

Admissions and Transitions Newsletter



Introducing the first Newsletter of the English Association's University Admissions and Transition Special Interest Group

At this summer's meeting, it was suggested that a regular newsletter would be a good way of publicising the University Admissions and Transition Group, set up in 2008 to foster cross-sector communication. This first edition is perhaps less of a *newsletter* than a means of alerting EA members working in post-16 and higher education to its intended purpose.

It is envisaged that the Newsletter will:

- encourage the exchange of ideas between AL teachers and those involved in university admissions and/or first-year undergraduate teaching
- inform readers of events or consultations that might be relevant to them or their students
- present some individual perspectives on sixth-form and undergraduate teaching and learning

I am extremely grateful to one of the EA's Fellows, Alison Shell, for her suggestion of a newsletter and for following through with a willingness to be involved with its production. Her personal reflections on teaching new undergraduates is the first in what we hope will be a series of 'point of view' pieces focusing on the teaching of AL and degree-level English today.

Given the scope of the education reforms currently underway, cross-sector discussion could not be more vital. It is hoped that this Newsletter will provide a channel for a lively exchange of views!

English Association Conference – Saturday, October 12, 2013

In October of next year the University Admissions and Transition Group will be hosting an English Association conference focusing on AL reform and the (by then) new specifications. It will provide an ideal opportunity for cross-sector discussion and for sharing information about the new qualifications in time for their first teaching in September 2014. More details will follow in the next issue.

Alison Shell on teaching today's first-year students

I have been teaching first-year students since 1994, in the English departments at Durham University and University College London. Both departments are lucky in the quality and quantity of applicants they attract, but this abundance of talent poses its own problems. Distinguishing between gradations of compliment on UCAS forms – where negative comments are in any case, increasingly rare – is a delicate business, and I find my specialism in Renaissance literature very helpful when it comes to reading between the lines of panegyric.

Yet surprisingly often, referees' top adjectives are deserved. Year after year, I look at the UCAS forms of the first-year students about to turn up, and think to myself that these rhapsodies must be unrealistic. Then I encounter them, and a surprising number really are that good. Awesomely mature and articulate, they would easily cope with demanding workplaces: no wonder, since many are veterans of internships already. The student who scrawls memoranda on his (or more rarely her) hand is not quite a vanished species, but most have a precocious ability to plan ahead.

In this way and others, today's first-year students are brighter than my generation were. Yet they are also more anxious; the effect of mass youth and graduate unemployment has not quite extinguished independent initiative, but it has led to a mindset where score-sheets are all-important. There are advantages to this, as well as the obvious drawbacks; it makes students willing, humble and positive about learning from mistakes, and from the tutor's point of view, this can only be a good thing.

Harder to put over is the desirability of independent thought and research. The university curriculum often suggests rather than prescribes, and students find this bewildering after the straitened requirements of A-levels. I increasingly find that my colleagues and I need to give them explicit permission to be free-range in their reading. Side by side with that, a degree of imposition remains helpful if they are to cope with the range of reference demanded of them. UCL is typical in having foundation courses in its first year, and in one of them, students are obliged to follow an American-style menu of great books read at breakneck speed. They complain at the time, but see the point later.

Needless to say, there's a big difference between students who come from elite schools – both state and independent – and the rest with regard to prior reading outside the A-level curriculum. But even this is less significant as a social demarcator than correctitude and presentational skills. When I see a correctly spelt and punctuated essay written with total grammatical control, the odds are that it was written by someone from a privileged educational background. I hope this will change, or tomorrow's journalists and publishers will come from an unnecessarily narrow section of the population.

Judging from the occasions when I've been able to track students' progress in this field, I would say that the first year of undergraduate life is too late to get one's eye in, for all but the most determined students. So I'm extremely grateful to teachers who bother with presentation and proofreading; in this as in so many other ways, your efforts are not only empowering for your charges, but noticed and appreciated by your opposite numbers in universities.

And finally...

It would be good to get some dialogue going about AL reform and in particular:

- how far higher education institutions have the resources/time/inclination to involve themselves in the design of ALs and how far they back Michael Gove in his desire that 'university ownership of the exams must be real and committed' (letter from Michael Gove to Glenys Stacey, 30 March 2012)
- the practicability of Awarding Organizations attracting a considerable number of endorsements from universities for each of its specifications
- which elements of the current AL specifications teachers and lecturers would like to see retained
- whether the present AS/A2 design should be continued or amended
- the desirability of continuing the A* grade
- the balance between subject content and subject skills such as close reading/the ability to read and analyse whole texts/independent research
- ensuring that ALs are not only internationally recognized, but also internationally transferable
- the importance of subject criteria

To read about Ofqual's progress so far in the AL reform process, go to:
<http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/ofqual-announces-changes-to-a-levels/>

Or if you would like to read about the EA's response to what is now commonly known as the 'GCSE fiasco', go to <http://www.le.ac.uk/engassoc/schools/CEFletter.html>

We hope that HE Fellows with an interest in AL reform will engage in some e-dialogue over the coming months, and that members of the Admissions and Transition Group will keep in touch during what promises to be a lively academic year.

**If you have any views which you would like to be represented in the next Newsletter, or if you would like to contribute a 'point of view' piece for a future issue, please email:
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