What are HE Institutions Looking for from A Level English Literature?

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Grumbles, there are always grumbles:

‘The students are coming with to us with too little sense of the amount of reading a degree in English will require.’

‘They aren’t used to reading books continuously and, if not at a sitting, at least within a few days.’

‘They are far too prone to look for simple explanations of why texts are such as they are. The vaunted “contextualisation” is all about looking anywhere else but the text itself to understand why it says what it does.’

‘They look for simple causative explanations in a writer’s biography; or in a mechanical application of history.’

‘Students come to us with scant knowledge of sentence structure; they don’t know what an adverb is, or even a verb!’

‘When they read a poem they either have no idea what prosody is, or believe everything written in English is in iambic pentameter (or, for the more discriminating, tetrameter).’

‘They only know modern stuff, and simply can’t read (choose any one to complete sentence): Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Herbert, Hazlitt.’

Those of us in Higher Education will have heard all of these and many more. It’s traditional to complain, and it’s always the case, we tend to believe, that those arriving now are always less well prepared than we were when we applied all those years ago.
Yet prospective changes to A level have sharpened our collective minds. I remember when Curriculum 2000 was ushered in that many of us in HE had serious doubts about, for instance, the division of A level in two and its modularisation. Some of my colleagues in HE still have reservations about modular A levels in English, and the value of AS as a component of the qualification; but these are now very much a minority, with most of the sector wishing, increasingly without much hope of success, to continue the present structure. My university, Cambridge, has been unusually vocal in putting the case against the return to linear A levels, and I want to rehearse some of that argument here, even though it isn’t specifically about English and English Literature.

Of course, we have to put our hand up and say that the removal of AS will give us immediate and local difficulties. As you know, we ask for UMS marks for each AS module to allow us a more refined and full snapshot of each student’s recent academic performance. We have a considerable body of evidence that says UMS at AS is the best predictor of future success in examinations in Cambridge.

But that is by no means the only reason we want to keep them. Our evidence also points to Curriculum 2000 advancing widening participation, with students from challenging backgrounds and less than stellar GCSEs discovering just how good they can be through their AS results, and feeling empowered to be more ambitious in deciding to go to university, and in their deciding which universities to choose. AS, as part of A level, has, I feel, made the step change from GCSE to A level more manageable for students, something at least as important as the transition from A level to university.

Even more crucially, AS has enabled all students to make informed choices about their A levels, after having had a go at a greater range of subjects. Being able to drop one less-enjoyed subject after a year, while still getting a substantial qualification for the work done, and then taking up a new AS in year 13 to build on what year 12 has revealed as unexpected strengths, has helped make A level a richer educational experience for many.

The argument has been, of course, that linear A levels will make possible a more coherent, less bitty, view of each subject; that the extra teaching time generated by the abolition of January resits (with which I have no real argument) and no public examination in A levels
after the first year (with which I have considerable argument!) will enable more depth and breadth.

We can only hope so, as it seems pretty clear that the Government is wedded to this particular change, particularly as it flies in the face of the advice given by nearly every stakeholder.

Rob Penman has written a thoughtful piece in the last newsletter outlining some of the conditions that might make a more positive outcome possible, but the greater flexibility he envisages is surely problematic in the light of increasingly *dirigiste* proposals from the DfE. A good instance is the recent struggle over GCSE English proposals and the very cogent responses to them from this Association and from the Council for College and University English that seem to have been ignored.

There’s something about such high handed actions that make Jeremiahs of us all, but there is a clear danger that, if unchecked, these changes to GCSE English may radically undermine the idea that literature is for everyone, making it instead the preserve of not only the more able but also those with most cultural capital. This in turn may limit the take up of A level English Literature affecting not only English university departments, but also those other subjects for which English Literature has been touted as a facilitating subject (other arts/humanities subjects but particularly the already challenged Modern Languages and Classics).

We have been told how much the Secretary of State values literature and yet the mismatch between the thinking on GCSE (optional) and A level (facilitating) is patent. One possible, if unintended, consequence of these reforms may be the restriction of literature to one privileged corner of our young.

So here we are, looking to the linear future with some foreboding, and I need to return to my grumbling colleagues and what they think is wrong with current English A level, however examined. The trouble is, most of these grumbles don’t really stand up to scrutiny. Certainly in Cambridge all the evidence suggests that students of English are better prepared than ever when they arrive and that they go on to achieve better results in our examinations than ever before; and they
will have been chosen for getting exceptional results in AS or A level as well as satisfying English academics in interview.

The synoptic element in A2 helped satisfy some of the more persistent complaints about the piecemeal approach, but so did, rather more clearly, the advent of some limited stretch and challenge material in A2. The most commonly heard grumble, one repeated when I told colleagues I was to give this address (when otherwise most shut up as they knew they would have to substantiate their grouses) was about the mechanical use of the assessment outcomes.

It would be hard to fault the thinking behind the current set, though some would, perhaps, suggest the odd tweak, and clearly we would all like our students to be able to produce work which shows this knowledge and these skills; but the devil is in the detail and many of my colleagues in HE would have put first:

- something about answering the specific question;
- something that recognises that not all of these AOs need be, even should be, present in all answers;
- something that marks a clear difference between other’s critical interpretation, and critical comment absorbed, accounted for, and even challenged.

It is sometimes quite dispiriting, when reading samples of written work from prospective students, to see marking that only ticks off, as it were, the relevant AOs without commenting on their appositeness to the argument being offered.

We might argue that, for instance, ‘being informed by the interpretations of others’ should also mean the student’s own changing interpretations of a text, not just dutifully trotted out critical comments from authorities; that, for another instance, it might not always be the case that examining historical context adds much to particular answers on particular texts, and that more insistent claims about the causative relationship of historical events and literary texts will be at best reductive.

Most of my colleagues would strongly argue for holistic assessment, which we know is the preferred approach in some boards (by all means informed by these AOs)—though we also know that this makes any process of assessment more complex and more a question of
professional judgement. We can, and should, not shy away from such judgement.

What is likely to exercise the HE sector about the rumoured changes to A level English apart from the retreat to linearity? And we do remain in a world of rumours, with little specific having yet emerged, and with the published account of Professor Mark Smith’s report (and how sad I was to realise he wasn’t the front man of the Fall) telling us achingly little but that there remained disagreement about unseen texts in the examination, and about the amount of coursework—and I don’t think anyone here would be surprised at that!

From an HE perspective—or to be more honest, from a Cambridge perspective since there is little agreement in the sector; to be more honest, in my opinion, since there is little agreement between colleagues in Cambridge insofar as they have an opinion at all—any change here is unlikely to make a significant difference to the way in which we see A level as a preparation for degree study in English.

I would like to see some critical assessment of an unseen text (not necessarily comparative) though I fully recognise the potential difficulties here. We often use such a test as part of our own processes at interview and find it a useful but by no means fool-proof way of discriminating between dutiful learners and those who can also apply their learning in different circumstances.

The story is often told that HE doesn’t like to see too much coursework, but from my questioning of colleagues that seems to have no basis at all when thinking about English—and we hear from teachers all the time that sometimes the most imaginative, individual and rigorous work is done when the student has that kind of stake in it. So we,—I—see no great problem, apart from acknowledged ones about levels of help, in there still being significant coursework in the new A level specifications—whatever these turn out to be.

I was recently at a meeting with colleagues from universities, from schools and from an examination board. What came across most strikingly was that we had a shared vision, based on the frank acknowledgement by all, including those in Higher Education, that even if the aim of A level was to prepare for degree level study (and most of us there would strongly dispute that that is its only aim) then, those who knew best how to do this were those doing the teaching,
and that they should be kept in the centre of the debate about form and content in A level, just as much, if not more, than universities. Those from the Board also knew that the way in which teaching was delivered, and with what enthusiasm, was crucial to any reform’s success. This group working together was prepared to think more freely about desirable changes. I am wary of the separate role of universities. The new committee set up by the Russell Group to oversee content is potentially only window dressing in my view, which I stress is a personal one (a view born of a sense that any claim that our opinion is really valued went out of the window when, despite all stakeholders disagreeing, A levels are returning to linearity). We need some recognition from government and its agencies that secondary teachers are also academics, engaged in developing their subject and the minds that want to study it, just as much as those in Higher Education.