
Admissions and Transitions Newsletter



U-turns, rewinds and the odd glimmer of innovation ...

Keeping up with current educational reform is not for the faint-hearted. In January of this year, we heard that the date for the first teaching of the new A levels would be delayed by one year; in February we had Michael Gove's backtracking on the EBCs (English Baccalaureate Certificates), and in March we received confirmation of a return to a linear A-level model. The first two of these announcements have been greeted with sighs of relief from the vast majority of those involved in secondary and higher education: not so the prospect of a rewind to pre-Curriculum 2000.

Back in January, a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, representing the views of forty Cambridge University admissions tutors, argued that attainment at AS is a more reliable indicator of undergraduate success than GCSEs or admissions tests, and warned that getting rid of the qualification would result in university entry becoming less fair. This view from HE was strongly echoed in a letter to *The Times*, written on behalf of associations of school and college leaders. Urging the Secretary of State to keep GCE as it is, the letter warned against returning to 'the worst aspects of A levels before 2000, when the curriculum for 16 to 18-year-olds was narrower, and a significant number came away with little to show for their work in terms of qualifications at the end of Year 13'. In this issue of the Newsletter, Rob Penman, a former Head of English and current Chair of the English Association's Secondary Education Committee, gives an individual perspective on the turning back of the qualification clock.

One other controversy which has emerged from the current reforms has been the notion of 'facilitating subjects'. Originating with the Russell Group, this classification of A level qualifications has met with fierce opposition from school heads, who have already witnessed a dip in the take up of subjects unlucky enough to be deemed 'non-facilitating'. In an open letter to Wendy Piatt, Hilda Clarke, head teacher of Tiffin School in Kingston-upon-Thames, warned that if students erred on the side of caution in their A level choices, take up for subjects such as philosophy, politics, music and economics could fall off dramatically. There has, though, been some rethinking in this area, with Michael Gove asking Ofqual to include not just facilitating subjects but all those with a high candidature in the first tranche of reforms, as well as all three English qualifications (English Language, English Literature, and English Language and Literature).

February of this year saw a fledgling qualification added to the current trio of English subjects: AQA's GCE Creative Writing (first teaching from September 2013). With the rapid growth of creative writing courses at university level, it will be interesting to see how this will be received by HE admissions – not to mention whether it will manage to make it into the 'facilitating' bracket.

It's terminal: Rob Penman on returning to a linear A Level

The news that A-level courses are to revert to end-of-course-only assessment was regarded by many teachers of English with even medium-term memories as a step backwards to the problems of A-level courses before the introduction of Curriculum 2000 and modular courses.

One of the problems with linear courses was that too many students took it easy during Year 12 and left too much to do in Year 13. Modular courses have undoubtedly made it easier for students to manage their A-levels and for schools to motivate students during Year 12. What they have also provided has been a greater degree of predictability and security, with the opportunity for retakes and the gradually emerging grade as scores are accumulated leading to students having clearer ideas of what grades are within their reach, what they need to do in order to achieve those grades and what courses of higher education are realistic ambitions. It is perhaps this sense of students having control over their attainment that has been one of the biggest benefits of modularisation. There may have been some surprises along the way with rogue results, but teachers have been fairly confident in saying to students that they will get the right result at the end of the course and what that result is likely to be.

Yet modularised courses have not been without their difficulties, either. Even with a reduction from six to four modules, some English teachers have felt that they have been teaching fragmented courses; that they have been teaching for the next assessment rather than a continuous and coherent course in English literature or language. With the next assessment just round the corner, teachers have often felt obliged to teach to the test almost from the outset, to focus narrowly on examination success, rather than to allow students to respond creatively and excitedly to what they study.

There is also the question of teaching and learning time. Modular courses require a lot of time out. Periods of study leave during the two January assessment sessions, and for a large section of the summer term in Year 12, will revert to teaching time. School holidays apart, it will be two uninterrupted years of study.

The return to linear courses may, then, bring some advantages. Free from the demands of the next assessment, students may feel they are studying a meaningful course of English literature or language rather than a series of soon-to-be-tested topics. They may be more able to see English as something worth studying in its own right; of reading and writing being stimulating and creative activities; and of their understanding of what they study growing throughout the two-year course. And when they are ready, when they have completed the course, they sit the examination.

But if we are to return to a linear arrangement of A-level courses, as now seems certain, then let us hope for a couple more changes that would improve the experience for our students. The first concerns the part played by assessment objectives, particularly in English literature courses, where candidates' ability to respond intelligently and imaginatively to literature – at whatever level of performance – is compromised by what often seems an artificial need to meet the requirements of the assessment objectives, where personal engagement is replaced by a desperate attempt to shoehorn in reference to the competing requirements of the four objectives.

The other area of concern lies in the accuracy of examination marking and the general lack of trust that teachers have in the ability of awarding bodies to ensure that standards of marking are reliable and consistent. One of the consequences of the GCSE English fiasco of 2012 was that teachers' confidence in the reliability of the marking of public examinations was shaken further. The process of appeals and remarks are, sadly, part of the familiar routine for English departments following the

publication of results. With candidates having only one go at their A-levels they and their teachers need to have absolute confidence in the accuracy with which examination papers have been marked. The need for appeals should be rare.

Some new initiatives

The First World War in the Classroom: A Teacher-Academic Exchange

This February, approaching fifty delegates attended a two-day symposium on teaching the First World War, led by Dr Catriona Pennell (University of Exeter) and Dr Ann-Marie Einhaus (Northumbria University). The event brought together teachers from the secondary and university sectors to consider how the First World War is taught in both the English and the History curriculums. It also provided an opportunity to reflect on the implications of the forthcoming centenary for students and teachers alike. With the emphasis placed firmly on dialogue between secondary and higher education, the symposium served to shake up ideas about teaching the First World War, providing some invaluable resources and ideas for refreshing classroom practice.

The symposium served as the launch event of an AHRC-funded research project exploring links between education and perceptions of the First World War. Through researching how the topic is taught in secondary schools, the project leaders hope to create a lively, ongoing dialogue between teachers, academics and professional organizations. To find out more about the project and how you can get involved go to <http://ww1intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/>

Student journals and English studies

There is growing interest in the use of reflective journals to encourage student engagement with their own learning at both sixth-form and higher education level. In a recent article published in *English in Education* (Spring 2013) Robert Eaglestone and Elizabeth English give a persuasive account of how embedding the use of journals in undergraduate courses can enable students to develop their own identities as readers and critics. Taking a literary theory course as its focus, the article details how writing a reflective journal helped students find their feet in an academic area which some find intimidating, as well as offering teachers insights into how successfully a course is working out in practice and what kind of pastoral support students might need to support them through their studies.

It would be good to hear from any teachers who have used reflective journals as part of their sixth-form or undergraduate programmes of study.

RADA in Schools

Theatres nowadays are developing a range of exciting and curriculum-focused courses and workshops for secondary schools and colleges. Perhaps rather less familiar than the Globe's education work is that of RADA (the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts), which offers individually tailored sessions for students, and CPD for teachers and lecturers.

Information about RADA's education provision can be accessed at:

<http://www.rada.ac.uk/education-and-outreach/rada-in-schools/ris/workshops-for-students>

All change at A Level: Looking Forward to the New English Curriculum? English Association Conference – Saturday 5 October, 2013

In October this year the University Admissions and Transition Group will be hosting an English Association conference at Senate House in London, focusing on A level reform. 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 2015.

Given that the present government looks determined to press ahead with changes to A level, this is a crucial time for all of us involved in English teaching to exchange our views on how our subject should be defined, studied and assessed.

We anticipate that this event will be very well attended and advise early booking:

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/news-and-events/alevelconf>

Details of key speakers and how to register for the day are outlined in the flyer attached.

English Association Conference on British Poetry of the First World War

Early bird booking is now open for the Association's major international conference on British poetry of the First World War which will be held at Wadham College, Oxford, 5-7 September 2014:

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/english-association/ww1poetry/ww1poetry>

Designed to appeal to all who have an interest in the poetry of the Great War, a distinctive feature will be that all the various societies, fellowships and associations devoted to individual poets of the First World War will be invited to participate by contributing lectures, panel discussions and recitals as well as exhibiting items from their archives and displaying their publications.

The conference patron is Professor Jon Stallworthy and plenary speakers will include Professor Edna Longley, of Queen's University, Belfast and Professor Jay Winter of Yale University.

And finally ...

- **If you are involved in university admissions and would welcome an advisory visit to your department on current A level courses and assessment and the implications for undergraduate teaching, please contact me at the email address below.**
- **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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