

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**

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# Talking about teaching

## Lessons from being a history teacher in higher education

Alan Booth, *After Standards*, Adelaide, July 2012

# The History Passion Project

Aims to:

- Foster understanding about present practice
- Encourage conversation about key issues concerning historians as teachers
- Share ideas for the future of history teaching and learning in higher education
- Provide resources for the development of academic historians as educators



# Research questions

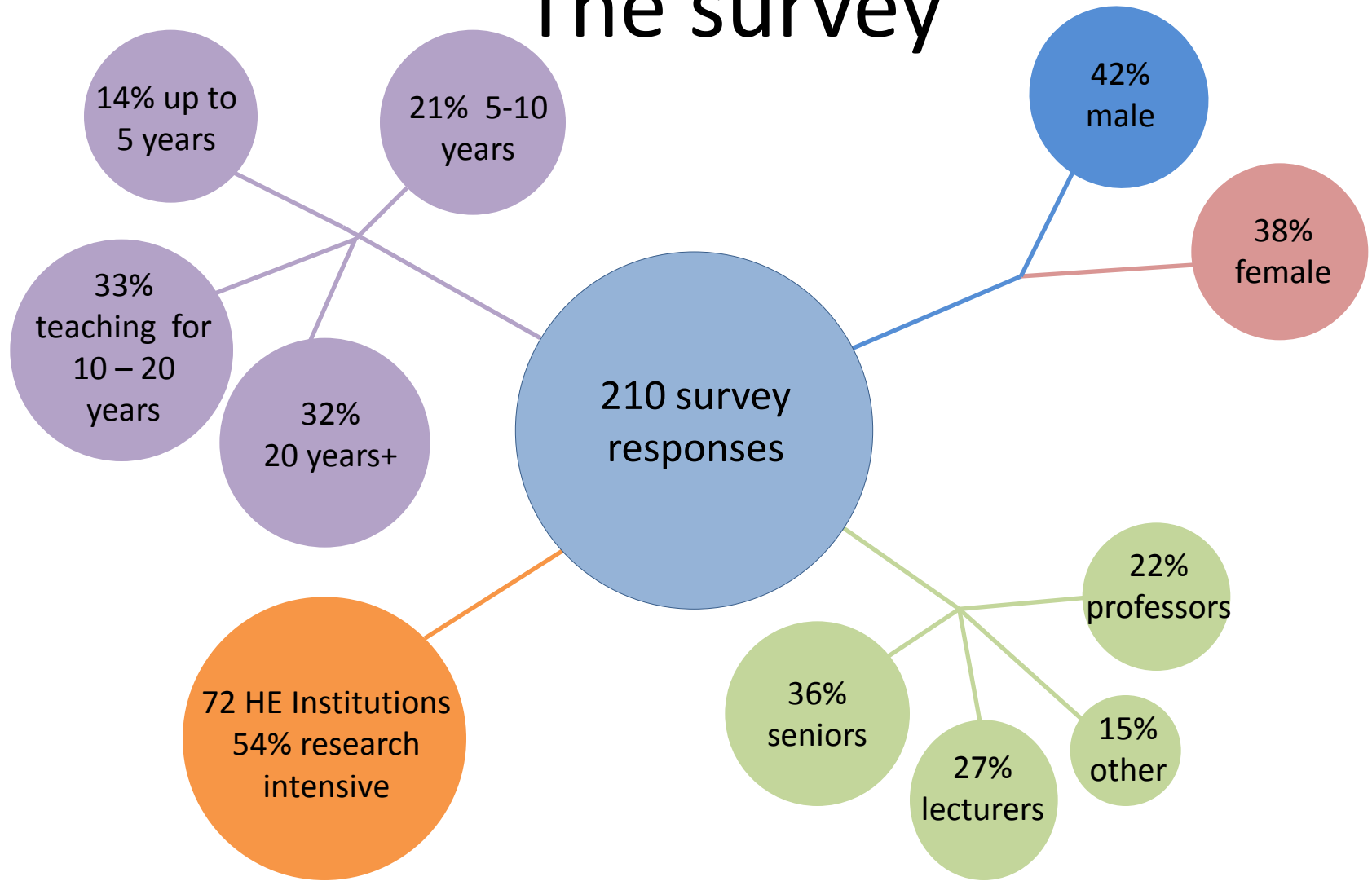
- What motivates historians as teachers? Where does love of the subject fit & how does it influence pedagogic hopes & ideals?
- What difference does history teaching make? And how can this be expressed in ways that resonate with wider publics?
- What sort of teaching engages students deeply?
- How do historians view their development as teachers & what advice do they have for others – especially those just starting out?

# The data

- Review of literature
- Filmed individual interviews and group discussions
- National online survey of UK historians based in history departments



# The survey



# Love, engagement and making a difference

- ‘I teach history because I love history ... In teaching it you have the sense that you are opening minds to things they never considered previously.’
- ‘I want to inspire an enduring love of history that lasts well-beyond the degree.’
- ‘I really get a kick out of seeing students develop, particularly to the point when they don’t need me anymore ... I like the fact that I can make a difference to so many lives.’

# Memories of inspirational teachers (1)

‘I keep coming back to the same word but it would be “enthusiasm”. I studied under some of the leading historians ... They were prolific researchers and writers and were all outstanding in their particular field. But the one thing they had above all else was enthusiasm for their subject. It was quite literally infectious.’

- ‘The professor who supervised my undergraduate dissertation ... encouraged us to critically engage with others’ viewpoints and his own, which made me feel that I was being encouraged to “be” a historian, rather than simply learn from historians. He made us feel that however tyro our attempts may be, they were interesting and valuable.’



# Memories of inspirational teachers (2)

‘Prof W. was one of the most generous teachers I ever came across ... he always seemed to value the life experiences that his undergraduates brought to the table – particularly mature students. The real greats are always the most generous to their students and fellow historians in my experience.’

‘The teacher who had the biggest influence on me taught me at school. He communicated his own love of, and interest in, history very effectively – his enthusiasm was infectious.’

# Unpredictable work

‘What I did not realise when I started as a history teacher was the imperfectability of teaching. I imagined that it was a skill that I would master after a number of years, or that this amounted to a professional competence that I could straightforwardly develop. Instead, teaching remains a work-in-progress, and some questions about teaching and learning become trickier, not more straightforward, as I spend more time in the classroom.’

# What I'd like to pass on ...

'Remember just because I find something fascinating, it doesn't mean that the students are going to share that level of interest in a topic. Don't be too judgemental and don't have excessive expectations, but encourage each individual to find what works best for them and to perform at their best. Be mindful that the key person in the room is the student, and allow yourself to be vulnerable and a learner and use your difficulties to understand theirs.'

'Trust yourself and the students to discover things together. Don't be afraid to let them talk; but bear in mind that they won't talk unless you give them something interesting to talk about –e.g. a piece of archival material – and they feel comfortable with each other.'