



# Bridging the gap: teaching and studying Ancient History and Classical Civilisation from school to university

by Penelope J. Goodman

## Introduction

The difficulties which students can encounter when making the transition from school or college to university are widely recognised. In some ways, of course, starting university should bring new challenges. Higher education is so called because it takes learners beyond what they have done at school, exposing them to new material and new ideas, and helping them to grow and develop in new ways. But it is in the interests of the students themselves, their school teachers, their university tutors and society at large to help them progress as smoothly as possible from the one environment to the other. Bridging the gap successfully enables students to make the most of their university education, rather than floundering needlessly.

For these reasons, a considerable amount of pedagogical research has been devoted to examining the challenges which students face when moving from school to university, and exploring what various different bodies are or should be doing to help them. Amongst this literature, Lister (2009) has set out strategies for improving fluency amongst first-year Latin students, but the experiences of Ancient History and Classical Civilisation students are represented only through work in comparable disciplines such as History, English and Geography. In this article, I will therefore first synthesise some of what that research has found, complementing it

where appropriate from my own experience teaching Roman History at university level. I will then bring the research into dialogue with the practical experiences of Ancient History and Classical Civilisation teachers, as voiced during a workshop discussion at a Classical Association Teaching Board INSET day on Roman History. My goal is to help students, teachers and academics in the fields of Ancient History and Classical Civilisation to achieve a better understanding of this key transition, the practical factors which affect it, and what can be done to ease the experience for students.

## The challenges of transition

The challenges of starting university are felt most keenly by students, but observed also by their lecturers in classes and written work. In the discipline of History, the views of both groups were investigated and compared by Booth (2003; 2005). On the lecturers' side, he summarised the most commonly-held views as follows:

Many new undergraduate students:

- tend to be more confident collecting information than constructing their own arguments
- lack depth of reading in the subject, tending to rely on A Level textbooks or teachers' notes

- possess a largely superficial, if any, grasp of historiography or the reflexive sense of the discipline
- are not too confident in some key skills for university study such as critical reading, researching in the library and essay writing outside exams
- lack a firm grasp of grammar, spelling etc.
- lack numeracy and foreign language skills
- display an increasingly instrumental approach to studying – a narrow focus on exams and grades. (Booth, 2005, p. 14)

As Booth points out, many of the issues which concern university lecturers are rooted in the real-world pressures which school teachers are under: for example, lack of time, student anxiety around achieving high grades in order to secure university places, and the need to perform well in school league tables. These tend to push teachers towards highly strategic, exam-focused classroom strategies (cf. also Wilson *et al.*, 2016, p. 6). It is also important to note that many of the skills which lecturers feel their students lack upon arriving at university may not have been appropriate for introduction at A Level (Ballinger, 2003, pp. 103-4). For example, students need to have acquired a basic grasp of the historical culture they

are studying and the primary source material available for doing so before they can begin to engage with historiographical issues or develop a reflexive sense of the discipline. For university departments then, it is important to avoid simply criticising schools for the gaps in their students' academic skill-sets. It is more constructive to recognise the real differences between school and university learning environments, and provide the information and support needed by students to navigate from one to the other.

Meanwhile if the lecturers' concerns compiled by Booth revolved around the deficiencies of their students, the students of course have a different perspective. When asked to comment on the challenges of starting university education, students are more likely to identify deficiencies in the teaching they receive compared to what they had experienced at school. Here, Booth's research can be usefully supplemented by the work of Skinner (2014), also in *History*, and both Ballinger (2003) and Wilson *et al.* (2016) in *English Literature*.

Across both disciplines, new students tend to express concern over the lower numbers of classroom-contact hours offered at university, which in turn also means that they experience less direct guidance from their teachers through the material they are studying (Ballinger, 2003, pp. 101 and 105; Skinner, 2014, p. 370). Indeed, they also find that the role of the teachers in their classes has changed. Whereas at school they had been used to viewing their teachers as experts who 'provide information' for them to use in essays and exams, they find at university that much of that 'information' is now opened up to debate. As students, they are expected to contribute to that debate, while their teachers often position themselves as fellow discussants rather than authorities (Booth, 2005, pp. 16-17). Similarly, the volume and difficulty of the secondary reading they are expected to tackle between classes changes. Students who have been used to reading teachers' notes or textbooks designed specifically for A Level students find themselves expected to read scholarly publications which assume prior knowledge, put much more emphasis on theory, and present debates rather than facts (Skinner, 2014, p. 367).

Students also report significant differences in the experience of

undertaking assessed work between school and university. At school, most are able to submit draft essays for feedback and improvement before their final submission, but at university they find themselves expected to work more independently (Skinner, 2014, p. 367). As a result, they sometimes feel unsure about how to approach a question and what to include in their response. The assessment criteria used to mark their work are also 'fuzzier', or in some cases simply do not exist at all (Booth, 2005, p. 17; Skinner, 2014, pp. 362-3; Wilson *et al.*, 2016, pp. 5-6). For example, university grading criteria may simply ask for evidence of 'wide and appropriate reading', but recent school-leavers want to know exactly how many items they have to cite in their bibliography. University departments may also ask students to undertake new forms of assessed work which they have not previously encountered, such as creative projects, group work or extended pieces of writing (Wilson *et al.*, 2016, pp. 8-13). These differences arise from the desire of university academics to foster independence and allow for original approaches, both of which can be stifled by over-prescriptive grading criteria and fostered by non-traditional forms of assessment. But for students who have not had this difference pointed out and explained to them, the absence of a clear template for what is expected can leave them feeling unsure of what their lecturers want, and anxious as a result.

Although expressed in different terms, many of the challenges which students identify stem from the same skills gaps perceived by their lecturers. For example, both agree that new students struggle with the volume and difficulty of reading expected at university, while the students' expectation that lecturers will 'provide information' is the flip-side of the lecturers' concern that students tend to prioritise collecting information over constructing their own arguments. The problems arise when students are unaware of the gap between their own understanding of what they are being asked to do and the expectations of their lecturers. Booth found that when students arrive at university, they typically say that they feel confident in areas like essay-writing, and are more concerned instead about gaps in their IT skills, numeracy, and oral presentation skills (Booth, 2005, p. 16). Yet in interviews about their

essay-writing technique, they 'routinely report that in reading they are looking especially for 'facts' to use in their essays, with far fewer saying that they look for interpretations or the position of the author' (Booth, 2005, p. 17). This matches poorly with the practices actually rewarded by university-level assessment criteria, such as reading critically and expressing independent views. The result can be that students hand in work which they think is good, but receive a poor mark for it, leading to demotivation and disillusionment.

## Best practice in universities

Since universities ask students to work in new and different ways when they begin their degrees, the primary responsibility for helping students adjust to the new requirements is clearly theirs (Wilson *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). Here too, though, real-world pressures need to be acknowledged. Academics' teaching duties compete with parallel responsibilities in research and administration, making it difficult to find the time for reconfiguring established teaching practices around changing student needs. Competition for recruitment also puts departments under pressure to achieve good scores in the National Student Survey (Ipsos MORI and HEFCE, 2017). The intention of the National Student Survey (NSS) is to reflect the quality of teaching in higher education, and this should include whether or not departments are successfully helping students to transfer from school to university. For example, students are only likely to agree with the NSS statement that 'Marking and assessment has been fair' if they have been helped to understand university-level assessment criteria and the rationale behind them. In practice, though, the NSS is conducted with final-year students only, reducing the incentive for universities to focus on the specific challenges faced by first years. Meanwhile, some of the pedagogical ideals implicit in discussions of higher education can be compromised by the way the NSS focuses on customer satisfaction. For example, the History lecturers consulted by Booth (2005) expressed concern about students' grasp of historiography and sense of the discipline, but modules emphasising these

topics tend to be less popular than straightforward ‘content’ modules. In practice, therefore, perceived gaps in students’ skill-sets may be accommodated rather than addressed, for fear of creating resentment and receiving poor NSS scores.

Nonetheless, universities are increasingly aware of the need to provide dedicated skills support to students arriving from schools. In particular, it is clearly essential to communicate to new students that university is different from school, and to articulate the expectations of their new environment. At my own institution, the University of Leeds, this process starts before formal induction, with the aim of ensuring that students are expecting a new environment and are aware of the need to adjust to it before they arrive. Once Leeds students confirm their places in August, they are sent a link to the University’s Flying Start website, which spells out from the start that ‘university is quite different from school or college’, and offers help with the transition from one to the other (University of Leeds, 2017). The website presents students with information, exercises and videos covering topics such as what classes are like at university, what independent study and thinking means, how to navigate reading lists and take notes, and how to get further support once the students arrive at Leeds.

The drawback of an interactive web resource, however, is that its value only emerges as students engage with it; and those students who most need its help may not do so. Most universities therefore also offer study skills modules when students arrive (Wilson *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). Typically, these cover the same sorts of topics as the Leeds Flying Start website, and are taught separately from content-based learning in the core degree subject. However, they are not always as effective as they might be. A review by Tate and Swords of study skills modules in Geography departments found that they are often designed by academics who did their own A Levels many years ago, and do not always know how much school teaching has changed since. As a result, they may not meet the needs of today’s students very effectively (Tate & Swords, 2013, p. 237). Skinner, working with History students, also noted that they found study skills modules only partially relevant to their needs. The students she

interviewed felt they had learned technical competencies such as how to reference correctly, but not the skills needed to tackle essay questions: for example, critical engagement, structuring, building arguments, or articulating independent positions (Skinner, 2014, p. 367). The obvious remedy here, recommended by both Tate and Swords and Skinner, is for university staff to develop a stronger understanding of what is actually being taught in schools and how, ideally through direct dialogue and consultation with school teachers (Tate & Swords, 2013, p. 238; Skinner, 2014, pp. 373–4).

Students may also be reluctant to engage with skills modules at all, finding them patronising and an unwelcome distraction from what they ‘really’ came to study. With this in mind, Booth recommends embedding skills training into content-based modules, rather than delivering it separately (Booth, 2005, p. 19). Indeed, this is what we are currently moving towards in Classics at Leeds. The School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, to which we belong, enrolls all students on a compulsory 5-credit skills module, but this only deals with plagiarism and navigating the university’s various online systems: e.g. the library catalogue, personal tutoring system and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). ‘Training in the academic skills of primary source analysis, critical engagement with secondary literature and writing essays is instead embedded into our four core first-year content modules on Greek and Roman literature and history. Lectures and seminars on all of these modules already focus heavily on the direct analysis of primary texts, whether literary or historical. Students see tutors modelling approaches to primary material in lectures, and then practise the same skills in seminars. Most modules also include at least one seminar which asks students to read two or more contrasting scholarly interpretations of the same material, and then come to class ready to discuss the grounds of the debate and their own opinions.

For essay-writing skills, we also use a scheme called ‘Unlocking first-class work’ to help students understand what good university-level work can look like. This scheme was developed in response to our observation that students often struggle to make the connection between the abstract descriptions in our assessment

criteria and the realities of their own essay-writing practice. For example, we ask for ‘detailed and accurate use of primary sources’, but students who are not already meeting this criterion may simply not know what it means or how to do it. Under the ‘Unlocking first-class work’ scheme, therefore, real but anonymised essays which have achieved a first-class grade are shared with the class, with the permission of their authors, after all assessed work on that topic has been marked and returned. The idea is to make the assessment criteria concrete by showing students an essay which actually meets them, on a topic which they are already familiar with because they have tackled it for themselves. The success of this scheme is clear from the responses I receive when asking first-class students if they are willing for their work to be shared anonymously with the class. Not only do they regularly express a sense of pride in being asked to contribute to the scheme – a welcome outcome in itself – but they often also remark that it has helped them in the past:

‘I am very happy for you to put my assignment on the VLE. I always find it very useful looking at examples of work to see how I can improve in the future so I think it’s a great idea.’

‘Yes, I’ve no problem with that! The previous assignment for Roman World that was uploaded was definitely of help to me.’

As with the Flying Start website, though, the limitation of the ‘Unlocking first-class work’ scheme is that not all students will take the time to look at the example essays which it makes available. In order to ensure that we are providing direct guidance to all students, therefore, we are now developing a dedicated lecture on essay writing in the first semester, and another on critical engagement with secondary literature in the second. From September 2017, these will be compulsory for all first-year students, and will relate directly to the content of their core modules through follow-up seminars inviting them to put what they learnt in the lectures into practice. The lecture on essay writing will talk through our grade descriptors, provide concrete examples of what they mean, and set out the principles of good essay planning. A follow-up

seminar will require students to research an essay topic, organise the material which they found into a plan, and then discuss their plans with fellow students in pairs before a group discussion. Similarly, our lecture on critical engagement will emphasise the role of interpretation and debate in Classical scholarship, and set out strategies for identifying and evaluating the arguments put forward in academic publications. The follow-up seminar will then ask students to practise identifying and evaluating contrasting positions for themselves; much as our existing seminars already do, but now with more explicit advance guidance provided in the lecture.

## Best practice in schools

Although the primary responsibility for helping new students adjust to university-level study lies with the universities themselves, schools and colleges can also play an important role in preparing students for the transition. Indeed, activities which help students to prepare for university often also carry the double benefit of enriching their studies and enhancing their performance while still at school. Teachers have long recognised in particular the benefits of inviting academics into schools to give talks, or taking pupils onto campus for visits and activities. Both demystify the experience of university by showing secondary-level pupils what academics and university students do, as well as adding depth and breadth to their understanding of their studies back in the classroom. Classics academics have also long made a point of offering such opportunities to local schools and colleges, on the grounds that nurturing secondary-level interest is essential to university recruitment, and thus to the long-term survival of the subject. Indeed, this was always central to the purpose of JACT (the Joint Association of Classical Teachers) and now likewise of the CATB (Classical Association Teaching Board). But the new era of uncapped student numbers and competitive recruitment has made university managers across the board far more interested in developing contacts with schools, precisely because they also serve as recruitment opportunities. Speaking as an academic myself, my advice to teachers is to take full advantage

of this new climate: browse your local university website for staff specialising in topics on your syllabus who may be willing to deliver talks, or write to heads of department asking about school liaison (sometimes also called educational engagement) activities. The response is increasingly likely to be a positive one.

Pedagogical researchers have also highlighted activities which can be pursued within schools and colleges to prepare students for university-level study. Norton *et al.* (2009) worked with a focus group of 20 A Level History pupils to explore their understanding of the assessment criteria provided by their exam board. They asked the pupils in particular to reflect on what examiners meant when they referred to a ‘sustained and critical analysis’ of a topic: that is, very much the same skills in critical evaluation and constructing arguments which university lecturers feel that many new students do not possess. While most pupils recognised that the examiners were asking for specific knowledge of the period, effective communication of that knowledge and some form of analysis, only five stated explicitly that the examiners would reward a convincing line of argument (Norton *et al.*, 2009, p. 6). In this particular case, running the focus group brought the issue to light, and the researchers used follow-up sessions to discuss what ‘sustained and critical analysis’ actually meant, show the pupils model answers which did and did not demonstrate it, and ask them to practise applying it for themselves. The short-term result was that pupils came away with a better understanding of what they were being asked to do, and thus of how to perform well in their A Level exams. But in the longer term of course this kind of explicit discussion of assessment criteria in schools can make a significance difference to the transition to university, both by encouraging students to develop particular academic skills, but also more broadly by drawing their attention to the importance of understanding and meeting assessment criteria in general.

## CATB workshop discussion

Perhaps the most consistent recommendation in the pedagogical literature on the transition from school to

university is that teachers and academics should work together to share their knowledge and experience of student learning on either side of the gap. With this in mind, I presented the above synthesis to a workshop audience at a Classical Association Teaching Board INSET day entitled ‘Roman History at the Crossroads?’, held at Queen Mary’s College Basingstoke on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2016. I then asked them to share their responses to the research, as well as their own views on what is a) desirable and b) practical for both teachers and academics wishing to help students to bridge the gap between school and university. The discussion group consisted of around 15 teachers, three academics (including myself) and two current A Level pupils. The teachers represented a range of different kinds of institutions, including state schools, independent schools and sixth-form colleges, and taught a number of different Classical and related subjects, including Ancient History and Classical Civilisation, but also Latin, Greek and Archaeology. The topics discussed by the group are organised here by theme, rather than necessarily the order in which they arose.

The teachers present were quick to express frustration over the constraints presented by the requirements of the National Curriculum and exam boards. The National Curriculum in particular demands so much content coverage that there is little time available for them to develop the academic skills which universities require. But teachers also felt that the assessment criteria used in both contexts were too prescriptive, and rewarded knowledge more than argument or critical thinking. Indeed, this is a particular problem at GCSE. Here, exam boards now encourage students not to write introductions or conclusions for their essays, but instead simply to make points. One teacher reported that schools have responded to this by advising students to flag up the exact number of points they include by using terms such as ‘firstly... secondly... thirdly...’, in order to ensure that they get the credit for them. Another said that the Edexcel Modern History GCSE now does not require students to write an essay at all, but only two contrasting points. Evidently, this culture does not encourage students to develop their capacity for sustained, critical argument. It also creates

difficulties with the transition from GCSE to A Level, where those skills *are* rewarded by the assessment criteria. But even at A Level, one teacher reported having a year 12 essay 'torn apart' for putting too much emphasis on argument and not enough on facts. Teachers did note that they welcomed OCR's new Ancient History specifications, which offer more holistic and less prescribed learning, and also require A Level students to practise critical evaluation of scholarly arguments.

Responding to the work of Norton *et al.* (2009), teachers reported that they do routinely talk to their students about exam board assessment criteria, what they mean and how to meet them. Their experience broadly supported what had come out of the research: in particular, that students find the criteria on interpretation and evaluation hardest to understand and meet. But while all teachers work hard to help students develop these skills, one made some important additional points about the practicalities of working with mixed-ability groups. His priority was to get his students through the exam, and that meant accessing the criteria at the appropriate point for them. When working with students who are not able to understand what, for example, 'building an argument' means, it is his responsibility to focus their attention on the criteria which they *can* meet, and ensure that they are doing so consistently. Other teachers noted that they do try to make students aware that university study will require them to develop higher-level skills, partly with the same intention as Norton *et al.* of improving their performance at A Level first. However, they find it difficult to get students to believe what they are saying or to take it seriously. Indeed, one felt that it would be useful to show her students Booth's findings about the different expectations of students and lecturers, in order to support what she was saying to her class.

Considerable discussion then followed about how prescriptive exam assessment criteria interact with students' grade anxieties to produce the 'instrumental approach to studying' which Booth's History lecturers complained about (Booth, 2005, p. 14). Teachers explained that prescriptive assessment criteria encourage students to believe that there is one 'right' answer to any given question: that is, the one which exactly

matches the prescribed mark scheme. This in turn leads students to assume that there is a precise formula for achieving each grade, and to interpret their actual marks in terms of deductions for failures to match that formula. They expect there to be a clearly-defined explanation for every mark which has been 'taken off' from the highest possible score, and are concerned if they cannot be told exactly what they did 'wrong'. The academics present at the discussion found this particularly illuminating, since, as highlighted in the pedagogical research, they are used to working with much less prescriptive criteria (Booth, 2005, p. 17; Skinner, 2014, pp. 362-3; Wilson *et al.*, 2016, pp. 5-6). One noted that the environment which the teachers were describing explained some of the complaints which are raised about feedback on university-level assessments. University-level feedback does not usually explain marks in terms of errors and deductions, since lecturers have less concrete ideas about what an essay 'should' look like, and typically use marks instead to express an overall judgement of the quality of the essay. But understanding that this is what students expect puts academics in a better position to explain what is different about the marks and feedback which they receive at university and why.

Teachers also spoke about how secondary-level students perceive and understand their grades. Several noted that in schools, students tend to be unhappy when they are just given comments on their work but no grade, since they see the final grade as their main goal. Again, this matches up with the concerns Booth recorded amongst History lecturers, showing that the same issue carries forward to university. One teacher commented that universities are now experiencing the effects of Curriculum 2000: that is, the reform of A Levels into modularised AS and A2 qualifications. Part of this reform included allowing students to take multiple resits until they achieve the 'right' mark, which in turn means that they are less used to accepting and reconciling themselves to disappointing results than previous generations of students. Another consequence has been an emerging culture of thinking in terms of 'aspiration grades', rather than 'predicted grades'. In Ancient History and Classical Civilisation especially, these aspiration grades may be unrealistically high, since

the students often have no prior experience of studying the subject before GCSE or A Level. They can therefore set their sights on an A grade, even if this is far above their current level of performance. Other teachers spoke about how students focus their sense of identity on their results, identifying as (for example) 'an A/B student', and experiencing serious setbacks in their confidence if they do not get the grades they are expecting.

This led in turn to a crucial discussion on the cultures within which teachers work, and especially the strategic decisions made by heads about the subject areas on offer. Just as students focus on their final grades, teachers too are judged on their cohorts' exam performances, and are under pressure to deliver results. This affects all subject areas, but teachers at the CATB workshop noted that it poses particular risks for Ancient History. Several felt that at present, while the grades achieved by their students in Greek and Latin are reliable and predictable, those in Ancient History can fluctuate: that is, students expected to achieve strong grades can sometimes do badly, and vice versa. The students in the room confirmed that this was their perception too. From the point of view of head teachers, this poses a risk to league table performance, meaning that subjects of this kind are the ones heads look at first when considering what to cut in order to improve rankings. Teachers felt that Classical subjects would survive if heads felt confident in them, and especially if they were included in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). They also noted that the new Ancient History GCSE specifications show close continuity with the Modern History GCSE, and felt that this would increase confidence in the subject amongst heads. The issue of fluctuating grades also has important implications for university entrance, and means that it may be pragmatic for admissions staff to take a flexible approach to applicants who have not achieved the grade they expected in a Classical subject.

Finally, teachers discussed some of the activities which they use to help prepare students for university-level study. Some reported that they run reading groups with their students as a 'stretch and challenge' activity, looking at and discussing scholarly publications in the

field they are studying. Others run seminar-style groups focused on discussing opinions. Both are designed to encourage students to develop the critical reading and debate skills which they will need at university, and teachers reported that they and their students had generally enjoyed the activities. Here too, though, the culture of strategic, grade-focused learning which has been fostered by time limitations, the pressure to succeed and prescriptive assessment criteria also has an effect. One teacher noted that some of his students had found the process of engaging in open-ended debate upsetting, because they wanted to get the answer 'right' and became anxious if they could not be told what it was.

## Conclusion

Our discussion strongly underlined the value of dialogue between teachers and academics as a means of understanding and tackling the challenges of the transition from school or college to university. Certainly, from my own perspective as a university lecturer I felt that I had learnt a great deal from it which will help me to support new students more effectively in the future. A stronger understanding of the practical constraints which school teachers are under, the pressure to achieve high grades, and the expectations fostered by prescriptive assessment criteria all will put me in a better position to respond sympathetically and constructively to student misapprehensions about university study. In particular, I will be more readily able to explain to them what university-level study requires and why it is different from what they have done at school: for example, why they receive less direct guidance from their lecturers and why our assessment criteria appear fuzzy to them. I hope that in capturing these issues, this article will be

of some use to other academics dealing with the same concerns, as well as to teachers wanting to provide the best possible forward momentum for their pupils. But I would also urge both academics and teachers to continue exploring the challenges of the school-university divide through ongoing dialogue, not least because the precise priorities and circumstances on both sides will continue to evolve. For Classical subjects, we are of course lucky to have the Classical Association Teaching Board as a national forum for this sort of interaction, but, as its now-chair Peter Liddel pointed out at the workshop, the Classical Association's local branches should also be remembered. Using these to engage and bring together teachers and academics could help to support important work in bridging the school-university divide on a local level, as well as potentially breathing much-needed new life into the institutions themselves.

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