

Future of History

Discussion notes from 24 November 2023

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Around 40 people in person, and a further 20 on zoom, met to discuss the Future of History at the NZHA Conference in Ōtautahi Christchurch on 24 November 2023.

The discussion was convened by Charlotte Macdonald (CM) (Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington).

The discussion followed immediately after the NZHA AGM.

Discussions on 24 November were a continuation of initial meetings and exchanges which took place in August in a series of zoom meetings initiated by CM and attended by historians across the country. Summaries of these meetings, and other related materials can be found in a shared Google Folder (for access see https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1Ct0Hmhj1uokPa_dKfdnRkQxpZRIZBbdj and request access. Rebecca Lenihan will then grant access to the folder as soon as she sees the request).

The prompt for the initial discussions and the 24 November meeting was the loss of jobs at University of Otago, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, and Massey University. The job losses were across many subjects at these universities, but all included History. CM's paper at the NZHA suggested this was part of a longer term drop in History positions un universities, from around 71 in 2013, to 49 at end 2023.

Accompanying the small additional funding made to the university tertiary sector by the Labour Government in June 2023 was a commitment to a review of the university funding model. This review was not scheduled to occur until after the 12 October election.

The meeting on 24 November took place just an hour or so after the detailed Coalition Agreement was released along with the composition of the incoming National-ACT-New Zealand First Government. Digestion of a number of features of the Agreement was taking place as the Future of History discussion took place. There was, thus, an element of novelty and volatility surrounding the deliberations.

CM provided an outline of where the Future of History initiative had come from, and where it had reached to date.

A range of views were expressed as to what should or could be the next steps. Everyone recognised there were challenges facing the university History sector in particular, and the History research sector as a whole.

The discussion ranged beyond this focal point.

The question of whether to approach the incoming Government as to the future of the funding review, or on other matters was considered. Erica Stanford holds the Education portfolio, while Penny Simmonds holds the Tertiary Education portfolio. Some were keen to make contact, if simply for information. Others were more reticent, considering that a sense of what we were seeking needed to be more strongly formulated first.

Other aspects of the Coalition Agreement, including the proposed Bill to Select Committee to define the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, was identified as something likely to be of high interest and work for the historical profession. Aroha Harris (Waipapa Taumata Rau University of Auckland) noted that Māori historians would be under particular pressure in this regard.

Questions were considered about the ways in which the Humanities as a whole, were facing challenges, including those historians who are employed at universities though not in History Departments (John Moremon, and indeed the whole of the organising committee of the NZHA Conference at UC and Lincoln). It was also noted that the challenges faced by History and Humanities in Aotearoa New Zealand is also part of an international trend. What we are seeing and experiencing is not unique (Barbara Brookes).

Younger voices expressed differing optimism/pessimism as to the possibility of getting jobs in History, and the security of that employment (Louise Stevenson, Caitlin Moffat-Young). All present were concerned about ensuring there were paths to the future. What has been the impact of 'first year free tuition' on student enrolment – and what will be impact of this now moving to final year of degrees (as proposed under Coalition Agreement?)

Possibilities of working more closely with local historical associations were raised (Virginia Warbrick, John Cookson).

The irony of History in general (as a field of interest, and as an arena for public policy research) being in 'rude health' while History as a formal area of study in the universities was noted (Jonathan West). How do we account for this gulf?

What the impact of the new History component in the core curriculum Years 1-9 will be on future study patterns at universities remains to be seen, but was raised. Working closely with NZHTA (NZ History Teachers Association) will remain important.

The urgency of the issue was noted in that colleagues at Massey will only learn the outcome of their current process in early 2024.

The capacities of NZHA to address these issues was raised. How do we best use our resources? Former president Katie Pickles, and former Exec member Felicity Barnes, noted the importance of working together, including under the aegis of the NZHA, while also noting limits.

A number of suggestions were made as to how some of these issues might be taken up by the incoming executive. Incoming secretary Charlotte Greenhalgh was on zoom and did take note of these.

At this stage, CM is prepared to continue with the Future of History initiative if it is felt that this is a useful discussion to continue. In the first instance, obtaining some further information as to the immediate plans of the incoming administration could be useful. How we then devise a strategy to support History will take further deliberation.