

## **A classic case of undersupply**

### **Latin and Greek are making a comeback - but can universities provide enough teachers?**

Chris Arnot reports

Tuesday February 5, 2008

The Guardian

Back in 1965, Oxford and Cambridge decreed that applicants no longer required O-level Latin to gain admission to their hallowed halls and cloisters. The following year saw the founding of the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP) with the aim of keeping alive not only the flickering flame of classical culture, but also a language that even some academics regarded as past its sell-by date and the preserve of a snobbish elite.

More than four decades on, something strange is happening. The demand for Latin teachers in schools is going up, while the supply is going down. "Universities aren't producing enough, so we're all scrabbling around for the same people," says Andrew Hutchinson, headteacher at Parkside Community College in Cambridge - a comprehensive serving the centre of the city. "Quite a lot of academics live around here, which means the parent body can be quite demanding." Unusually for a state school, both he and his deputy are classicists.

Hutchinson has an MA in the subject from King's College, London, one of just two universities that are still training classics teachers. The other is Cambridge. Every year, its faculty of education gives PGCEs to 15 graduates qualified to teach classics, including Latin. King's College trains another 12. A total of 27, then. Meanwhile, around 72 Latin teachers are retiring or leaving annually, according to the CSCP.

The CSCP also estimates that there has been a three-fold rise over the past seven years in Latin classes of one form or another. The subject is now taught in 1,042 schools, including 453 independents and 118 grammars. But the biggest increase has come in state comprehensives, with a total of 471. Before addressing how this has come about, perhaps King's should be asked why it is training only a dozen classics teachers annually.

"Good question," says Aisha Khan, subject director for PGCEs in Latin and classical civilisation. "Our head of department recently made a bid to increase the numbers to 16, but that was turned down. We've been told by the Training and Development Agency that the figure will stay at 12 until at least 2011."

Khan's counterpart at Cambridge, Bob Lister, points out that 20 years ago there were 15 higher education providers of classics teachers. "But then 20 years ago," he goes on, "universities were happy to have PGCE courses with four or five students. Financially, that won't work now."

Times change. The number of higher civil servants with Oxbridge classics degrees is in decline just as the number of employers demanding graduates with more practical skills is increasing. What can a profound knowledge of classical civilisations offer in this brave new world? "The same benefits as any humanities degree - the ability to develop and sustain argument with

reference to evidence," Lister says. "What's more, a knowledge of classical heritage is invaluable to anyone trying to understand culture in the 21st century."

## Roots of English

Or the new millennium, to put it another way. Millennium is a good Roman word, and one of many that lie at the roots of English and other European languages. Ironically, the revival of an ancient language in schools has come about through modern technology. DVDs and computer terminals bring the subject to life in a way that would seem unimaginable to older generations who were forced to conjugate verbs by rote. "In 2000, the government put out a tender for software to support the teaching of Latin," says Will Griffiths, director of the Cambridge project, based on the second floor of the university's faculty of music. "One aim was to improve standards in schools where the subject was being taught by trained teachers. The other was to allow the majority of schools to be able to offer the subject through English or modern language teachers."

For the most part, the subject is taught on an extra-curricular basis to children who tend to be academically bright. "You find them in state schools all over the country," Griffiths enthuses. "I remember a girl in Dagenham who did GCSE by following our distance-learning course. The girl was highly sought after by top clubs in the field of women's football, but she turned them down to concentrate on her studies and came out with an AS in Latin by video link."

In one of its offices, the CSCP harbours a bank of screens from which one teacher, Verity Walden, holds what might be termed a video conference in Latin with some 260 schools around the country. Meanwhile, the demand grows for specialist Latin teachers on site. "They're becoming like gold dust. I sometimes receive two inquiries a day from heads looking to hire one," says Griffiths, 37, a former classics teacher at a comprehensive. "The issue for higher education is how it can support this surge in interest from schools. The government will always prioritise subjects like English and maths, but there's no reason why it shouldn't support more training for teachers in classics."

And the children who are creating the demand for those teachers - how do they see a knowledge of Latin and classical civilisation helping in their future degree and career choices?

"I think there's still an idea that a knowledge of Latin is helpful for medicine and law," says Griffiths. "That may be a misconception. But there's little doubt that Latin helps with an understanding of the make-up of English and other modern European languages. As teachers it's our job to enthuse and make that understanding a lively process."

## Not an easy option

On the other side of the River Cam, dusk is drawing in and children are streaming away from Parkside Community College as Latin teacher Nicky Parr is going to work. From key stage 3 onwards, between 25 and 40 pupils in each year group stay behind after normal classes, and the numbers taking the subject at GCSE level are approaching double figures. "It's not an easy option," says Parr, "Latin is marked particularly rigorously and children have to put in long hours. It demands commitment as well as academic ability."

At least one of her pupils, Molly Makinson, 13, is also studying ancient Greek. ("My grandad used to teach it," she says.) Another, David Mestel, 15, acquired an A\* GCSE in Latin in year 9. Along with Luke Freeman-Mills, currently studying A-level Latin at sixth-form college, he's producing a booklet containing translations of Virgil, Horace, Ovid and others. So does he fancy studying the subject as part of a classics degree?

"No," he says. "I will probably do something scientific." For young Mestel, it would seem, translating Latin poetry is simply a bit of fun.