Why study English? We're poorer in every sense without it

Susanna Rustin

Fewer are taking the subject at A-level and university. Are they being put off by the way government says it must be taught?

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'The number of students in England taking either English language or literature has fallen by 25% since 2013.'

The lack of science, maths and language teachers has been talked about for years. But a shortage of English teachers has gone under the radar. Although last year's target for new trainees was met, in the two previous years it was missed. English used to be among the most popular subjects, both to teach and to learn. Lessons had a reputation for being creative, thought-provoking – and even fun. Philip Pullman, David Almond and Joanne Harris were all teachers before they became authors. But dramatic reductions in the number of A-level entries and applications to study English at university suggest that some of the enthusiasm long associated with English has drained away.

The figures are most startling at A-level, where the number of students in England taking English language or literature has fallen 25% since 2013 (a pattern mirrored in Wales and Northern

Ireland but not Scotland). While a demographic dip (fewer 18 year olds) partly explains this, the fall in English entries is far bigger than the overall 6.5% drop in entries – English has lost more students than other subjects. Undergraduate enrolments on English degrees have also fallen: from an all-time high of around 51,000 in 2011/12 to 39,000 last year, although the proportion of English A-level students who go on to study it at university has hovered around 14% for a decade.

It makes sense to view the decline of English studies as part of a bigger, international story about the weakening of the humanities, and its counterpoint: the rise in Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths). Enrolments in humanities courses in UK universities overall have fallen sharply. The number of students beginning foreign language courses fell by 10% last year; art and design by 5%. Similarly in the US, a longterm decline in the popularity of humanities courses accelerated sharply after the financial crisis of 2008/09; having accounted for 22% of all US degrees in the late 1960s, they now make up less than 5%. Writing in the Atlantic last year, historian Benjamin Schmidt called this a "crisis", arguing that the cause is students' anxieties about the job market and an increasingly instrumental view of higher education as a means to boost future earnings (even if graduate employment statistics provide limited justification for the switch from arts to sciences).

As someone who took only humanities subjects from age 16 and sometimes regrets this, I am sympathetic to the idea that students, especially girls, should be encouraged to stick with what does not necessarily come as naturally as studying one's native language. I think a broader curriculum for 16 to 18 year olds would be beneficial, as would a stronger commitment to foreign languages.

That said, I think the decline of English – which I take to encompass all literature (Irish, Nigerian, American as well as British) written in it – is a cause for concern, and not just because it threatens the supply of school teachers. I chose English because the way literary forms could be used to convey ideas and feelings

interested me more than anything else. The things I read at school – Wilfred Owen's shattering war poems, DH Lawrence's imagistic stories, Shakespeare's king of self-pity, Richard II – made deep impressions on me. So did my later encounters with modernism: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, the facsimile edition of TS Eliot's manuscript for The Waste Land, with all its crossings-out and scribbled amendments, in the university library.

It's true that the route through such activities to the workplace is not obvious. But Alex Thomson of the University English association believes student debt and "propaganda about Stem being the route to a high-wage job" have obscured more complicated truths about the world of work. He fears that the uneven impact of such messages will result in a social narrowing, and the increased concentration of people from well-off backgrounds in humanities-linked careers in media and arts, which they already dominate.

But there is another factor that he and others believe has played a bigger part in putting students off English. And that's what is happening to the subject in schools, where spelling, punctuation and grammar (referred to by the acronym SPaG) have, under the core knowledge curriculum championed by schools minister Nick Gibb, come to dominate. Education consultant Myra Barrs is among the critics of what she calls a "new formalism", in which content and meaning are sacrificed to a recipe-type approach (take an adverb and some wow words, add a pinch of unusual punctuation …) You don't have to be against the traditional staples of grammar or Shakespeare to see the pitfalls of this, or the constricting effect of the enormous importance placed on GCSE grades.

There is a pragmatic argument to be made, in English's defence, about the creative industries' contribution to the UK economy, and a case to be made for the subject as a forge for tools of critical inquiry. Despite belonging to a generation taught by literary theory

to be suspicious of universalism, I also believe too in the humanistic role of literature in advancing a more expansive and democratic version of Englishness than the nativist one: a culture that is curious about different meanings, new forms and other voices as well as taking pride in its own traditions.

This approach recognises in poetry, prose and drama from all times and places a means for people to communicate with each other. Right now, as we teeter on the brink of an uncertain future, there is an unanswerable case for English as one of the UK's most valuable resources. It should be open to all young people growing up here.

Study English, and learn the ways of the world

Letters

Readers discuss the benefits that can be gained from studying the arts

'English literature almost uniquely involves the vicarious experiencing of lives, relationships and times other than one's own,' says Gill Sharpe. Photograph: Peter Cade/Getty Images

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How I agree with Susanna Rustin (Why study English? We're poorer in every sense without it, 11 February)!

A retired teacher, I hear the arguments for studying Stem subjects frequently put forward as self-explanatory. But are science graduates necessarily more employable than someone who has spent her degree years reading widely, analysing language, developing sound aesthetic judgment, defending her opinions in seminars, and learning how to express them in lucid, cogent and elegant prose in weekly essays? Many ex-pupils I hear about who have arts degrees are successful in business, academia, the law, novel writing, and the arts. One is even running a department in the Guardian.

All university degrees give training in the discovering of knowledge, in the practice of self-expression, and in the increasing of self-confidence. What the study of English literature almost uniquely involves, however, is the vicarious experiencing of lives, relationships and times other than one's own.

Through imaginative exploration of the ideas of works of literature, through sensitive analysis of language and form, and comparison of works from different periods, the student of English is brought to a knowledge of a world wider than her own, and a deeper empathy with others. Her subject is, after all, the human condition itself.

This seems to me a priceless achievement, and one that is all too lacking in today's world, dominated as it is by values of competition and gain, and dismissive of the needs of others.
Gill Sharpe
Croydon, London

• It's no surprise that "some of the enthusiasm long associated with English has drained away". As an English tutor I have witnessed young people's interest in reading being eroded by the current government's curriculum changes, particularly for GCSE. The reversion to 100% exam assessment and the elimination of a coursework element for English language has removed the joy element, with analysis of texts for the sake of it now the only priority. Teenagers no longer enjoy reading – in fact, most don't read at all – because it has become such a chore at school.

Michael Gove, in his infamous tenure as education secretary, has a lot to answer for. In poisoning the syllabus, including the ridiculously narrow-minded restriction to the reading of only British authors –

thereby eliminating at a stroke great writers such as Steinbeck and García Marquez – he has also poisoned today's youth against the beauty of books.

Steve Mason

Hornchurch, Essex

• Jess Gillam makes a powerful case for music being central to the education system (Letters, 11 February), and she is an outstanding example of the value of state funding of music education. Dance, drama, art, all the creative arts, develop the lifeskills she lists, most of which are, in addition, skills employers need. Quite apart from the intrinsic value of the creative arts there is considerable research evidence that pupils' engagement in them raises their performance in mainstream curriculum subjects and improves the confidence of less academic students.

More generally, as Susanna Rustin argues, academic studies in English and the humanities encourage creativity and critical thinking, important in themselves yet also valuable skills for developing enterprise and for the professions. Rigid formulaic concentration on hard skills reduces both personal development and the dynamic perspective essential for our society and economy to thrive in these difficult times.

Sheila Cross

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