



OHTE General Report on the State of History Teaching in Europe 2023

Executive Summary



OBSERVATORY
ON HISTORY TEACHING
IN EUROPE



This first general report, produced by the Council of Europe's Observatory on History Teaching in Europe presents a snapshot of the state of history teaching in Europe. Based on a mixed method approach utilising qualitative and quantitative data collected from both education authorities and practitioners, this report presents the commonalities and differences in history teaching within the member states of the Observatory. It also provides a baseline against which further general reports can be compared, allowing to detect changes over time. The report consists of six thematic chapters, which establish the following observations:

The chapter on **the place of history teaching in the educational systems** finds that while history education is present in public primary education in all member states but one, whether as independent courses or as part of multidisciplinary courses, the picture appears more differentiated at secondary level, where history can be compulsory or optional; taught as a standalone subject or part of a multidisciplinary course. Based on recent reforms, a general move towards competence-based education and a rising use of digital tools and techniques has been observed. While teacher training and educational resources have evolved in this context, teacher qualifications have undergone transformations less often.

The chapter on **history curricula** reveals that in the majority of member states, the design and development of history curricula involves civil society participation besides state institutions. Multiperspectivity and the inclusion of the history of different types of minority groups are present in curricula, to different degrees. While fourteen member states include minority groups in their history curricula, Roma and/or Travellers nevertheless receive comparably less coverage overall. Only two member states include the histories of sexual and gender minorities in their curricula. While all member states include references to neighbouring countries, only four emphasise a wider European perspective. Teacher feedback identifies curricula as mostly flexible, manageable, and effective in addressing diversity-related issues. Teachers' curricular concerns focus mostly on content overload.

The chapter on **textbooks and other educational resources** finds that textbooks remain, by far, the most widely used resource in history teaching in OHTE member states, followed by teachers' notes, and websites and databases. Teacher feedback reveals diverse views on the utility of textbooks, particularly in the promotion of multiperspectivity and critical thinking. More importantly, a strong concern of teachers pertains to the representation of diverse social groups and minorities in textbook content.

The chapter dealing with **the practices of history teaching in the classroom** provides information on the pedagogies employed by teachers as well as the type of content covered in the classroom. In terms of content, teachers have identified national history as a dominant theme, followed by European history and world history. Chronologically, the Middle Ages and the Modern Age are the periods more commonly taught throughout the OHTE member states. Themes pertaining to 'Political and Military History', as well as 'Social and Economic History' are seen by teachers both as most relevant and most widely taught. And while teachers consider 'History of Minorities and Cultures', 'Environmental History', 'Migration History', and 'Gender History' as having significant relevance in developing multiperspectivity and critical thinking, they recognise that these contents are less represented in their history teaching. Cross-curricular links with 'Geography' and 'Citizenship Education/Civics' are seen by teachers as the most relevant. Methodologically, teachers widely underscore the continuing recourse to unidirectional instruction. While

pedagogies related to working with historical thinking and historical consciousness are also used, more active – and time consuming – methods such as project-based learning are less used. Teachers attribute this disparity to the demands on their time placed by overloaded curricula, textbooks, and exams. In addition, there is a clear consensus that educational authorities must provide teachers with opportunities for professional development in collaborative, multi-directional pedagogies.

The chapter on **learning outcomes and assessment**, including examinations, and their impact on teaching practice identifies that historical thinking is the learning outcome that teachers value the most, while they attach least value on memorisation of facts. In all countries but one, specific types of assessments are required. In circumstances when there are no exams, teachers can focus more on skill/competence and critical thinking assessment. Grading complexity and exams are a deterrent to a more regular use of these types of assessments. End-of-stage exams, especially if they are externally assessed, have a significant influence on teaching practices. The combination of overloaded curricula, and high-stakes exams that cover most or all of the curriculum creates time pressures for both teachers and students.

The chapter on **teacher training and qualifications** establishes that there is a variation in qualification requirements between teachers at primary and secondary level – with a higher degree of specialisation being required for teachers in higher years. Only in two OHTE member states, history teachers must be university graduates in history to teach history at all educational levels. Initial training tends to occur at undergraduate or masters level. Training programs are led by higher education institutions, national training institutions supervised by the Ministries of Education, independent organisations, NGOs, and teachers' associations. In eight countries, entry exams are required to register as a history teacher, while the rest of the countries apply selection systems based on the qualifications and experience of the applicants. In-service training is mostly optional and takes place both during and outside of formal working hours. Although almost all the state authorities stated that educational reforms have been recently introduced in this area, nearly half of the respondent teachers claim that the opportunities for professional development remain the same, while most experienced teachers believe that provisions for training have gotten worse. Finally, history teachers prioritise the need for seminars in the domains of ICT and innovative teaching resources, historical thinking competencies, and active-learning methods.

Main findings

1. History education is present in some form in public primary education in all member states except for Armenia, either as a standalone subject or, more frequently, as part of a multidisciplinary course. Understandably, history education is much more complex at the secondary level, where its status (compulsory or optional, standalone or multidisciplinary, curricular foci) varies widely not only across member states but also across different levels of education and types of schools.
2. In the majority of the OHTE member states, history curricula are not the exclusive prerogative of state institutions. Examples of civil society actors involved in curriculum design are civic organisations working in the field of education; teachers' associations;

representatives of minority groups; individual teachers and independent education consultants; and even the general public.

3. Cross-curricular links with other subjects are frequent. Among these, in order of importance, geography, citizenship education, art, literature, language/literacy and religious education are most frequently seen as complementary to history education.
4. The most frequently used educational resources according to teachers are textbooks, teachers' notes, and websites and databases with historical content approved by the education authorities.
5. Teachers expressed several concerns regarding educational resources, ranging from an excessive abundance of resources available, both digitally and in print, through the need for training on how to be selective in their use in history classes, to the adequacy of textbooks. With regard to the latter, concerns were expressed in particular about multiperspectivity, the extent to which they foster critical thinking and the representation of cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, religious and sexual/gender minorities, particularly Roma and Travellers, as well as the coverage of topics such as gender history and the history of childhood in textbooks.
6. Primary sources are viewed by history practitioners as essential to the discipline's specific methodological approach and thus as key to a good-quality history education. However, in light of survey results indicating that a significant number of teachers rarely or never use primary documentary sources in their history classes, there is still room for improvement, all the more so in conjunction with the widespread use of online historical content indicated by respondents to the survey.
7. The most relevant approaches to history addressed in the classroom, as indicated by the teachers, are, in order of importance, social and economic history, political and military history, migration history, art history, the history of minorities and cultures, environmental history and gender history. The frequency of the last three, while they are seen as relevant, is considerably more limited. The field of history with the lowest score in terms of both relevance and frequency is gender history.
8. There is a discrepancy between teachers' preferences for certain pedagogies and the frequency with which they use them. Didactic methods (for example, lectures and periodisations) are the most commonly employed, although methodologies related to historical thinking and historical consciousness also feature notably. Active learning methods such as place-based or project-based learning are the least frequently used. This is related to concerns about the time allocated to history in the overall curriculum and to curriculum overload, the two most significant obstacles consistently identified by teachers to a good-quality history education, followed by the pressure placed on their teaching practice by textbooks and exam.
9. All member states encourage teachers to use multiperspectival methods, and most of them include some minorities (cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, religious or sexual/gender) in their history curricula. In contrast, fewer than half explicitly mention the European dimension in their curricula.

10. The learning outcomes that history educators find most relevant are, in order of importance, related to historical thinking and living together in diverse democratic societies, whereas the one they find least relevant is learning and remembering historical facts, dates and processes.
11. A variety of assessment tools and methods are prescribed by the education authorities in OHTE member states, and an even wider range are used by teachers in practice. The most frequently used methods are oral assessment and factual questions about historical events or personalities, followed by interpretation of historical sources and essay questions requiring argumentation. The least frequently used types of assessment are activities related to historical empathy (such as role play and simulations) and activities that assess students' competences for democratic culture. When they are in place, final examinations, which assess both knowledge of historical content and historical thinking skills, influence both the teaching practice and the assessment because the teachers will focus mainly on enabling students to pass the exams.
12. Prospective history teachers in the vast majority of OHTE member states hold an academic degree in history and a master's degree in pedagogy and/or didactics. There is a discrepancy between primary and secondary education: elementary school history teachers in most member states, unlike those in secondary schools, are not required to possess extensive and in-depth subject knowledge.
13. There is a notable discrepancy with respect to in-service teacher training. While education authorities in most member states encourage and offer a variety of training, these are often poorly attended when they take place outside of regular working hours and/or are not financially supported by the authorities. With regard to their preferences for specific areas of in-service training, teachers prioritise training in ICT, innovative teaching resources, historical thinking competences and active learning methods.
14. Across several dimensions of history teaching, there are discrepancies between more experienced teachers and those who are relatively new to the profession, with the former being consistently more confident in using active learning pedagogies.
15. Across several dimensions of history education, there seems to be a general discrepancy between what teachers think is relevant and what they describe as happening in practice in the history classroom. In what might be evidence that the transition towards a good-quality history education has been adopted in principle, teachers consistently assign relevance to active learning methodologies and competence- or skills-based history teaching rather than to more didactic approaches to history, pedagogies and/or educational resources. However, its implementation is still wanting, for reasons that may have to do with its complexity.