

The SP-H Programme at St Andrews: Promoting academic success for pathway students in the School of History

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines an initiative developed within the School of History at the University of St Andrews to address the persistent challenges faced by students entering through two supported pathways: the Gateway and the FE-HE routes. *Supported Pathways – History (SP-H)* is an integrated practice project launched in 2022-2023 to enhance the academic experience of these students and, thus, improve retention rates. Complementing and expanding on a support scheme run by the Admissions Office, SP-H offers subject-specific training alongside holistic mentoring. Through informal conversations with participating students and our own pedagogical reflection, we identified five key areas of concern: anxiety, imposter syndrome, social exclusion, limited academic skills, and reluctance to seek help. These findings shaped SP-H around four action points: practical “how to” training, academic skills development, mentoring, and fostering belonging (these action points designed to solve or at least reduce the abovementioned concerns). SP-H teaches weekly sessions and provides opportunities for socialisation for first-year students, supplemented by staff mentoring throughout their degree. This sustained engagement has proved particularly valuable during the transition to honours (third year). Preliminary evidence suggests that SP-H contributes towards student retention and, crucially, is effective in promoting early intervention, thereby contributing to academic success.

Keywords: supported pathways, transition to university, academic success, academic skills, mentoring, SP-H

The emergence of SP-H

The origins of the Supported Pathways – History (SP-H) project can be traced to the final months of the 2020-2021 academic year, when a small group of staff in the School of History at the University of St Andrews reflected on the pandemic’s impact on our students. The discussion was informal and based on our experiences as tutors and module coordinators rather than statistical analysis. A clear pattern emerged: students experiencing the greatest difficulties were those within Widening Access, particularly the Gateway to Arts and the Further Education – Higher Education (FE-HE) pathways. Widening access aims to increase participation in higher education among underrepresented groups through a set of schemes known as Supported Pathways, which provide tailored courses, specialised advising, and practical support to ease students’ transition to university. The Gateway pathway is tailored to Scottish students who are traditionally underrepresented at university, have experienced disadvantage in their previous schooling (such as attending low-progression schools), and have not met the standard entry requirements. The FE-HE pathway supports students entering university through alternative routes, including professional colleges. Students within Supported Pathways often share characteristics such as being first-generation university entrants, coming from low-income backgrounds, belonging to ethnic or racial minority groups, being mature students, having caring responsibilities, or having a declared disability.

It could be argued that what we observed then was simply a consequence of COVID-19, which had placed immense pressure on students of all ages and levels, heightening their anxiety and stress (Deng et al., 2021; Sipeki et al., 2022). However, I contend that the pandemic merely exacerbated the challenges commonly faced by students in Supported Pathways and, if anything, contributed to an increase in drop-out rates among them. These issues were neither time- nor context-specific, but rather indicative of a structural condition.

Assessment of the problems faced by students in Supported Pathways

The following academic year, 2021-2022, was dedicated to two main tasks. First, we examined the support mechanisms available to Gateway and FE-HE students at St Andrews, which are provided by the Admissions Office during the students' first year. Upon entry, these students declare their degree intention and are placed into tailored support groups by the Admissions team. Concurrently, advanced Gateway and FE-HE students (from third year onward) are selected as mentors to lead these groups. During term, student mentors provide guidance on academic skills, time management, referencing, critical thinking, and digital engagement. The Admissions Office also organises sessions with other university units on topics such as employability and wellbeing.

Second, we assessed the challenges faced by pathway students entering the School of History. This involved reviewing relevant scholarship, conducting informal conversations with these students, and drawing on our own teaching experience. From this, five key areas of concern emerged:

a) **Anxiety:** This was not only related to meeting academic standards (Wong & Chiu, 2020), but also to not knowing how things work or what is expected (Cotton et al., 2016). Simple, routine tasks, such as signing up for a tutorial or submitting coursework online, often cause stress. The library was highlighted as a major site of apprehension: not knowing how to check out a book, fear of appearing out of place, and feeling lost while navigating the stacks. All these experiences, students felt, could mark them as outsiders, as individuals who do not belong at university (Breeze et al., 2020). For similar reasons, pathway students also expressed anxiety about discussion-based classes (i.e. tutorials).

b) **Imposter syndrome:** Research has shown that it is prevalent among university students regardless of background, although it appears slightly more pronounced among STEM students (Beesley et al., 2024; Dao et al., 2024; May & Casazza, 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Further work is needed to understand how supported pathways students experience imposter syndrome and whether it is indeed less acute in the humanities and arts than in the sciences. Nonetheless, our students reported feeling it, particularly when comparing themselves to their peers. Related issues, such as lack of confidence (Robertson & Cunningham, 2024) and not believing in their own abilities (Mayne et al., 2015), often result in caution when engaging with instructors and reluctance to participate in class.

c) **Fear of not fitting in:** Nearly all History pathway students commute to St Andrews, limiting their ability to take part in extracurricular or social activities. Many also have caring responsibilities and/or are significantly older than the typical undergraduate. These factors restrict their opportunities to 'fit in' and build a peer network. Moreover, the many duties/commitments of pathway students put additional stress on them (Christie et al., 2013; Mayne et al., 2015).

d) **Limited academic skills:** Whether due to inadequate prior training or the passage of time since their last formal education, pathway students report difficulties in engaging with critical analysis and developing their own arguments (Morgan, 2015; Wong & Chiu, 2020). They also express uncertainty about notetaking,

research, and essay structure. Lecturers consistently identified academic writing as a particular challenge, even when students themselves were unaware of its extent.

e) **Reluctance to ask for help:** A desire for independence and to appear capable often lead to what has been termed as ‘avoidance of staff support’ (Wong & Chiu, 2019). Our students reported they did not want to ‘bother’ their instructors or ‘be a burden’ for them.

The SP-H programme: Goals and activities

Equipped with all this information and having formed a team with staff members, the project *Supported Pathways – History* (SP-H) was launched in 2022-2023. It was conceived as an ‘integrated practice’ initiative (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Carey, 2022) in the sense that, although all SP-H members are academics in the School of History, our aim is to offer much more than academic advice. We also seek to collaborate actively with our colleagues in the Admissions Office and other units – integrated practitioners themselves – to support our pathway students more effectively and efficiently.

This collaboration with the Admissions team is intended to complement their existing provision for pathway students in History, mainly – but not exclusively – by expanding subject-specific content. Admission colleagues begin working with pathway students two weeks before classes start in September, providing on-campus training that introduces them to university life and familiarises them with available institutional support. As noted above, the Admissions Office also offers ‘learning mentoring’ throughout the students’ first year, which is delivered by student mentors under the team’s general supervision.

SP-H builds upon this foundation by offering additional resources and comprehensive History-specific support tailored to the diverse needs and backgrounds of our mentees. In essence, SP-H is designed to pave the way for the academic success of our Gateway and FE-HE students, a success understood not only in terms of grades and career prospects, but also in relation to enhanced critical thinking, personal development, engagement with the university community, and a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Cachia et al., 2018; Lowe, 2023; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education [NFETLHE], 2021a; York et al., 2015).

SP-H becomes active in late August, once the Admissions Office confirms the Gateway and FE-HE entrants who intend to pursue a History degree. The cohort is consistently small: typically, five to eight students per year. This allows for sustained, personalised and meaningful mentoring. Crucially, whereas Admissions’ support ends after first year, SP-H continues throughout the entirety of the students’ degree programme. After four consecutive academic years, SP-H supports twenty-two students in total. These modest numbers ensure long-term viability for the programme.

SP-H’s action points towards academic success

SP-H delivers its support through four key action areas:

1. **How-to guidance:** To reduce anxiety and imposter syndrome, SP-H provides information and training on practical and experiential matters.
2. **Academic skills:** SP-H equips students with a wide range of academic skills to help them ‘level up’, so to say, with their peers.
3. **Mentoring:** SP-H adopts a holistic approach combining academic and wellbeing mentoring, delivered by both student mentors and History staff mentors. Because lecturers are often perceived as distant (Breeze et

al., 2020; Robertson & Cunningham, 2023), staff mentors demystify academic authority, model help-seeking behaviours, and encourage proactive learning. This early, positive engagement with academic staff fosters students' confidence and self-esteem, thereby enabling 'early successes' in managing their studies (Wong & Chiu, 2019). Therefore, SP-H underscores "the importance of developing relationships between lecturers [...] and [...] students" (Morgan, 2015, p. 122).

4. **Community:** Tinto's seminal work on student retention highlights belonging (i.e. being part of a community, or several) as fundamental for first-year students (Tinto, 1993). Subsequent research stresses the need for communities built on open, fluid communication, collaboration and personal connection among their members (Braxton & Mundy, 2001-2002; Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002; NFETLHE, 2021bc). Accordingly, SP-H creates frequent opportunities for socialisation, both among students themselves and between students and their mentors.

SP-H activities throughout the academic year

During the Admissions-led pre-session training, the SP-H coordinator meets pathway students intending to study History. Students are given a tour of the School of History, lecture theatres, the library and other key locations to reduce anticipatory stress before the semester starts. They are also introduced to key staff they may encounter, including the Head of School, Director of Teaching, Wellbeing Officer and administrative colleagues. In addition, SP-H students attend a practical session focused on the online platforms used for teaching and coursework. They also participate in a mock tutorial designed to simulate the dynamics of a discussion-based class.

From the second week of classes onward, pathway students attend weekly sessions with their student mentors. Although these sessions are scheduled by the Admissions Office, SP-H redesigns and tailors the content specifically for History students. Over time, SP-H has developed distinctive, example-rich sessions with practical activities that target core academic skills and foster critical thinking. Another key role of SP-H is to mentor the student mentors themselves, recognising that they face their own academic pressures. As they are not trained instructors, SP-H provides structured plans, materials, ideas for activities and general guidance to help them deliver effective sessions.

Additionally, each SP-H student is assigned an academic mentor, that is, a member of staff who supports them throughout their degree. While the support provided by the Admissions Office concludes after the first year, SP-H's academic mentoring continues until graduation. Mentors check in with their mentees regularly, although it is typically the students who initiate contact. Some students reach out frequently, such as every fortnight, while others do so more sporadically. Communication varies from email correspondence to in-person meetings or even informal coffee chats. The guiding principle of academic mentoring is flexibility, ensuring that mentees receive the support they want and need. Staff mentors address a broad range of queries, from academic concerns to questions about university life, available resources, internship opportunities, etc.

Finally, SP-H facilitates opportunities for student socialisation throughout the year. These events, such as coffee gatherings and lunches, are more frequent for first years. Student mentors and the SP-H coordinator attend these occasions, and staff mentors sometimes join as well.

Conclusion

Improving retention among pathway students is undoubtedly one of the SP-H's core goals. Given the modest cohort size (twenty-two in total) and the relative novelty of the project, it is premature to draw definitive conclusions. Still, our data indicates that SP-H has been effective in facilitating early intervention. This success is largely due to the engagement with mentors. Students unanimously express appreciation for 'having someone you can talk to', describing their mentors as 'a real asset' and 'invaluable'.

From an organisational standpoint, SP-H has yielded several valuable insights. From the programme's inception, it became clear that sustained support across the entire degree is essential, as the transition to honours (third and fourth year) can be as challenging as the initial move to university. The mentoring of academic staff has proven particularly valuable in navigating this phase. Ongoing dialogue with mentees has also been crucial, as their feedback directly shapes content. Their input has informed the refinement of our 'how to' training, led to the shortening of some sessions, such as time management, and prompted the expansion of others, like critical reading of secondary sources.

Biography

Ana del Campo is a lecturer in medieval history at the University of St Andrews. Trained in pedagogy in her country of origin, Spain, she is the Academic Skills Officer in the School of History, as well as one of the founders and current coordinator of the SP-H. Email: adcg@st-andrews.ac.uk.

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