' This was to be accomplished by the TEF – 'a framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality' – based on metrics often tangential to teaching.

The logic of the government's actions, such as it was, dictated that 'teaching excellence' was to emerge out of competition, not collaboration between universities. Historians at the nine subscribing institutions of the EMC (Bishop Grosseteste, De Montfort, Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Loughborough, Northampton, Nottingham and Nottingham Trent) took the opposite approach. They recognised that teaching innovation flourished when shared across institutions, that universities' individual CPD programmes were too generic to cater to historians' distinctive practices and that the sum created by community was greater than the parts divided by rivalry. The EMC's founding document accordingly identified its goals as follows:

> To improve history teaching and learning in universities
>
> To advocate for history education, its value and relevance …
>
> To create a networking and knowledge exchange hub for history educators …
>
> To develop impact case studies, public engagement and funding applications
>
> To develop research and publication in history teaching and learning
>
> To become a beacon for history pedagogy building national/international contacts and networks
>
> To engage pre-HE history educators to create a long-term and holistic approach to history pedagogy

Limiting membership of the organisation to the East Midlands was designed to encourage face-to-face interactions. A representative from each institution was expected to four organisational meetings a year. Every academic historian in the region was invited to annual meetings and sponsored projects and events had to involve at least two subscribing universities: the more, the better. These activities were paid for by a six-figure budget raised through annual institutional subscriptions that varied according to faculty size. The Centre was initially hosted by Loughborough University, which had made a name for itself in teaching innovation since reintroducing an undergraduate history programme in 2009.

So has the EMC fulfilled its aspirations? My answer is inevitably subjective, since from the outset I have served as its Co-Director alongside Professors Alan Booth and Chris Szejnmann. But it's not

difficult to make the case that the organisation has done some good. Seedcorn funding has enabled academics across the region to pool their experience of teaching North American history, indigenous histories, the Russian Revolution and visual sources. It has supported studies on how undergraduates can use hands-on archival material and whether their seminar performance and attendance improves when assessed on participation. The two annual meetings attracted comparable numbers of attendees to past History Subject Centre conferences. The meetings combined networking, small-group discussions and presentations by speakers such as Huddersfield's Pat Cullum, creator of one of the first and best placement programmes for history undergraduates in the country. Out of the meetings came new collaborations, the sharing of best practice and an engagement with teaching issues among historians who had not previously considered attending a pedagogy event. On a smaller scale, staff exchanges have enabled academics teaching similar subjects at different universities to visit each other's classes.

Four ongoing EMC schemes help postgraduates and early career historians at the start of their teaching careers. An East Midlands History Network coordinated by Lincoln postgraduates Rachel Yemm and Abi Dorr is running a series of one-day conferences where postgraduates discuss the process of research and share their findings. Kellie Moss at Leicester has initiated a peer support scheme in which advanced postgraduates like herself advise and coach those still newer to teaching. Experienced staff mentor postgraduate teachers through a combination of workshops, Skyping and one-on-one meetings in a year-long programme devised by Dr Joe Merton at Nottingham. The programme has succeeded in developing a new generation of history pedagogues whose teaching is reflective, informed by research and enriched by cross-institutional collaboration. Finally, a database set up by Dr Nikola Tomic and myself at Loughborough allows postgraduates to register their interest in part-time teaching across the region. It has enabled early career historians to find employment in over forty seminar groups outside their own universities, thereby introducing them to diverse teaching practices and diminishing the role of patronage in the distribution of teaching opportunities.

It was encouraging that three universities recently bid to succeed Loughborough as the host of the EMC in 2017-19. The honour goes to Derby, which among other things will coordinate the EMC's preparations for the subject-level TEF. The EMC endorsed the RHS' response to the 2015 Green Paper and particularly welcomed the RHS' preference for the peer review of teaching within disciplines over 'proxies that have little connection to actual teaching quality'. The effects of the TEF remain unpredictable. The best-case scenario is that it will encourage academics 'to think more rigorously and collectively about their work as teachers and educators,' as the EMC's founding document put it. Alternatively, it could accentuate the game-playing one-upmanship engendered by the metrics, markets and managers directing British higher education. If so, future initiatives like the EMC seem unlikely.