

HSC exam crams 100 years into three hours

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In just 12 months, HSC modern history student Olivia Lee has covered almost 100 years of dictators, wars and the best and worst of humanity, from Rosa Parks to Hitler.

Yesterday morning, a century of content was condensed even further. Three hours was all she had to demonstrate she could remember all the dates, facts and statistics she'd learnt, alongside 11,131 other students sitting the final modern history exam.

"Modern history is one of those subjects where there's so much content that you're only really tested on a very small proportion of it," Olivia, 18, said.

Topics she studied covered Nazi Germany, the Russian Revolution, the Vietnam War and the American civil rights movements – all periods which initially appeared entirely separate.

"But you realise that everything's a bit messy and intertwined," she said. "So as you're learning about Hitler's rise to power, you realise, based on all your other topics, so much is happening in the world at the same time. In Indochina, stuff turns up about civil rights in the USA as well."

Meriden School modern history teacher Jessica Chilton, who is also the school's head of teaching and learning, said the subject helped students collate discreet facts to make a broader argument and see patterns and connections in history.

"I would hate for girls to leave my class thinking that history is just about facts and dates, and timelines. I would have not taught modern history well, if that was the case," she said. "I want them to leave being able to see the connections between things that have happened in the past, to be able to construct an argument."

While numbers in other



Meriden School students discuss their HSC modern history exam yesterday. Photo: Sitthixay Ditthavong

humanities subjects, such as ancient history, have dropped, modern history enrolments at the HSC level have remained strong at above 10,000 students each year.

Outside schools, while university history departments may be struggling, podcasts and historical fiction are booming.

"It's quite interesting how much historical fiction and shows like that are so popular. I think as humans, we're hard-wired to be drawn to stories of the human experience," Chilton said.

Sydney Nguyen, 17, enjoyed learning about the frenzied days of the Russian Revolution to Stalin's purges and was completely fascinated by the subject's Indochina 1954-1979 topic, which includes the Vietnam War. "It was

known as the lounge room war because everyone got a view into the civilian casualties," she said.

In yesterday's exam, an essay question on the Vietnam War asked students to "assess the impact of the Second Indochina War on civilians in both North and South Vietnam".

Sydney said those sorts of questions were why she loved the subject. "Research and critical thinking is something that's very unique to modern history," she said. "You really have to consider all these different perspectives and all of these different experiences that kind of contradict and conflict, but also overlap in the same way, to form history."

For Alyssa Stanson, 18, the exam was not the easiest she has taken

because each question was extremely specific, with little room for broad responses. "Indochina was a bit difficult in terms of the actual exam. It wasn't the best exam I've taken," Alyssa said. "But it also made it, can I say, a little bit fun?"

Alana Ikladios, 17, was nervous about the topic of the Vietnam War but those nerves faded when she saw the question. "I realised I actually had a lot to say about that topic," she said.

Sophie Tan, 17, said, in the power and authority topic covering the Weimar Republic to the rise of Nazism, an eight-mark question about cultural expression and degenerate art put her through her paces because cultural expression, such as jazz, was such a minute part of the syllabus.