



Access to Art History Study at the Pre-University Level

Executive Summary

The Association for Art History (AAH), in response to a brief from the Courtauld Institute of Art, assessed the prevalence of pre-university art history education in the UK. Using existing data, additional research, and a national survey of schools, the AAH compiled an up-to-date picture of A level history of art (HoA) provision.

Key Findings:

- 80 institutions currently offer A level history of art: 61 fee-paying and 19 state or non-fee-charging.
- Provision shows significant geographic disparity: the subject is offered only in England, with courses concentrated in London and the Southeast; the North and Southwest are severely underrepresented.
- Over the past decade, the number of schools offering the A level has fallen by 34%, from 122 institutions in 2014 to 80 today.
- Despite fewer providers, student numbers for the A level have risen, with a 42% increase in A-level candidates between 2019 and 2025, reaching the highest levels since 2016.
- The cessation of the AS level in 2018, however, means that fewer students overall are taking the subject at secondary school and FE colleges.
- University enrolment in art history courses has remained stable, showing greater resilience than in some other arts and humanities subjects.
- Financial pressures threaten the continuation of some school-level HoA programmes, potentially reversing the recent upward trend in student participation.

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Introduction

This report includes information on the access to art history at the pre-university level in the UK. As there is no formal curriculum in art history in primary or secondary schools, information will be limited mainly to the offer at the A level and AS level (no longer offered), where the subject is termed the history of art (HoA). It will make reference to the availability of the subject based on the location of programmes and whether they are at fee-paying or free schools and will cite numbers of teachers and students across the sector. In addition, the report considers how the provision of the HoA has developed in recent years, including whether schools also offer related qualifications such as the HPQ, EPQ, IB, and extracurricular HoA clubs.¹

While the report will show how the uptake of the A level in the HoA has increased markedly in the last six years, this should be seen in the context of the history of the subject at the pre-university level where, not unlike some other humanities subjects, greater numbers of students were taking the course in decades past. The A level for HoA was first introduced in 1962, the same year in which the subject was made a compulsory subsidiary subject in schools and colleges of art and design. In the 1980s, enrolment for HoA was c. 4,000 when four examining boards, each with different courses, offered the subject.² With the implementation of Curriculum 2000 in the UK, the number of exam boards and corresponding course offerings was reduced to one, and student numbers dropped to c. 2,000.³ The AS level in the HoA (offered at year 12, with an exam at the end) was introduced in 2002 and ran until 2018. Its discontinuation has led to a further lessening of students taking the subject at secondary school and further education colleges.

Methodology

To supplement and update the information already held at the Association for Art History (AAH), we conducted research to locate all of the institutions where the subject is offered. We created a list of schools, colleges, and charities that offer the HoA A level and developed a survey with questions designed to produce the data we required. To ensure that survey responses were as complete and accurate as they could be, we contacted a number of the schools directly, corresponding with and speaking to members of staff where needed.

We also cross-checked the list of providers with long-time teachers/leaders in the field with extensive knowledge of the historical provision of the A level in the UK including the founder of the (now wound down) charity Art History in Schools and with the Articulation team at the National Gallery which works with many of the schools presently offering the subject and has knowledge of the landscape of the offer across England.

Findings

Providers

Our research showed that there are 80 schools, colleges and charities offering the A level in HoA, 72 of which took part in the survey for a response rate of 90%. (Appendix 1) Sixty-one

¹ Another qualification, the Cambridge Pre-U certification, was offered in the history of art from 2011 to 2023 and was discontinued when the certification ended for all subjects. Uptake was seen mainly in exclusive boys' schools and was markedly lower than that of the A level, sometimes at around 10%. As such, it is not addressed in this report.

² Caroline Osborne, *A Short History of 'Art History in Schools'* (2014), p.1.

³ Caroline Osborne, *Timeline of Art History in Schools*, (2016), p.1.

of the providers are fee paying and 19 are state or privately funded, offering a free course. Included in these numbers are two charities which provide the A level: Art History Link Up with a free, London-based and online offer, and the National Extension College (NEC), offering an online course for a fee.⁴

Among the schools confirmed to offer the HoA A level:

- Three schools currently have no enrolled students.
- Two schools will discontinue the subject within the next year.
- One additional school anticipates discontinuation by 2027.
- Five Heads of Department report that HoA feels ‘at risk’ in their schools, citing declining student numbers

Some schools offer cross-institutional arrangements, such as the Westminster School, which admits five external students (from schools including Harris Academy Westminster and Grey Coat Hospital School) via an application process. This demonstrates that selective partnership models can help to widen access to the subject.

Within the International Baccalaureate, HoA is offered at Standard Level in two schools but not at Higher Level, which may influence its visibility and the extent to which students select it within the IB framework.

We also tested whether HoA is taught as part of other subjects and found that modules exist in cognate humanities and arts courses such as History, Religious Studies, English, Fine Art, and Classical Civilisation. For interest, and to show engagement levels in the sector, we asked schools if they have a HoA club or society. Forty-one schools (60% of those answering the question) reported that they did and 12 did not; though a number expressed interest in forming one. Our survey also showed that the EPQ is offered in about a third of the schools which responded to that question—25 out of 72. The HPQ is much less common, with only four of the 71 respondents indicating that they make it available at their schools.

The number of providers of the A level has decreased considerably, by a total of 43%, in the last fifteen years. In 2010 there were 143 schools and colleges offering the course, this dropped to 122 by 2014 and since then to the present number of 80. In addition, there were another 30+ schools offering the AS level, affording students a different opportunity to take the subject who did not want to commit to the full A level and a second year of study.

The information gleaned from our research has confirmed the continued disparity in the offer of the HoA A level both in terms of where the course is available and the type of providers offering the course. There are rather marked ‘cold spots’ where the course cannot be taken, particularly in the North of England and in the Southwest. Further, the A level is not offered outside of England, having been discontinued in Northern Ireland in 2019 (with the last sitting of the exam being in 2020) and with no courses in Wales or as part of the Scottish Highers. Three-quarters of the schools offering HoA are from the independent sector; those schools and state-sector schools have similar concentrations in London and in wealthier counties in the Southeast.

⁴ Schools where the course is not offered can pay for the student fees. If the student sits for the exam, the school recoups, from the government, considerably more than amount of the fee.

Location and type of HoA A level course providers in England



Our survey asked schools how long they had been offering the HoA A level (Appendix 2). Of the 51 respondents, 24 schools reported that they have delivered the course for more than 20 years and 25 began offering the course in the last 20 years. (Two did not know how long they had provided the course.) We are not able to glean how many schools have dropped the A level course over this period of time; thereby cannot provide a net increase or decrease in the number of providers.

Teachers

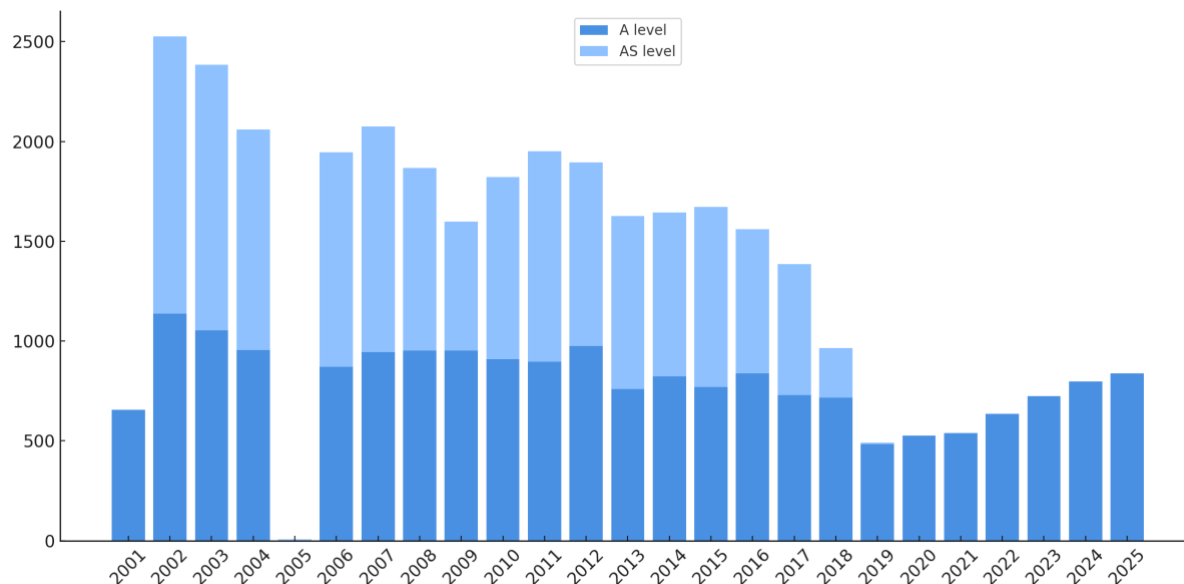
Staffing information from responding schools indicates a mix of full-time and part-time HoA teachers, though a significant number of schools did not supply this data. As such, the data is incomplete despite the AAH's efforts in contacting schools directly to request it. Forty-eight of the 80 providers (60%) employ 37 full-time HoA teachers and 41 part-time teachers and 22 are self-employed, hired on a contract basis.

Students

We have over twenty years of data of students sitting for the A-level exam.⁵ (Appendix 3) In broad terms, this shows that during most years of the first decade of this century there were more students taking the HoA exam than there have been in recent years. We are encouraged, however, that after the disruptive announcement by the examiner AQA to cancel the A level and a move to a new examiner, Pearson, in 2019, students sitting for the exam have gone up year on year, with an aggregate increase of 42% over the seven-year period to 2025. However, the discontinuation of the AS level in the HoA has led to the decline of the total number of students engaging with the subject in years 12 and 13.

⁵ Data from examiner AQA does not exist for 2005.

Students sitting for the A and AS level exams



The end of the AS level and the recent increase in A-level exam seatings do not appear to have had an effect on the number of undergraduate entrants taking the subject at university. Appendix 4 shows that despite changes in A level engagement, undergraduate entrants remain roughly the same over the same number of years.

As we have seen above, lower-income students, especially those living in northern and rural areas, face barriers to studying the history of art. While it is encouraging that a new, free A-level course has been created in the North (Didsbury High School, Manchester), it is concerning that several schools presently offering the course have indicated that their courses are under threat or expected to close. Most notably is the state-maintained Harris Westminster Sixth Form in London with one of the larger cohorts of students and a strong record of their A-level students taking the course at university. If these schools discontinue the offer, we would not expect the steady increase in student numbers over the last seven years to continue.

One way forward to address the geographic disparity of the HoA offer and the potential closure of programmes is the online provision. It remains to be seen whether the two providers will be able to attract students who would have otherwise taken the course had it been offered at their schools.

Conclusion

The history of art provision at the pre-university level has largely withstood financial and political pressure over the last fifteen years, going against the trend we have seen in some cognate arts and humanities subjects. In terms of students sitting for the A-level exam, it has performed better than perhaps most would have expected in the current environment with a sizeable increase over the last seven years. The discontinuation of the AS level, however, means that fewer students are taking the subject at years 12 and 13. Apart from student uptake overall, problems persist over of a lack of access to the subject by students from most

parts of the UK and for those whose families cannot afford to send their children to fee-paying schools.

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Appendix 1

Providers offering the A level in the history of art

State Sector

School	Area
BHASVIC	Brighton
Camden School for Girls	London
Cirencester College	Gloucestershire
Didsbury High School	Manchester
Godalming College	Surrey
Harris Westminster Sixth Form	London
Hills Road Sixth Form College	Cambridge
King Edward VI College Stourbridge	West Midlands
Lady Margaret School	London
Latymer Upper School	London
London Academy of Excellence Stratford	London
Lowestoft Sixth Form College	Suffolk
New College Swindon	Swindon
Peter Symonds College	Hampshire
St Dominic's Sixth Form College	Harrow
Varndean College	Brighton
West London Free School	London

Independent Sector

School	Area
Ashbourne College	London
Badminton School	Bristol
Benenden School	Kent
Bradfield College	Berkshire
Bryanston School	Dorset
Channing School	Haringey
Cheltenham College	Cheltenham
Cheltenham Ladies' College	Gloucestershire
Christ's Hospital School	West Sussex
Dauntsey's School	Wiltshire
Downe House	Berkshire
D'Overbroeck's	Oxford
Dulwich College	London
Eton College	Berkshire
Francis Holland School – Sloane Square	London

Framlingham College	Suffolk
Godolphin and Latymer	London
Gresham's School	Norfolk
Hampstead Fine Arts College	London
Harrodian	London
Harrow School	Harrow
Headington Rye	Oxford
Highgate School	London
James Allen's Girls' School	London
The King's School	Canterbury
Lady Eleanor Holles School	London
Mander Portman Woodward (Cambridge)	Cambridge
Mander Portman Woodward (London)	London
Marlborough College	Wiltshire
Mayfield School	Sussex
Moreton Hall School	Shropshire
Norwich School	Norwich
Notting Hill and Ealing High School	London
Notre Dame School	Cobham
Oundle School	Peterborough
Putney High School	London
Queen's College London	London
Queen's Gate School	London
Radley College	Oxfordshire
Rochester Independent College	Kent
Sherborne School	Sherborne
Sherborne School for Girls	Dorset
Shrewsbury School	Shropshire
South Hampstead High School	London
St Edward's School	Oxford
St George's School	Ascot
St James Senior Girls' School	London
St Mary's Ascot	Ascot
St Mary's Calne	Calne
St Paul's Girls' School	London
St Peter's School	York
Surbiton High School	Kingston upon Thames
Sydenham High School	London
Tudor Hall School	Banbury
University College School Hampstead	London
Wellington College	Crowthorne

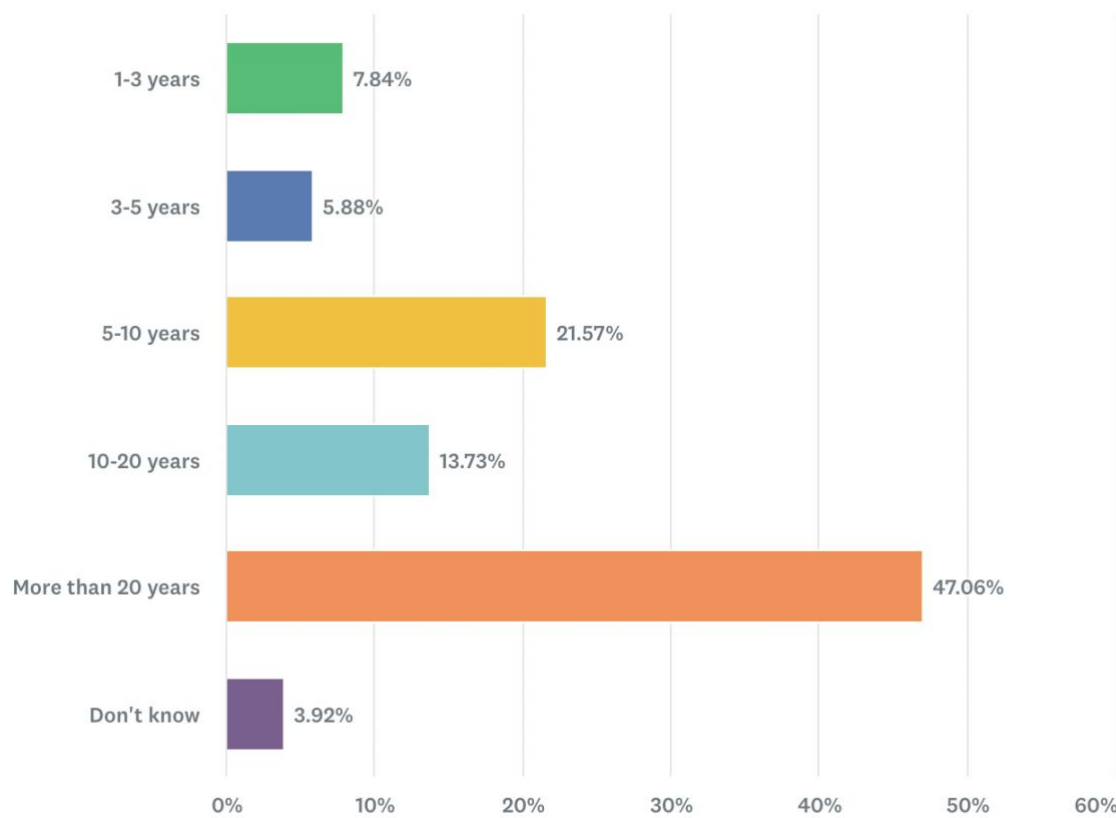
Wells Cathedral School	Wells
Westminster School	London
Westminster Tutors	London
Wimbledon High School GDST	London
Wycombe Abbey School	Wycombe

Charities

Name	Area
Art History Link-Up	Online and London
National Extension College	Online

Appendix 2

Duration of A level courses in the history of art



Appendix 3

Students sitting for A and AS level exams in the history of art

Year	A level	AS level
2025	838	-
2024	798	-
2023	723	-
2022	635	-
2021	538	-
2020	525	-
2019	483	7
2018	717	248
2017	728	657
2016	839	721
2015	769	902
2014	824	821
2013	760	866
2012	976	919
2011	897	1,055
2010	908	913
2009	952	646
2008	953	914
2007	944	1,131
2006	870	1,076
2005	N/A	N/A
2004	955	1,104
2003	1,053	1,331
2002	1,137	1,390
2001	655	-

Appendix 4

Year	Students sitting A level exam	History of art Undergraduate entrants
2019	483*	1,248
2020	525	1,285
2021	538	1,320
2022	635	1,215
2023	723	1,275

*AS level discontinued and change to new A level examiner

Glossary

A Level - Advanced Level qualifications are two-year subject-based courses in the UK, assessed mainly by exams, that prepare students (typically in years 12 and 13, aged 16-19) for university entry or skilled employment.

AAH – The Association for Art History is the subject association for Art History in the UK.

Art History in Schools – Art History in Schools (AHiS) was a charity (2015-2024), established to increase the number of young people in the UK with access to art history education.

Articulation - Articulation is a national education programme provided by the National Gallery, London, that develops young people's confidence and public speaking through art; its flagship Prize is for students aged 16–19, with wider workshops and strands engaging participants from 14 years of age.

AS Level – Advanced Subsidiary Level is a UK qualification typically taken in Year 12 (aged 16-17), representing the first half of an A Level course and assessed separately, either as a standalone qualification or as part of the full A Level.

Cambridge Pre-U certification – a post-16 qualification offered as an alternative to A Levels, assessed by final exams; discontinued after the last examinations in 2023.

EPQ – Extended Project Qualification is a UK Level 3 qualification that allows post-16 students to undertake an independent research project, producing either a dissertation, investigation, artefact, or performance, alongside a written report and presentation.

HoA – History of Art

HPQ – Higher Project Qualification is a UK Level 2 qualification that allows students, typically aged 14–16, to develop independent research, project management, and presentation skills by completing a substantial project on a topic of their choice.

IB – The International Baccalaureate is a globally recognised educational programme offering a broad and rigorous curriculum for students aged 3 to 19, with its post-16 Diploma Programme providing an alternative to A Levels through the study of six subjects plus core components such as the Extended Essay, Theory of Knowledge, and Creativity, Activity, Service.