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**THE INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT IN A LEVEL HISTORY: AN EXAMPLE OF  
SELF-REGULATED LEARNING IN SIXTH FORM COLLEGES**

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**Abstract**

*This paper seeks to explore how students approach their Individual Assignment in A Level History. The paper was informed by theories of self-regulated learning and independent learning. The research involved 84 students and 15 teachers at four Sixth Form Colleges, in which students responded to a structured questionnaire that was drawn from the literature on self-regulated learning. The data was analysed according to ability range. The views of students were supplemented by discussions with teachers and reference to the position taken by the Historical Association over the issue of A Level reform. The conclusion suggests that students adopt a range of approaches, some determined by their innate ability but others by more practical concerns. The paper suggests that teachers plan a skills-based programme that refines students' independent learning prior to launching on the Individual Assignment.*

**Keywords**

Advanced Level, Advanced Subsidiary (AS) Level, Coursework, General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level, Independent learning, Individual Assignment, Self-regulated learning (SRL), Sixth Form College (SFC)

**Introduction**

The media in England and some leading universities have periodically criticised the current General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level) qualification as failing to prepare students for undergraduate level study. Indeed, the Russell Group of leading universities has identified some subjects, such as history, as 'facilitating' entry to certain degree courses, and in doing so differentiated between these more academic and supposedly less academic subjects on offer to potential university entrants. This debate over the academic quality of A level led the British Coalition Government (2010-15) to announce plans to restructure the qualification after 2015. One major change to A Level is the change to Advanced Subsidiary (AS) Level, which at present equates to half a full A Level in terms of content and value. The future AS qualification will be detached from the A Level qualification and remodelled as a separate qualification. There is, however, a much more profound criticism of GCE A Level in that students are often too spoon fed and not used to undertaking self-directed and independent learning. As early as 1998, Utley (1998) had identified this issue:

Many university tutors claim that the school system is failing to prepare students for what will be expected of them at university. A-level history in particular is seen to be teacher-dominated, creating a passive dependency culture.

The aim of the paper is to explore the possibility of the Individual Assignment (IA) in A Level History as a vehicle to develop students' skills as independent learners. This paper will investigate how students, teachers and the wider 'historical community' view the Individual Assignment, and the degree to which it develops independent learning.

### **The institutional context: Sixth Form Colleges and GCE A Level**

The Sixth Form College (SFC) sector remains relatively small both in terms of its membership and those students it caters for. Compared to the over two hundred General Further Education Colleges (GFECs) and 1689 schools with sixth forms reported by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF), 2011), there are now only 94 SFCs in the highly competitive post-16 education field. School sixth forms taught over 176,000 students and GFECs cater to over 86,000 students enrolled on level 3 (university entrance) programmes in 2008, compared to over 54,000 students in SFCs. Their market has tended to be limited to the provision of GCE A Level study, as well as a few colleges that offer the International Baccalaureate (IB). The sector is also characterised by the numbers of its student body. Compared with the 30% of providers that have a student body aged 16-19 of over 3,000 students, namely the large GFECs, SFCs tend to be much smaller. Although there are some that have below 1,000 students and an equally small number over 3,000, most range between 1,000-3,000 students, with an approximate average of 1,750 (Lauener, 2011, p.8). Although the SFC sector is relatively small in relation to the maintained school sector and the more diverse and larger GFECs, SFCs do make a significant contribution to university entrance in England.

The A Level qualification was introduced in the UK in 1951 as the primary entry qualification to university. The qualification is taken over two years by 16-18 year olds in both the State and Independent sectors, and indeed internationally. Awards are subject-based and cover a wide range of disciplines such as the arts, sciences, social sciences, foreign languages and some vocational subjects. In practice, most A Level students take a study programme of three or four subjects. In recent years there has been some diversification with the introduction of Applied A Level, which is designed to deliver a vocational curriculum for subjects such as Travel and Tourism. In many respects, however, A level is still dominated by the traditional subjects, with English, mathematics and the physical sciences being the most popular (Paton, 2012). In terms of the mode of assessment, A Level is still characterised by traditional methods of assessment, such as essay writing and formal external examinations. In some respects, the traditional make-up of A level is also reflected in the professional practice of some teachers who tend to adhere to traditional modes of teaching and learning. Hibbert (2014, p. 39) reported that 'students valued... the structure of A Level teaching, but nearly all of them talked about having been spoon fed of force fed'.

### **What is the Individual Assignment (IA)?**

The IA constitutes 20% of the required assessment for GCE A Level History. The IA is composed of two pieces of coursework, each of 2,000 words. All the examining boards provide a very broad range of topics ranging from early medieval to modern History options from world history. The first piece of the IA is concerned with a topic in depth over a period of 20 years; an example of which is: 'What was the short-term significance of the Balfour Declaration?' In this part of the IA, students are required to obtain, interpret and use a variety of original sources to arrive at a judgment. In the second piece of writing for the IA, students are required to consider the topic from a broader perspective over 100 years; an example of which is: 'To what extent were foreign powers responsible for the continuing conflict in the Middle East, 1900-2000?'

Although the delivery and timing of the IA varies across institutions, most colleges schedule the work for the first term of second year A Level and allocate two hours per week to support it. The role of the teacher is restricted by the examination board's regulations, and is far more limited than is the case for other subjects that offer coursework at A Level. In History, the teacher is expected to deliver five weeks' worth of class time to teach the topic in its entirety, and then

send students off to research and write-up their submission. Teachers are forbidden to make written comments on draft work and their role as a facilitator in the IA is curtailed. This rule contrasts starkly with subjects such as Art and English where teacher support is ever-present and re-submissions of drafts for feedback are the norm. In this respect, History provides a rigorous example of self-regulated study and a useful point from which to evaluate independent learning in English SFCs.

### **Literature review: the self-regulated learner**

Pintrich's definition of self-regulated learning, cited by Schunk (2005), provides a concise insight into the concept and its practise:

An active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment.

In simple terms, self-regulated learning placed the student at the centre of the learning process and, in doing so, allocates a significant amount of responsibility to the student to reach their goals. The literature on self-regulated learning mirrors other theoretical approaches to student-centred learning that has appeared in research journals in the past few decades, such as Guy Claxton's *Building Learning Power* (Stoten, 2012) or more generally as independent learning. Research identifies self-regulated learners as more likely to achieve highly, enjoy studying, and develop life-long learning skills (Wolters, 1998; Zimmerman, 1989; Pintrich and De Groot, 1990; Shunk and Zimmerman, 1994). As Boekaerts (1999, p. 445) acknowledges, self-regulated learning has been informed by writing on learning styles, students' metacognition, and theories of the self. Importantly, self-regulated learning has also been linked to the need to encourage independent action and the capacity to take the initiative often associated with the idea of flexible specialisation in the workforce- a major requirement in the future labour force of the twenty-first century.

Self-regulated learning has drawn both from information processing theory (Pintrich, 2004) social cognitive theory, and in particular the work of Bandura (1997) and Zimmerman (1998).

We should also differentiate theories of self-regulated learning from those associated with students' approaches to learning. Although both self-regulated learning and students' approaches to learning recognise the importance of goal setting and the motivational context to individuals' learning, they differ in terms of how they undertake empirical research and what they aim to investigate. Whereas, for example, self-regulation of learning research tends to use quantitative questionnaires, such as Pintrich and de Groot's (1990) Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), students' approaches to learning research, often influenced by postmodernist theory, may wish to use a phenomenological and qualitative approach. Moreover, students' approaches to learning investigations have tended to undertake research into general learning strategies, such as learning styles (Marton and Saljo, 1976; Entwistle and Waterston, 1998) or the idea of deep and surface learning. According to Pintrich (2004), self-regulation of learning research is more concerned with the generation and analysis of differences in student motivation and learning than is the case with most students' approaches to learning investigations. Consequently, we should expect to see the issues of motivation, goal setting and metacognition and as central to the discourse on self-regulated learning.

Schunk (2005, p. 174) has described the four main lines of research that has been undertaken into self-regulated learning. Firstly, citing the work of Boekaerts (1999), Schunk refers to the



interest in exploring the nature of self-regulation as a process, often comparing 'good' and 'bad' forms of self-regulation. Secondly, the issue of motivation is central to the work of Pintrich and De Groot, (1990) and Pintrich (2004) in which they explore the idea of influencing the level of motivation amongst students. Thirdly, we see that the possible relationship between learning and affective factors is explored in the work of Henderson and Cunningham (1994), and finally, in the research of Schunk (2005) and the idea that specifically designed forms of intervention can lead to an improvement in students' achievement. It is clear from the literature as a whole, that motivation is viewed as a central issue for researchers and work has tended to focus on the traditional discussion of intrinsic (inherent subject interest) and extrinsic (relationship with teacher) forms of motivation, to explore more specific issues such as the impact such as personal ideals, values and goals, as well as the impact of others, on outcomes. For Thoonen et al., (2011), motivation incorporates three additional components beyond a general orientation and students' intrinsic/extrinsic drives: these are value, expectancy and affective components. In short, students are regarded as being more motivated to learn where they see a clear benefit from the completion of the task, expect to achieve highly and enjoy their learning. Whether A level History students are motivated positively through the IA is an area that the research aimed to explore. The notion that targets can be set, managed and their outcomes evaluated is a second major concept associated with self-regulated learning. Indeed, the setting of targets is an important part of the tracking of students' performance today not least in the SFC sector where each student is given a target grade based on their GCSE performance. Sheldon and Elliot (1998) have reported that those students who are more aware of their targets tend to be more effective as self-regulated learners. They also reflect on their progress over a range of tasks and modify their behaviours in light of their evaluation. Such a view suggests that motivation is a nexus of complex processes and far more complicated than behaviourist thinkers had originally suggested.

A third major theme associated with self-regulated learning is reflection. For Zimmerman (1989), self-regulated learning can be defined in terms of a learning model with three phases: forethought, performance and self-reflection. Although the idea of students' control over their learning strategy is central to SRL, metacognition is more important as learning is the product of this iterative reflective cycle. For Zimmerman (1989), this process of self-reflection involves reacting to, observing and judging the learning experience. Boekaerts and Cascallar (2006) have reported that some students adopt a 'maladaptive' position that inhibits their progress and have suggested that students learn to modify their level of motivation and choice of learning strategy in order to maximise their level of achievement.

A fourth major theme of self-regulated learning relates to the importance of self-efficacy. The idea of self-efficacy is integral to this process of metacognition as students reflect on their learning experience. In part, self-efficacy is, as Zimmerman (1998) recognises a consequence of interaction with others and their feedback. For the most part, however, self-efficacy is related to the psychological state of a student, their experiences of learning over their entire educational career, and most importantly, their record of achievements. The implications are clear for teachers. Building-up a student's self-efficacy is a life-long process, as is learning, although Zimmerman (1998) considers that self-efficacy is most closely tied to their most recent results. The importance of constructive feedback becomes ever more important given the cyclical nature of feedback as a reinforcement of self-image. For Zimmerman (1998) the frequency and immediacy of feedback are both important in constructing a student's self-image. Perhaps one of the lessons to be learned for teachers is the need to design a feedback process that includes the student as much as in the teaching process, as suggested by Fluckiger et al. (2010). Quite apart from the instrumental requirements of effective feedback, it should also recognise the emotional context to all learning. Given the rubric of the IA, the

relevance of the lead-up period and what is done prior to the research seems all the more important.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is closely tied to students' emotional condition, in that a positive self-image may reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Just as a positive self-image may be associated with higher levels of motivation, effort and achievement, a negative view may inhibit learning. For Rawsthorne and Elliott (1999), students are not simply driven by the attainment of goals, as suggested by goal theory, but need to deal with their emotional state as well. Together with other researchers (Elliott and Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliott, 1997; Middleton and Midgley, 1997) they have emphasised how emotional drives such as 'performance avoidance' and anxiety are integral to students' motivational state. In particular, a number of researchers (Pintrich and de Groot, 1990; Zeidner and Matthews, 2005) have identified test anxiety as a demotivating factor for less able students. Al Khatib (2010) reported that higher levels of test anxiety were tied to underperformance in examinations, and that female students were more prone to test anxiety than male students. Levels of test anxiety are reported to increase (Montalvo and Torres, 2004) when students compare their likely performance to others. This paper is concerned with investigating whether self-efficacy and test anxiety varied between ability levels in history, and whether the IA was preferred to examinations.

### **Research methodology**

The research process sought to elicit the views of students, 15 teachers and the national representative body for 12,000 History teachers, the Historical Association (HA), on their views of the IA. The research process was conducted over one year at four SFCs, two in the North of England and two in the South East. At the time of the research, two of the SFCs were regarded as 'outstanding', whilst the other two were judged to be 'good' in their provision of teaching and learning, by Ofsted, the statutory inspection agency for England. The author, who had worked at two of the four institutions, used opportunity sampling to obtain the data. Given the reality that the author was a 'practitioner-researcher', a departmental manager and had indeed taught on the course, certain ethical issues were clearly associated with the process of research in terms of interaction with respondents. Students' anonymity was protected as the questionnaires used were not issued or collected by the author and no names were elicited. In conversation with teachers, assurances were made that their views would be not be conveyed to senior managers and their participation would be kept confidential.

The first phase of the research process involved an analysis of 84 second year A Level history students' views using a questionnaire following their submission of the IA. This questionnaire used 15 statements each with a five point Likert scale to generate students' responses on issues generated through the literature review, such as fear of failure, motivation and their preparedness to undertake self-regulated independent study. These statements were reducible to three core coding themes: affective issues, self-reflection and most importantly how students approached independent learning. The data was initially analysed according to those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in order to obtain an overview of the cohort. The data was subsequently sorted into two data sets, grade A and DE students to see if there was any difference between the most and least able students.

As described above, the role of the author as a 'practitioner-researcher' complicated the research process. However steps were taken not to engineer responses. The conduct of interviews was driven by the wish to elicit rich data through open-ended discussion, and in doing so create an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas, 1984/1987) in which neither participant was privileged over the other, anonymity was assured and individuals felt free to expand on



an issue as they thought appropriate. The questioning began with the core coding themes identified above, and as the conversation developed, developmental questions followed on. For example: what do you think about the value of coursework? Should the reformed A level contain an element of coursework? How do students approach coursework? For Habermas (1984/1987), this research setting should enable participants to arrive at an inter-subjective account based on common understanding. In contrast to conventional positivist validity claims, such as reliability and generalisability, Habermas (1984/1987) offers inter-subjective truth, and sincerity that reflect this fundamentally social constructionist approach to the generation of research findings. In addition to these research conversations, supplementary information was derived from the web-sites of the HA, the three major English examination boards and the Department of Education.

As with any small-scale study, its generalisability is limited and its value is tied to the insight of a small number of SFCs and their particular context and experiences. Further useful research could compare the performance between the SFC sector and the school sector for instance, as well as more extensive research within the SFC itself. A large number of students study A level History in the School and GFEC sectors and it would be informative to see if there is any variance between sectors, and what possible factors may influence diversity. This research exercise is useful in relating empirical results to theoretical issues raised within the literature review in relation to students' motivation, their self-efficacy and process of self-evaluation- did the IA motivate students; did it provide them with a different way of viewing their academic ability and did it develop their skills. These issues were central to the research. The findings to these research issues can inform the SFC sector on how to address these wider concerns with students' progress.

## Findings

### The raw data

Table 1 below displays the data generated from the questionnaires distributed to students, together with a reference to the theoretical context\*. There are a number of statements that generated very similar or indeed identical responses, such as statement 6 'set own learning goals' and statement 15 'learns more than required'. There are however, a number of statements that generate interesting findings. In particular, statement 1 'worry about exams', statement 3 'research prior to writing up', statement 4 'instrumental approach to work', statement 7 'enjoy learning in depth', statements 9 and 10 'plans work' and 'outcome is all-important', as well as statement 12 'highly motivated' and statement 14 'coursework is preferred to exams'. Although care should be taken when making observations on such small data sets, there is a basis here to make some tentative comments on how students approach the IA.

TABLE 1 Data generated from the student questionnaire

<b>Number</b>	<b>Statement Theoretical context*</b>	<b>Level of overall agreement (out of 84 students)</b>	<b>% of A grade students (out of 14 students)</b>	<b>% of DE grade students (out of 10 students)</b>
1	<i>Worry about exams</i> <b>Fear of failure / Test anxiety</b>	73	76	100
2	<i>Reflect on work</i> <b>Self reflection</b>	67	86	80

3	Research prior to writing up <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	42	64	30
4	Instrumental approach to work <b>Instrumentalism / efficacy</b>	64	57	80
5	Prefer to control learning <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	61	64	70
6	Set own learning goals <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	43	43	40
7	Enjoy learning in depth <b>Intrinsically motivated</b>	69	100	80
8	Explore before being instructed <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	28	36	40
9	Plans work <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	55	76	40
10	Outcome is all-important <b>Instrumentalism / efficacy</b>	60	93	60
11	Exercises initiative <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	42	50	40
12	Highly motivated to achieve <b>Intrinsically motivated</b>	57	80	50
13	Prefers to make own notes <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	50	62	70
14	Prefers coursework to exams <b>Fear of failure / test anxiety</b>	41	28	60
15	Learns more than required <b>Deep / Independent learning</b>	54	50	50

#### Data from research discussions:

A consensus of opinion emerged from discussions with 15 teachers in favour of the IA. Teachers felt that the IA offered students the opportunity to practise the skills required for degree level study and also served an effective means of discriminating between ability levels in History. In particular, the emphasis on developing independent learning and time management skills were identified as important to students' wider maturation as learners. In this respect, the IA was thought to have value beyond the study of history. Teachers also felt that the IA enabled students to explore a topic in depth and pursue their own intellectual interests. For example, at one SFC students were offered the choice of researching women's history, the Arab-Israeli conflict or Medieval Spain. A number of teachers reported that empowering weaker students to pick their IA pathway from a range of options helped motivate students and produced better results. Although one SFC reported that the IA generated the best grades from the four units at A level, others felt that the IA did not necessarily ensure higher grades than a fully examination-based A level. This finding should challenge the view that the IA is an easy unit within A Level history.

Feedback from a representative from the HA was also supportive for a number of reasons, and echoed the public position of the body. The feedback reflected many of the positive remarks made by history teachers, especially the value placed upon the IA as a means of developing students' independent learning and writing skills. The idea of the IA as an introduction to university-level study was also valued, as was the view that undertaking an individual project

was inherently useful as it often stimulated students' interest beyond a minimalist approach of 'learning for the exam'. At national level, the HA and well as the university sector had also voiced support for the continuation of the IA during consultations with the Department of Education over the reform of A level History. It is clear that the 'History community' values the IA as a challenging intellectual exercise that promotes the study of history.

## Discussion

The data generated a number of interesting findings that echo much of the literature on self-regulated learning and pose some important questions for how we should approach independent learning. The first stage of analysis examined the cohort as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the statement that generated the highest level of agreement was statement 1 that referred to test anxiety (73/84). Given the pressure on students to achieve highly, this outcome could be expected to be prominent in their concerns, indeed this was echoed by statement 5 that referred to the importance of the final outcome and which was fifth (60/84). Those statements that came second, third and fourth related to: enjoy learning in depth (69/84), self-reflection (67/84) and the adoption of an instrumental approach to work (64/84). This list of the top five most agreed statements do resonate with the literature described above.

In terms of the statements which generated the least amount of agreement, a number of important issues emerged. Although the statement that came fifth from bottom suggests that students prefer to make their own notes (50/84), the bottom four statements carry important implications for teachers who wish to promote independent learning. The statement at the bottom of the data list related to students exploring before being told to do, and with only 28/84, such a figure is disappointing for those teachers who would wish to inculcate a culture of personal initiative and independent learning in their classes. Moreover, the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth on the list of most agreed statements reinforce this concern. Only 43/84 of students tended to set their own learning goals, 42/84 undertook significant research prior to writing-up and 41/84 preferred coursework to examinations. This data suggests that a great deal of work needs to take place prior to launching students on their IA. It also infers that students still look to their teachers for some form of direction and support. Teachers must be aware that simply 'letting them get on with it' will not create self-regulated independent learners. Teachers should consider delivering a period of training in the skills of independent learning for students.

The second stage of analysis of the questionnaires sought to uncover any differences between the most able (A grade) and least able (DE students) students. There were a number of issues that emerged from this analysis of the data. Data from statement 1 would suggest that the least able students (100%) are more worried by examinations than the more able (76%), perhaps because of past experiences. This finding is echoed by statement 14 in which proportionally less (28%) of the more able students preferred examinations to coursework compared with a majority (60%) of the least able in the cohort. If this were to be replicated elsewhere, then teachers should be conscious of the need to address students' lack of confidence as well as examination technique. The second major issue to emerge was from statements 12 and 4 that related to levels of motivation and approach to work. Whereas a large majority (86%) of the most able students described themselves as high motivated, only half (50%) of the least able students did so. In relation to their approach to study, whereas a small majority of the more able students (57%) adopt an instrumental approach to work, a large majority of the least able do so (80%). Whether this is because the less able choose a 'lowest cost' approach to study or another reason should be the focus for further research.

The third issue to emerge from the data relates to differences in how students approach independent learning. Data generated by statements 3, 7 and 9 all infer that the more able student approaches independent learning with greater confidence than the least able. Whereas almost two-thirds of the most able (64%) undertake extensive research prior to writing up, less than a third (30%) of the less able do so. In addition, the evidence suggests that the more able students (100%) enjoy learning in depth more than the least able (80%). Moreover, a large majority of the most able students undertake independent planning (76%) compared with a minority of the least able students (40%). This evidence would indicate that teachers should be careful of the needs of the less able history student, as well as of the more able. This evidence highlights the importance of supporting the less able students when undertaking independent research, and echoes Vygotsky's ideas (1934/1986) the scaffolding role of the teacher, prior to the formal research phase of the IA.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to explore how students approach their IA and whether self-regulated learning can inform professional practice. Reports from Ofsted and policy documentation within SFCs indicate that teachers have responded to the call to empower students to manage their own learning and move away from traditional forms of didactic teaching. In moving towards a greater emphasis on the student as the focal point of the learning process teachers must be more aware of those factors that stimulate or inhibit learning. This investigation explored how the core themes of self-regulated learning- target setting, self-reflection, motivation, and self-efficacy - impact on A Level History students who were undertaking their IA.

The findings from this investigation are important to those who teach History at A level, and for those who are interested in how to promote independent learning through self-regulated behaviours. The findings from this study suggest that students do adopt differing strategies depending on their view of themselves, the importance of the assignment and the benefits of wider reading. The data infers that although a majority enjoy the opportunity to learn in depth, relatively few set their own learning goals or were prepared to take the initiative. This was particularly evident in respect to the four statements that were least favoured by students on the questionnaire. This finding has important connotations for teachers, as it suggests that students still look for support even when tasked to act independently. Teachers are advised to front-load the research process with a supportive period of research training prior to 'letting students go'.

A second main line of enquiry related to how ability levels impacted on students' outlook and behaviours. It was clear that the more able students approached the IA differently from the less able. In particular, not only did the more able students tend to reflect more on their learning and general progress, but also they were also more confident in undertaking independent learning. These findings suggest that teachers should approach the lead-up to the research with a differentiated strategy in place for different ability levels. The importance of self-regulated theory is tied to its provision of a conceptual framework within which to analyse students' learning. Paris and Paris (2001) offer two metaphors of self-regulated learning: the first is the acquisition of new skills and the second is the development of the student as a more independent learner. The first of these two metaphors is often dependent on the ability of the teacher to transmit the necessary skills and is inherently limited in its usefulness. The second is a goal that teachers should, and generally do, aim for. The practicalities of how this goal is to be achieved lies in further reflective research by teachers that informs their situated professional practice.

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