

THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF CLASSICS

Three surveys carried out on behalf of *Friends of Classics* by Colin McDonald MA FMRS (McDonald Research)

This brief report summarises the results of three research studies which were commissioned by *Friends of Classics* in connection with the founding and progress of *Classics for All*. Taken together, they confirm the high value placed on even a brief encounter with classics in school and beyond by those who have experienced it or know anything about it.

The first study (2009) was a mail survey among heads of department in schools held on the Cambridge School Classics Project database: by definition, these were schools known to be at least interested in teaching Latin and therefore most likely to be applicants for funding from *Classics for All* to help the reach out into local schools. The letters and questionnaires were sent out in the autumn term, and produced replies from almost equal numbers of independent and state schools (over a half of the independents schools and over a third of the state schools mailed).

Both independent and state schools in this study were equally and strongly positive about the benefits of classics, and claimed strong support from their parents and fellow members of staff. The response from the state schools, however, was of most interest to us. They were of course an atypical group, not representative of state schools as a whole; but they did reveal a significant demand for classics within the state system which was not being adequately met. The main problems, especially in the state sector, were difficulties of timetabling and lack of trained staff, and several expressed a wish that the National Curriculum should give better acceptance to Latin and Greek—a problem which the government since 2010 has done something to improve.

Our second project was a substantial survey in early 2011 amongst those who had experienced classics as a feature, whether substantial or not, of their own education. This survey was run for us by the YouGov panel company, on a sample selected from those of their panellists who had studied at least some classics at school; the sample was randomly selected from these people, with oversampling of the languages to ensure we had sufficient Latin and Greek students.

A wide range of demographics was covered in the sample, including, importantly, types of employment, including professional and managerial jobs. A very high 81%

response was received to the mailing. Respondents were asked what value their classical studies had been to them, especially in their working lives but also in their general quality of life, and about their support for its presence in schools. Replies were generally positive, especially in terms of the mental training classical studies were thought to deliver. Of special interest was the finding that those whose classical education had stopped at GCSE or equivalent were in all respects almost as positive for classics (within one or two percentage points in most cases) as those who had continued them to A-Level or university.

The third study was a more in depth exploration of the feelings of known enthusiasts for classics, drawn from *Friends of Classics* and *Classics for All* supporters. This was an online survey run for us by the research agency Cobalt Sky in mid-2015. We wanted to reveal what classicists, trained as they are in powers of thinking and expression, would say about their own subject, with the idea that their words would provide a powerful extra charge for *Classics for All's* publicity. How far this has been successful may be judged from the examples quoted below.

There were some who questioned the value of talking only to the committed, on the grounds that we knew what they would say. Yes, but not necessarily the in-depth *detail* of what they would actually say, nor how they would say it. In contrast, non-classicists' views of classics as a school subject, when they have not themselves experienced it, can tell us very little.

In the following three sections we reproduce the reports on the three studies, which give more detail.

Study 1: Classics teaching in schools (2009)

Introduction

This postal survey was conducted amongst schools teaching classics, both independent and in the state sector, with the aim of discovering what values they attached to classics teaching and what problems they faced in doing so.

Letters with questionnaires were sent to all schools known to teach Latin held on the database at the Cambridge School Classics Project: this database was compiled following a telephone survey of all schools carried out by CSCP in 2002. The letters were addressed to the appropriate heads of department and were timed to arrive during the 2009 autumn term (avoiding holidays and half-term). Reminder letters with questionnaires were sent to non-respondents after an appropriate interval.

Completed questionnaires were returned from 491 out of the 1103 schools contacted, a response rate of 45%. The returns included nearly equal numbers of independent (256) and state (234) schools. This equates to a slight bias in returns in favour of the independents; the response rate from independent schools contacted was 56% and from state schools 36%. Because of this small bias, results below are quoted separately for independent and state schools.

Key results

Latin and Greek languages

95% of the independents and 78% of the state schools contacted currently teach Latin. 77% (independent) and 33% (state) teach it to A-level or equivalent standard.

Teaching of Greek is much lower: 59% (independents) and 15% (state) teach any Greek; 41% (independents) and 8% (state) teach it to A-level standard.

There is a difference in who gets taught these languages: of those who teach them, 93% of independents but only 65% of state schools say they are open to anyone (as opposed to being restricted to top-stream or 'gifted and talented' children). Three quarters of the state school teachers said that, if they had more resources, they would like to increase the numbers taking Latin or Greek. State schools have more difficulty fitting Latin/Greek onto the timetable: only 67% of those who teach Latin in state schools do so on timetable as opposed to virtually all the independents, and only 7% can teach Greek on timetable (cf. 40% of the independents).

Both types of schools agree closely in what they see as the main benefits of Latin and Greek. Mental training (intellectual rigour, developing logical and analytical skills) are regarded as more important than more 'practical' aims (clarity of expression, improving English or helping to learn modern languages), although this rank order covers a wide range of opinions.

Both types of school claim a high degree of parental support for Latin/Greek: 91% independent, 71% state. In both cases parental opposition is almost non-existent. Both also claim support from teachers in other departments (75% independent, 58% state) the remainder being mostly indifferent; there is very little opposition from other departments in either type of school.

The main problems faced in teaching classical languages are timetabling and finding or training the staff required. These problems are somewhat worse in the state sector, where 53% say timetabling is a serious problem and 40% staff (equivalent

figures for independents are 18% and 20%). A lesser problem is that pupils tend to give up too early (14% state, 18% independent). In open questioning, several respondents expressed a wish that the National Curriculum should give official status to Latin/Greek (23% independents, 28% of state schools). It would be satisfying to think that this evidence helped to persuade the ministry, under Michael Gove, to stop legislating only for modern languages (which meant that ancient languages were in practice ignored), and to validate both Latin and Greek for teaching at primary and secondary level and as qualifying for the EBacc.

Ancient history and classical civilisation

72% of independents but only 38% of the state schools teach Classical Civilisation. Ancient history is taught by far fewer: only 10% of independents and 6% of the state schools. More than half (58% independents, 53% state) would like to increase these numbers if they had more resources.

The most important benefits of studying these subjects were felt to be 'ability to understand different points of view', developing skills of persuasion and argument, and 'intellectual balance and objectivity'. These were given somewhat more importance than 'wider understanding of one's own history/civilisation' or 'skill in handling and presenting information', although there is again a wide range of opinion around these averages, and all do have importance. The pattern here was very similar between independent and state schools.

Support for these subjects is again high among both parents and teachers, with almost no opposition. Problems are similar to language teaching, with timetable and lack of staff the most serious (but pupils are less likely to give up these subjects too early). These answers are very similar for both independent and state schools.

Study 2: YouGov survey on the effectiveness of school classics for work and life (2011)

Introduction

This survey was conducted in January-February 2011, using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of 185,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. YouGov had recently completed a screening survey among 80,000 randomly-selected panellists to ascertain a number of details

for sampling purposes, including educational details. An email was sent to 2,700 panellists selected at random (with certain quota controls) from all those (out of this 80,000) who had studied classics at secondary level and above, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link.

2,182 responded to the questionnaire (an 81% response to the mailing). They were equally divided between men and women; two thirds were over 50, 9% under 30. Just over half were in work (full or part time) and a third were retired. Of the 1,402 persons in work, nearly half (49%) had responsibility for other staff: 11% for more than 10 staff. Altogether, 66% of the total sample (including the retired) were or had been responsible for other staff.

80% of the total sample had studied Latin, 21% Greek, 42% ancient history, 31% classical civilisation, and 46% 'Classics'. Please note, however, that these figures do not accurately represent the distribution of these subjects among all YouGov panellists who had studied classics, since the language strata were oversampled to ensure a good number of Greek students, the smallest group (about 15% within the base sample of panellists). This distribution of subjects applied across different age groups, sexes and social grades, with only minor variations. The following summary table shows the levels up to which each of these subjects was studied (percentages based on the total sample):

	Latin	Greek	Ancient History	Classical Civilisation	Classics
Up to:	%	%	%	%	%
O level/GCSE	45	9	16	10	19
A level	15	3	9	8	10
First degree	5	4	10	7	8
Higher degree	1	1	2	2	1

Support for classics in schools

A key question was: to what extent would you support or oppose all secondary schools, including the state sector, being given the opportunity to teach classical

languages (Latin and/or Greek)? And a similar question for ancient history and classical civilisation. The results were strongly positive. 83% supported the languages being taught, with 6% opposing; 86% supported ancient history and classical civilisation being taught, with only 2% opposing. These levels are very similar, with only minor variations, across all demographic breakdowns.

All supporters in either case (92% of the total sample) were asked which one method for achieving this support they thought would be the best. The answers overwhelmingly focused on the curriculum, with 54% saying the National Curriculum should be less rigid and 28% that classics should be included on it. Other methods were much less favoured: more funding for staff (5%) or for resources (3%) or dropping another subject to make room (3%). Only 2% had no opinion to give. Again, this pattern is reproduced across all demographic breaks with marginal variations only. The youngest age group (the under 30s) were a bit more likely to suggest more funding for staff (13%); but interestingly, those under 39 were a little more likely than older people to argue for including classics in the curriculum.

Usefulness of classics at work

Those who had responsibility for staff (65% of the total) were asked how useful they thought the study of classics was as a training for someone in their area of work. This was a 5-point scale ranging from 'extremely' to 'not at all' useful. Just over half (51%) chose the top two positions on the scale (i.e. useful or very useful); 22% chose the negative positions (not useful), and 29% chose the middle position.

These findings vary somewhat, as one would expect, according to the type of work done. We have divided the sample into four groups: teachers or academics, other professionals, senior managers or administrators, and others (including here clerical, sales or service jobs, skilled and other manual workers). The results are shown below.

	Teachers and academics	Other professionals	senior managers or administrators	Others
Useful	65%	58%	47%	38%
Indifferent	22%	23%	29%	25%

Not useful 11% 18% 22% 30%

The gradient from left to right of this table is not unexpected, but it is striking that as many as 47% of the managers/administrators and 38% of lower level positions considered classics to be a useful training. A range of reasons was offered for this positive opinion: the most important related to language skills (both English and foreign languages), breadth of understanding (of history and also modern society) and thinking or reasoning skills.

Everyone in the sample was asked how they thought classics had helped them personally, and by equipping them with certain skills. Altogether, two thirds (68%) thought classics had helped them in their working life, a great deal or to some extent. Four fifths thought they had benefited in verbal or speaking ability, writing skills, and logic and reasoning ability. A smaller proportion but still a majority, around 60%, thought they had gained in terms of creativity, adaptability and planning or strategic thinking. These answers varied little with the type of work done, although slightly fewer of the 'others' group (57%) said they had been generally helped in their working life.

A notable point is that these levels are similar whether or not classical subjects were studied to degree level. Those who only took them as far as GCSE or A-Level were sometimes (not always) less positive than the university classicists, but not by much: all groups were on balance strongly positive. We explore this more fully below.

Quality of life

Four fifths (81%) of the total sample said that their general quality of life had benefited from classics. This hardly varies through all the demographic subgroups, including type of work (even among those in the 'other' category, 77%).

Opinions of those who did not study beyond GCSE or equivalent

One would perhaps expect people who have studied classical subjects to degree level, or even to A-level, to have positive views, and so it proves. But what about those who carried a subject only as far as GCSE and later stopped? The following table summarises their responses and shows that they too were strongly positive:

Stopped at GCSE level:

% who gave positive				Ancient	Classical
answers :	Latin	Greek	History	Civilisation	Classics

Writing skills	84%	91%	90%	88%	87%
Verbal/speaking ability	84%	90%	91%	87%	86%
Quality of life in general	83%	89%	91%	87%	87%
Support schools teaching	86%	94%	86%	84%	85%
Logic/reasoning ability	77%	88%	85%	84%	80%
Help in working life	71%	78%	77%	75%	74%
Creativity	58%	66%	72%	72%	70%
Adaptability	56%	63%	70%	70%	65%
Planning/strategic thinking	57%	66%	66%	66%	66%
Useful for training	51%	64%	59%	55%	51%

There is of course considerable overlap since most students combine more than one of the subjects as defined here. Also, some may well have taken one or two of the subjects to A-level or above, but others to GCSE only. A separate analysis covers those who took any of the subjects (or any combination of them) to GCSE level but none to a higher level. Just over a third of the sample fall into this group. Their answers to these questions are shown below.

	Studied all/any up to GCSE level only	Studied some to higher level than GCSE
All/any classics: % giving positive answers		
Writing skills	81%	86%
Support schools teaching Latin/Greek	83%	82%
Verbal/speaking ability	81%	83%
Quality of life in general	77%	82%
Logic/reasoning ability	73%	80%

Help in working life	65%	68%
Creativity	56%	66%
Adaptability	53%	66%
Planning/strategic thinking	52%	61%
Useful for training	49%	52%

Those who stopped any classics at GCSE level remain remarkably positive about the personal benefits, though a little less so than the others (as is to be expected). It is notable that they are no less likely to support classics teaching.

Study 3: Enthusiasts' in-depth experience of classics (2015)

Introduction

In 1990, the Council of University Classics Departments carried out a limited but in-depth survey of classicist businessmen about the value which they felt their study of classics had added to their careers. It was published as a pamphlet entitled *Classics in the Market-place*, and widely distributed among schools and universities. The reaction to it was extremely favourable, and since then *Classics for All* has been successfully launched and is doing sterling work spreading classics teaching to a wider market. But times and Secretaries of State for Education change, and after fifteen years it was felt appropriate to visit the question again.

This time, in 2015, our approach was different. We carried out a survey amongst *Friends of Classics* and supporters of *Classics for All*, inviting them by email to take part in a confidential internet-based survey hosted for us by the research company Cobalt Sky. Coming from this source, our respondents were, by definition, all classicists and with favourable views of the subject (although even amongst these one gets the occasional criticism). But this precisely suited our purpose. There was no need to revisit the negative opinions and prejudices of people who had little personal experience of the subject: we have long known what those are, and in many cases are successfully countering them. What we sought in this survey was the detailed insights of people who had experienced classics during their education, and what they felt it had meant to them during their lives and work. We asked them to

dig deep, and they did so, and we are very grateful to all those who took the time and trouble.

251 *Friends* and *Classics for All* supporters completed the survey, nearly three quarters of whom had studied classics to degree level. They were asked to tell us their final year at school, which gives an indication of their age range and also what educational regime they had been examined under. They formed a fair spread: 7% had left school before 1951 and so had taken School and Higher Certificates; three quarters had done O and A-Levels, of whom 59% came after 1961 (when Oxbridge dropped their requirement for Latin); 17% came from the GCSE years, after 1988. This last was the group most likely to have taken a classics degree (86%); the group most likely to have stopped after school was the post-Oxbridge O-Levels (1961-87), of whom only 65% took it to degree level.

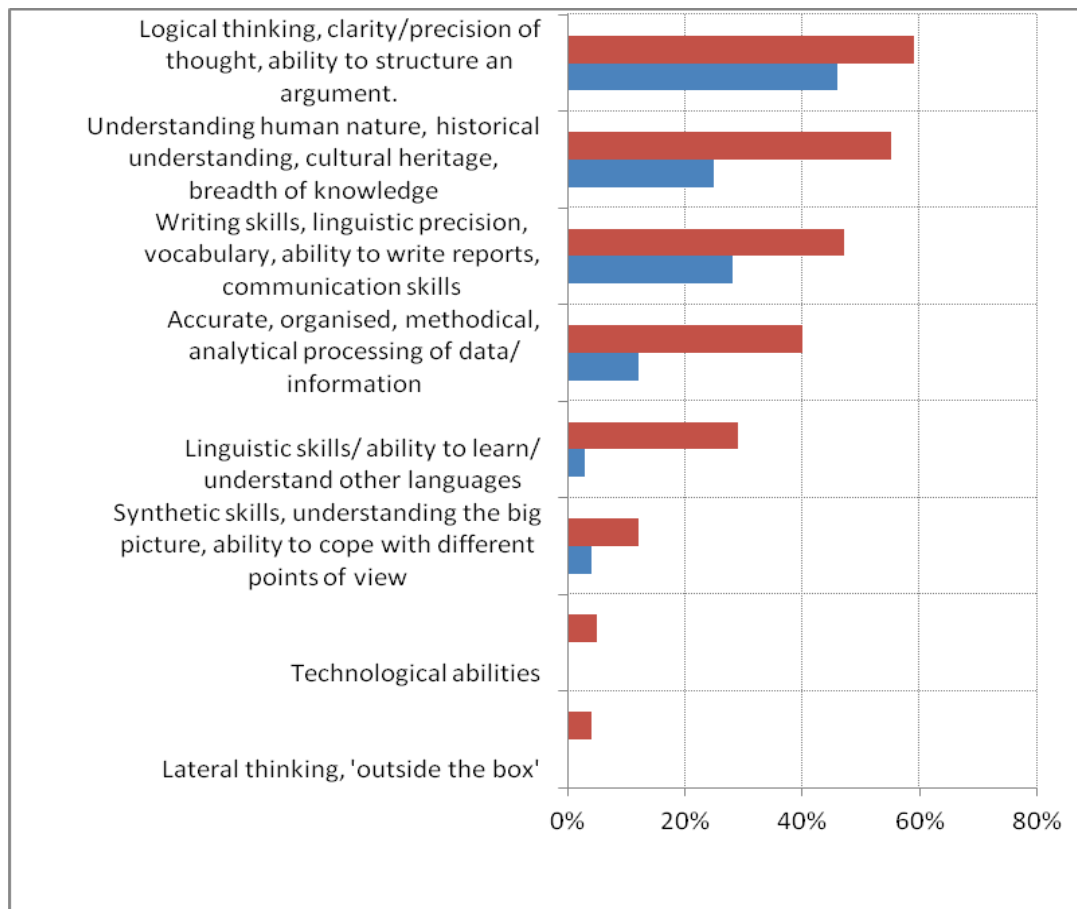
As expected from the sample base, many respondents were or had been school or university teachers (about 45%), but there was a good range of other professions. 40% were in business or industry, about a fifth in a science or technology discipline (of whom half were involved with computing or logistics), and about a quarter in media, publishing or the arts; 44% had also had careers in law, finance, government/civil service or the armed forces. These figures add to more than 100% because many claimed experience in more than one area of employment. Besides, we asked respondents what their husbands, wives or partners had done, since that could add to the insights they themselves would have. Altogether, our sample showed a wide base of experience for their comments.

Of the 70 respondents who had not studied classics to degree level, 46% had taken it up to A-Level or equivalent, 44% to O-Level or equivalent, and the remaining 10% (7 persons) had stopped after primary school. There is a clear age trend here: the proportion taking classics to A-Level drops sharply after Oxbridge dropped Latin, from well over half to below half. All of the 7 persons who stopped at primary school came from this younger group. But most of these 70 people had at least learnt Latin; only six of the (again from the younger group) had studied in translation only.

Classics for a career

We asked respondents what points they would make to an employer in favour of classics, and which single point they would most emphasise. The replies are rich and varied: the main ones are summarised in Chart 1 (percentages are based on all those who answered the question).

Chart 1: Points in favour of classics (the blue lines are the single points which would be most emphasised)



Logical, clear, precise thinking and writing and linguistic skills have long been recognised as key benefits of a classical education. Respondents put this in various ways:

‘Classical languages teach you to think and write clearly and correctly. Reports and presentations by people who have done some classics are better than those by people who haven’t. The study of a civilization in some ways so different and in some ways so similar to our own broadens the mind and helps people be more creative in thinking of strategies. Because Latin and Greek are highly inflected languages people who study learn the habit of precision in their writing.’

‘It is unquestionably the best training for the mind that exists. Attention to detail, logic, precision, mastering a lot of material and applying it, linguistic awareness, clarity of expression—all of these lie at the heart of a classical education.’

‘Quality and clarity of analysis and logical thought. Ability to express oneself clearly/succinctly. Resilience when faced by novel points or apparently difficult issues. A

propensity to understand a variety of view points and a balance in assessing the available (often voluminous or conflicting) material.’

What may surprise a little more is the prominence given to the second item on the chart, general human understanding, regarded as equally important to mental ability; absorption in the culture of the ancient world is clearly seen to matter very much (and of course need not be dependent on knowing the languages, although they help):

‘I believe that my relative success in naval and business life owes much to Latin. I have found that its ruthless logic makes me think differently about language and words, and makes me more precise. Understanding English is greatly helped by a grounding in Latin. An employer should benefit from the logical and orderly approach to thought and language, as well as the mental training and discipline of learning the words and their endings, the constructions, and so on. The fact that it is unnecessary to speak the language allows one to concentrate on the language itself rather than pronunciation, idiom and so on. Roman history and the Roman characters show us a lot about human nature. I don’t think we’ve changed much since then (less cruel?), but the politics is, in essence, very little different from now. There is a lot to learn from the way they largely wrecked their constitution, in their struggles for power. Militarily, too, there is quite a lot of leadership to learn from the successful generals.’

‘It instils a breadth of vision which few other disciplines do. Students have so many options, they can look at events and problems in multiple ways. The languages instil a logical outlook as well. Classical culture has so many lessons: few events and circumstances and organisations cannot be seen in terms of classical history or even mythology.’

‘Classics and ancient history are distinctive because we study the “primary” (ancient) evidence—whether written or material—directly and learns skills of logical analysis and “close reading” more than in other arts subjects—particularly the case if one studies an ancient language. Like other arts subjects, classics fosters skills of argument, clear writing, good use of evidence; and promotes an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the values (and value!) of cultures other than one’s own. Classical subjects are among the most inter- or multi-disciplinary of all disciplines, because one is studying a many-cultured world which also contained extremely mixed cultural contexts. It is a liberating set of disciplines for these reasons and also because it makes one sensitive to “the past in the present”; think of the relevance to the modern world of Athenian democracy, Hellenistic sciences, and Roman law. It is no idle claim that ancient Greece and Rome are the foundation of European and cognate cultures.’

‘The study of classics helps us to think holistically about how culture, politics, economics and religion influence each other to build and change civilisations. This helps its students to develop the ability to stand back from our own civilisation and to gain insight into how it operates, how it is shaped and how to change it for the better (or worse!). It can help us to understand how power is gained and lost, giving us a critical awareness of how this is happening in our own society. In addition, the long perspective that classics students take,

helps us to perceive patterns and trends in human behaviour. This gives us objectivity when observing changes in our own culture. It can help to make us more tolerant and open minded because we know that our own societal norms are neither permanent nor inherent to human nature; other civilisations have made different choices. This aspect can also make us better equipped to combat bigotry, prejudice or intolerance.’

‘No one who has studied classics could have failed to spot and understand the hubris and nemesis seen in banking when the bubble burst in 2007/8. A classical education provides insight into human nature, wisdom, strategy, philosophy, politics... everything that still oils the dynamics of the world today, including the world’s geo-political dynamics and the workings of human communities each commercial enterprise represents. The actions and motivations of humans were captured so perfectly in Greek and Roman writings. There is, in fact, nothing new to learn about human nature and dynamics that wasn’t already discovered in the classical world. One can also understand why certain built environments are more human or positive in influence than others. Leadership was closely studied by the classical commentators/writers, and here again there is little that was identified then that isn’t seen every day in every organisation.’

‘Classicists have an excellent understanding of intercultural relations. They study how different cultures respond to each other, which means they will be well able to work sensitively within a global market. They may have learned linguistic skills needed for good communication skills, but also the potential for learning languages in general. The kinds of understanding of systems and data retention which learning a language requires make classicists useful in many ways. Studying classics is partly about offering a safe space to explore complex ideas. Classicists will have learned to develop informed views on various topics, which help them not only understand, interpret and hold the modern world better to account for itself, but also respond critically to it. Classicists think in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary way. They use the intellectual tools applicable to many different academic disciplines. They think creatively about a topic with intellectual flexibility and versatility.’

More disappointing, perhaps, are the last three items on the chart. Not many of our respondents seemed to think that classics had relevance to technological ability.

There were, however, some exceptions:

‘On my first day at JP Morgan Investment Management (1982), the Department Head said to me: “Ah, you’ve studied classical Greek, you’ll be able to figure out that damn computer”. He was right, and I promptly became the office expert ... The points I would make to an employer would be: flexibility, curiosity, logical thinking, application (you can’t learn classical languages to degree standard without regular effort), superior written English skills (which is a huge plus in today’s working environment), ability to address problems from a different angle, and broader range of interests, to mention just a few ... And let’s face it, classicists are bright. Someone with an A* in classical Greek usually has a clutch of equally good A-levels, and could have studied anything ... They simply chose classics.’

Our sample was also asked to give examples of specific ways in which their classical studies had helped them in their own career. The replied exemplified the points made above:

‘Ability to formulate an argument on the spot and communicate it clearly and concisely to be persuasive under pressure.’

‘I became a barrister specialising in long, complex commercial cases involving large volumes of documents. My classical education gave me the patterns of thinking which enabled me to analyse the cases and the many documents more rapidly and effectively. As an advocate, though I cannot claim many skills, I was commended for accuracy in stating the facts and legal principles—which undoubtedly stemmed from my classical training.’

‘Thousands! I have won all sorts of research contracts because company directors are impressed by my ability to put across complex issues clearly and effectively and in several languages, if required. I have organised many successful classical music and arts festivals due to my organisational skills, habitual attention to detail and clear, convincing vision. (This includes raising the money to fund them). On the more practical side, I have built houses, restored castles and created lakes, all with my own hands using skills which I can learn fast and flexibly as result of my classical education.’

‘In the early stages of learning the trade in IT, having studied symbolic logic as part of the Greats course was helpful. As a young executive working with very senior management, I found that the facility to analyse colleagues’ personalities and motives was very important in providing advice, and helped to impress those who had important influence on my own career prospects. In IBM, a number of the senior management team came from a classics background, and I think there was an unconscious fellow-feeling that helped make connections in a very large company.’

‘I work in finance as a generalist analyst who covers a lot of different sectors, countries and asset classes. I often have to assess the work of specialists who have an informational lead on me, meaning I don’t always know 100% of what they are saying, but I am usually able to interpolate the missing bits from the bits I know, rather like an unseen exercise.’

‘Helping me understand there are other cultures and worlds to engage with.’

‘Understanding people and the contexts within which they operate—corporate politics, human dynamics, motivations, spiritual influences, desires etc.’

‘When I was working in Portugal, even without knowing Portuguese I was able to understand the marketing documents I was given to read. In a broader way, studying the Greek & Roman cultures enables one to better understand and interact with the people from other countries one meets when one works in a global organisation.’

‘Now retired but, working in a completely “non-classical” field, kept me broad-minded and able to keep things in perspective at work and with colleagues.’

‘I’m a tax adviser working in fund management. Classics taught me the ability to form my own opinions without recourse to others. It helped me develop forensic skills in interpreting tax legislation. It gave me a healthy scepticism about human motivation and behaviour which helps me negotiate with counter-parties.’

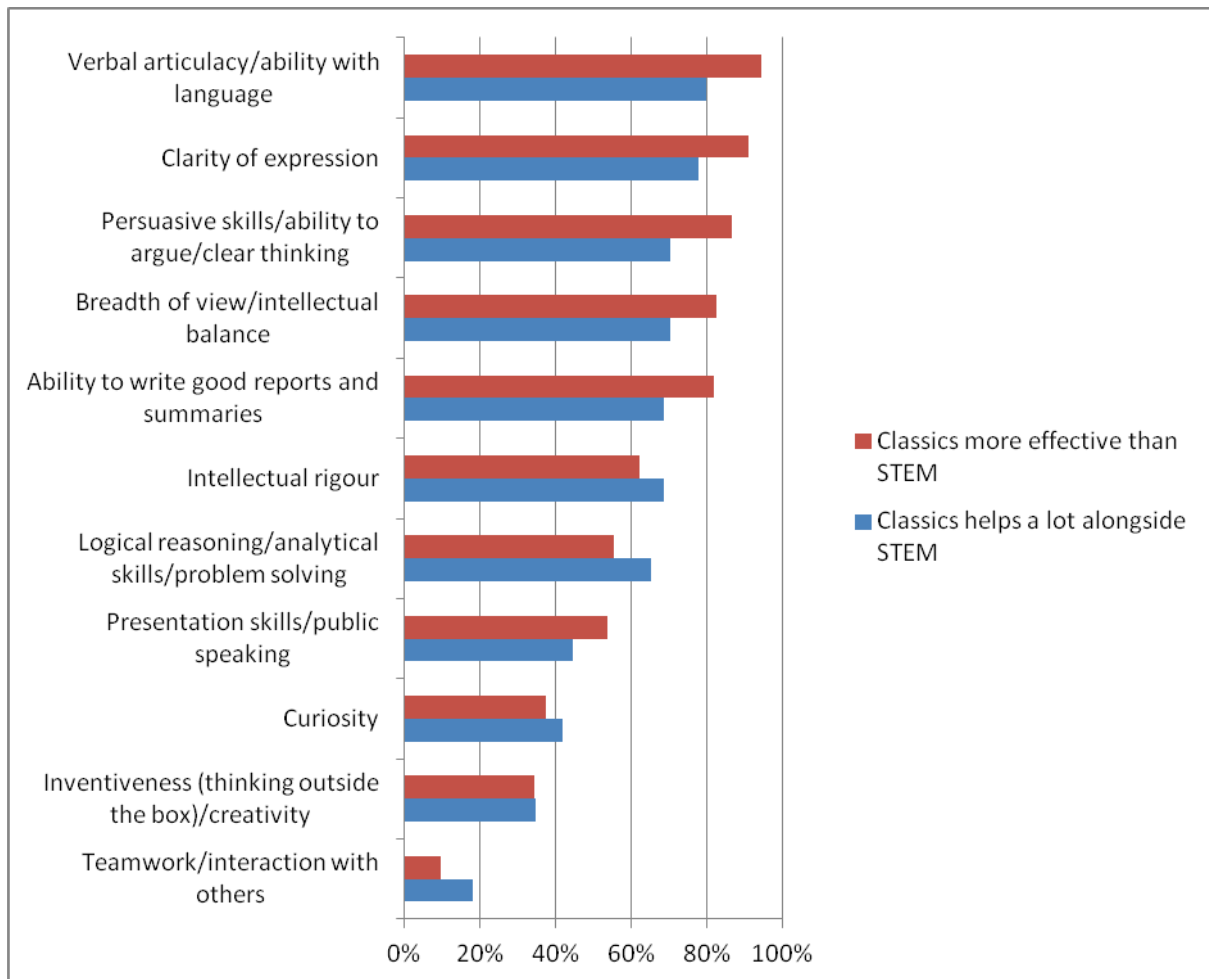
‘In my operational research into bureaucracy (see ‘Gammon’s Law of Bureaucratic Displacement’) my study of the classics contributed hugely to my analytic skills, lateral thinking and my ability to concentrate on problems for extend periods of time, ranging from many hours of uninterrupted and intensely focused thinking to weeks of dogged persistence on a seemingly intractable problem. Succinct expression of ideas.’

Classics and the STEM subjects

The STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are crucial: no-one nowadays would get through their school career without a good grounding in at least one or two of these. Classics must find its place alongside them, and cannot, as once it could, replace them.

We asked our sample to think about classics in relation to the STEM subjects in two ways: first in comparison against them, and secondly as adding value (or not) in conjunction with them, in terms of developing those skills which employers find valuable. Their replies are summarised in Chart 2. These figures are percentaged on the whole sample, including those few who did not answer the questions.

Chart 2: Percentage saying classics effective compared against and alongside STEM



In further comments on this question, several of our respondents remarked on how classics and maths, if properly taught, complement each other. The majority (74%) did not think that classicists as such were better at coping with numerical and statistical problems than other students of the humanities or social sciences; however, the remaining quarter did think so—partly because good classicists and good mathematicians must be intelligent people.

‘Attention to detail/accuracy. However, in some respects this may be because classics and maths (for example) seem to attract students with similar aptitudes. There is a case for identifying classics as a strong cross humanities/STEM bridge.’

‘Because the abilities needed to do classics are much more akin to those required to do STEM subjects than those required for other humanities/arts subjects.’

‘In my experience, and it may be out of date, classicists are equally at home in numeracy and literacy. Few humanities achieve quite the same degree of comfort, although again that may have changed.’

‘But classicists know the need for precision. They can see through cant and waffle and can often see when statistics are being misapplied.’

‘I studied maths to A-level standard under the Swiss Maturité system, and never had any problems with numbers. I found that the junior team members whom I was responsible for when I worked in banking and who had studied classics never had a problem with functional financial numeracy; I just wish I could say the same for those who had studied economics or business!’

‘Because of the linguistic aspect of classics and the quite scientific approach to languages which develops similar skills required for solving numeracy problems.’

‘Because classics is a minority subject it is often taught as an additional subject for pupils who can cope with it alongside meeting the required standard in the critical subjects like maths and English. So, by definition, they are statistically better than average at maths. In addition, I believe there is a correlation between mathematical ability and classics—both are considered very logical subjects. So, for example, at my secondary school many A-Level classicists also studied maths or further maths at A-Level.’

‘It’s all a matter of organised thinking. Statistics are ubiquitous in the research work I do; I am not a statistician, but I can grasp the essential buried in the numbers and I can spot anomalies easily because of the way classics has taught me to think. I work with specialist doctors in the medical research field—they usually assume I am from a scientific background, because I can pick up and follow the scientific arguments without much difficulty, albeit not algebra or formulas.’

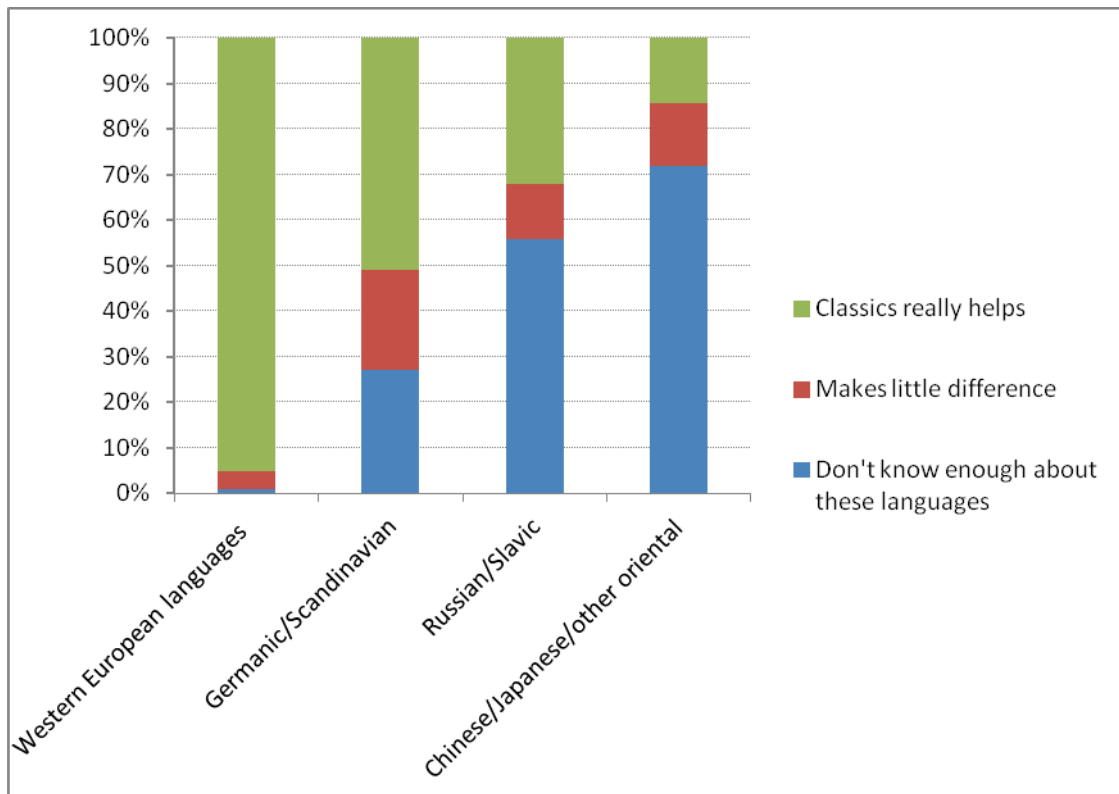
‘The sequential logical thinking and pattern spotting in classical language learning mirror the numerical thinking processes in maths, computing, and data analysis.’

‘I take my own child’s case. Until she started to study Latin and Greek (which she did to A-level), she was deemed an average student. In fact, even in the Latin class she was seen as one of the lower attainers. Because of this attitude towards her, (which was in all subjects) she was not encouraged to take the classics to A-level. She left her school after GCSEs with multiple awards for her top marks in all her GCSEs. (She ended up being one of their top students). At her new 6th form, she was deemed to be gifted and indeed got top marks in all her A-level grades and is now studying at a top university. I was sorry that she did not pursue her love of classics at University level but she was very much put off at her secondary school. And I was surprised to note that as her Latin and Greek improved, so did all her other subjects. Greatly. This seemed to bypass the staff at this particular school who preferred to keep her as a “low/average attainer”.’

‘The logical approach and clarity of thought needed for linguistic work are the same skills as are needed in maths, physics and chemistry. Most people with these strengths are good at both classics and maths/science. There are few for whom these skills are not easily transferred from words to numbers or vice versa.’

Classics and other languages

Chart 3: Effect of classics on learning other languages



Nearly everyone (96% of the 248 respondents who answered this question) thought that classics was really helpful for learning Western European, Latin-based languages; only a few thought it made little difference. They were less sure when it came to other languages. As can be seen in Chart 3, this is largely due to many being unfamiliar with the more exotic languages. Leaving these people out, most of those who could express a view clearly thought that classics helped to learn German, Scandinavian or Russian, and half thought it would help with oriental languages.

One of the ways in which classics may help with language learning is by developing a deeper insight into the basic principles on which languages work: grammar, syntax, Chomsky's 'deep structure'. Everybody agreed, and nobody disagreed, that classics helps with grammar and syntax. Almost everyone agreed that classics develops a sensitivity to different ways in which languages convey meaning; just 6% thought it made little difference. There was a less secure majority for the notion that classics develops sensitivity to different cultural contexts, with 81% agreeing, 19% saying it made little difference. However, many felt the benefits strongly:

'This reinforces language skills beyond mere acquaintance to real knowledge. This is the level at which real understanding is consolidated. I went on to learn several other languages with great ease as a result Including (at various levels) Italian, Russian, German, Hungarian, Hebrew and Sanskrit.'

‘It’s a real intellectual test. You have to think what the passage means, what are the central ideas, how best to express it in Greek or Latin, how Greek or Latin varies in expressing ideas. It certainly helped me with the précis paper for the Fast Stream Civil Service selection exam—sadly abandoned now, I think!’

Translation versus composition

We explored the advantages of Greek and Latin composition as well as translating into English. Most of our respondents had studied in the original languages. There was strong appreciation of the challenging nature of composition:

‘This is the key to it all; precision in composing in a classical language ensures that a complex but clear set of rules is fully mastered. There is no room for woolly thinking or imprecise expression when writing in these languages, and the knock on effect in articulating in other languages is clear.’

‘You realise that the register we know and use for Latin seems more formal than much English. You have to tidy up the thought to find a Latin equivalent. I don’t know how it is in Greek but I imagine it might be rather looser.’

‘Translating challenging passages of English into Latin and in particular Greek was always the most intellectually challenging discipline I undertook at school or university. I think I would equate it to logic or deductive reasoning in mathematics with the overlay of language on top. One really has to be able to think clearly and often laterally as with relatively limited vocabulary, it was possible to translate quite complicated passages.’

‘The ability to get swiftly to the essence of any statement, argument or even poetic sentiment, to analyse it, to understand why it was written the way it was, to find, if needed, another way of expressing it which loses as little as possible of the original intention, style and impact. I can think of no better method of learning to examine and formulate what you are really trying to put across than composing in Greek.’

But there is the occasional counter-note:

‘Be careful here. Overstressing these advantages can be deeply counterproductive when non-specialist teachers are faced with having to teach skills that they feel under-confident about themselves. Yes, these help grasp of syntax, but linguistic experts in e.g. Netherlands, with much better language skills than the British, are contemptuous of the old public-school fetishisation of compositional skills.’

Translation from Latin and Greek

Translating out of Latin or Greek was thought to be ‘easier’ but had benefits of its own:

‘Less challenging than composing in Latin or Greek, but still had its moments ... Breaking down phrases and sentences in the original Latin or Greek and then reconstructing them in English really helped in learning how the English language works. Also in challenging passages, it was often a bit like a jigsaw—if I couldn’t make much sense of the first couple of sentences in a passage, then I would head further in to the piece and then return to the opening. It taught me to think outside the box and to persevere with complicated problems.’

‘You really have to think about the resonance and cultural context of the original words. For example, what is good English for *optimates* or *populares*? Doing this helps you appreciate the extent to which apparently neutral words we use are in fact loaded: consider the use of “choice” or “political correctness”.’

‘Insights (at all levels) into how things can change/not fit when moved between languages. Again, much depends on how this is taught and especially on the degree of analysis/reflection that is encouraged.’

‘Discovering that being succinct is something Latin does well—taught me to cut out superfluous words when writing for publication.’

‘Literal translation is impossible, so it develops the ability to write in English.’

‘Having to express concepts in elegant English while trying to preserve the meaning of the original is a really useful transferable skill.’

‘Intellectual rigour—never being satisfied with a broad brush or “near enough” translation, because one misinterpreted ending and your whole translation could in fact be nowhere near accurate. Logical thinking combined with empathy for and understanding of another person’s meaning and experiences—these two rarely come together either in MFL translation, STEM subjects or humanities/English ... rather you get one or the other.’

And there is more to it than mere skill with words:

‘Pleasure. My life is enriched every single day by thoughts or references to the seemingly endless store of wisdom and culture to be found in the great classical texts when you approach them with the thoroughness that is prerequisite to reading them in the original. A person thus enriched is a person who can bring more to the workplace and to colleagues on a daily basis.’

‘Pure delight in beauty of language. Delight in problem solving of tricky translations. Sense of connection with people who lived and died hundreds of years ago leading to a sense of connectedness and humility and perspective.’

‘For me, translating was a pleasure in itself. It was very satisfying to find a way, in English, to express what the ancient writer intended to say. Of course I didn’t achieve this all the time! But the business of translating made me really think about what the original writer was saying, and how, and this has helped me to read and understand complex or ‘difficult’

literature, especially poetry, in English. The skills I learned in translating from ancient languages served me well when I did an Italian degree as a mature student.’

‘I don’t think I gained much sensitivity to different cultural contexts as a schoolgirl or undergraduate, but I think that would be the case now. Translating classical authors developed my love of literature, and the desire to read literature in its original language whenever possible.’

Classics and the other humanities

We asked respondents to think about classics in relation to other humanities and social sciences: in what respects did they think classics ‘wins’ over them as part of a rounded education, or where they thought there was no real difference, or even that classics was less good than other subjects (and if so, which). We asked them to think here not only about classics not only as preparation for work, but also for general quality of life.

Chart 4: Effectiveness of classics compared to other humanities

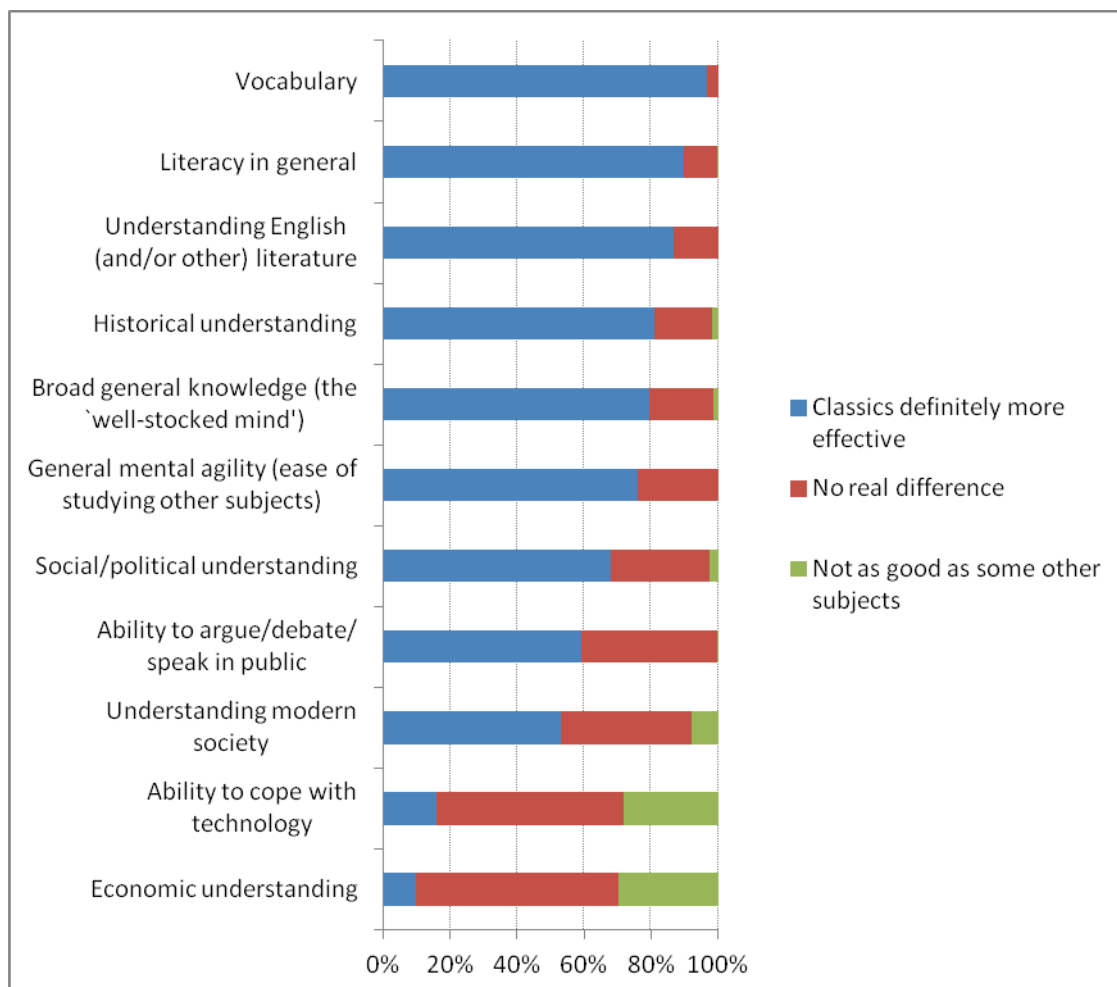


Chart 4 summarises where our sample thought classics had most and least effect. As expected, it wins handsomely for vocabulary and literacy. A majority backs classics for historical understanding and for general mental training. Approval begins to drop for 'social /political understanding', although some three quarters still favour classics here. Just under two thirds thought classics more effective for developing skills in argument and public speaking; a third thought other subjects as good, although no-one proposed a better subject for this. Only half of our classicists thought classics better for 'understanding modern society': perhaps this is something schools could work on in the future. The two items at the bottom of the chart are disappointing, though perhaps not surprising. Even though some think Latin a good preparation for IT work, there are clearly many technological areas which require other skills: people mentioned the sciences and maths, the STEM subjects here:

'Classics is very old fashioned sometimes. I would like to see how classics can help people can be proficient in Excel or Java script coding for example. There is no way classics can compete with this current and modern trend. This is where job industries are going nowadays and people need to be computer literate.'

Economics is thought by many to be irrelevant to the ancient world:

'There is a problem with classics here because of the different conceptual structure and contexts of economic practices and thinking in antiquity. For more advanced students (e.g. in sixth forms) there is useful comparative work to be done with classics/economics/politics.'

'Obviously for this you should study economics. Apart from the invention of currency, in classics we never considered economics, a relatively modern concept.'

But some blamed this failure on the fact that economics had been largely ignored in their courses of study (a gap which nowadays is receiving more attention):

'When I read *Literae Humaniores*, I was surprised at how difficult it was to find good sources of evidence on ancient economies. Were I to want to learn about economics, I would probably study economics.'

'Economics (duh). Or modern history. Or probably maths. The difficult is that classical authors and many modern classicists aren't very interested in or knowledgeable about economics, and so even where they try to address the subject it isn't necessarily done very well. Also the economies of the Roman and Greek world, while interesting, aren't that close to modern conditions.'

'The literature has little about academic economic issues.'

Classics for a career

We asked our sample to sum up what they thought would be the strongest argument for saying that studying classics would be ‘good for getting a job’, on two assumptions:

- (i) That the languages had been included;
- (ii) That it had been ancient history or classical civilisation, without the languages.

As one would expect, most of our participants, having studied the languages, repeated at this point their clear views of the benefits of doing so for general mental training. But it is far from being just about language. The breadth of vision and the widening of interest resulting from studying the classical world, and the need to call on several disciplines, are at least as important for many:

‘To gain a real benefit from study of the classics, it is essential to study a classical language. The study of ancient Greek is of particular benefit because the language presents a greater range of challenges, for example, the greater range of verb tenses, and the greater range of great literature—Plato and Aristotle versus Cicero, or Homer versus Virgil. There is also the benefit of mastering the use of a different alphabet which helps in the study of languages such as Russian, Chinese and Japanese. But even if the study is confined to Latin, the brevity and accuracy of expression are of great benefit as training of the mind. The strongest argument is that the study of classics in the original languages [especially if Greek is studied in Homeric, classic and *Koine*] trains the mind to be accurate, logical, sensitive to different modes of thought and living, and to understand the continuity of challenges and ways of dealing with the challenges through the ages.’

‘As I noted early on in the survey, what I really valued about my classics course was the breadth of what was studied—languages, literature, history, philosophy, linguistics etc—which, in my opinion, gave me a broader set of skills at the end than a degree in, say, English or history. Historians are much valued by employers—for their analytical thinking, their ability to write coherently and to put forward a compelling argument etc. I think classics has the edge on history because it can develop those same sorts of skills but also has the language/linguistic element, developing skills that history (on its own) doesn’t.’

‘I would argue that—if it is taught interestingly and well, by a subject specialist who knows *how* to teach it—it allows a student to mix language, civilization and literature all in one healthy and heady go. It’s the interdisciplinarity that is appealing and is a good preparation for work. Employers look for people who have wide interests and good discipline, are reliable, and can think for themselves. To read and understand Latin or Greek is a real skill—like reading music—rather than something which one can parrot. Add in the literature and the civilization, and you have a very good all-rounder.’

These values apply even without the languages:

‘Classical civilisation exposes students to different disciplines in the humanities and thereby teaches them different ways of thinking. This may make them more rounded and creative. A different argument applies in the case of ancient history. Its greatest advantage is that it gives students training in simplifying and breaking down large volumes of information.’

‘A well constructed course in ancient history or classical civilisation, for example involves the careful collection and assessment of evidence and ideas. And you may well have read more widely in the literature (in translation).’

‘To a lesser degree, ‘classical civilisation’ also has great merits since it covers all arts subjects—history, drama, poetry, art in all its forms, philosophy, philology and archaeology. Thereby providing a greater breadth of knowledge than other arts subjects.’

‘The wealth of knowledge that it brings helps in so many areas of life, alongside the discipline of learning how to do thorough research and to produce a comprehensive argument (when writing assignments).’

‘The study of a society “in the round” encourages an enhanced understanding of our own society. The study of a united European-based society, which was the foundation of modern European civilisation, encourages the ability to see ourselves as sharing in a common European linguistic and cultural heritage. This fosters understanding and tolerance, important attitudes in employees at a senior level in multi-national companies.’

‘Without the mastery of the languages the benefit is less. But the strongest argument remains that the study of classics trains the mind to be sensitive to different modes of thought and living in a way which is more effective than merely the study of modern languages or modern history. It is difficult to think of a more powerful way of training the mind than the study of Plato and Aristotle in philosophy, and Thucydides and Herodotus in history. What matters most in education is developing the capacity to think clearly, both logically and laterally, and classical studies even if merely in English can play an effective part in developing that capacity.’

‘Knowing how different societies have attempted to solve the problems that all societies face gives one the curiosity and confidence to say “I don’t have to solve this problem the way I’ve been taught, or the way everyone else seems to be thinking about it right now.” ‘

Some respondents did think that ancient history (say) without the languages would be neither better nor worse than any other history, but most would disagree:

‘You can study a relatively compact culture which has a complete history, and see in microcosm the problem of the present day. It has become a cliché that we in a world rather like that of the later Roman Empire before its fall.’

A few respondents commented on how classics directly helps the job-seeker:

‘Classics provides a better grasp of one’s first language, which in turn gives the confidence one requires to perform well in interviews, exams and in the work place.’

‘Classics is not there to give you *a job but to educate and form your brain* which ultimately will help you in your job finding.’

‘Shows an ability to read and study a complex ancient language at a high level. GCSE Latin, although the prescription is much less than it used to be, still demands a level of understanding, particularly for literature. This alone would show an employer that a potential employee has certain qualities, above other candidates.’

‘The ability to cope with complex linguistic structures while simultaneously developing an understanding of the nuances of what is written help to develop the mind for work experience, where an ability to think quickly and read what is not being said can be of first order importance.’

‘Shows candidate’s rounded knowledge of the world.’

But one or two appreciate the practical problem which classics faces:

‘Having had several children who have studied classics to BA and MA level, I feel classics is not as valued as it was in the 90s-2000s. The big demand *as proof of mental agility and detailed analysis* is A-level (or equivalent) maths. Classics needs to be sold as a viable alternative to maths. Because many people in HR and lower level management have no experience of classics, they discount it as being of value. Classics is perceived as evidence of private-school education—HR departments have quotas to fill. Some HR departments do not know what classics is; so the applicant is excluded by computer before coming to the attention of any human being; compared with the bald ‘A-level maths’, A-level ancient Greek/Latin does not stand up (in their opinion).’

Classics for life

Our final question asked respondents to say how they thought classics enhances ones general quality of life, apart from work. Some of the responses border on the lyrical:

‘It’s an incredibly multi-disciplinary subject—history, arts, architecture, literature are just some of the elements and it offers an inexhaustible treasury of knowledge that makes it a lifelong passion.’

‘Roman and Greek civilisations had and continue to have a massive influence on modern society: our laws, our philosophies, our *mores*. An understanding of ancient civilisations is therefore integral to understanding our own. In doing so, it enriches our understanding of modern British society and culture as much as the study of modern history or modern literature.’

‘I haven’t always found classics easy, particularly translation from Greek and Latin. It has been a bit of a personal challenge—but the satisfaction you get when you translate something

correctly is unmatched elsewhere in daily life. You are understanding the words written by someone hundreds of years ago and deriving meaning from them. It's a wonderful thing.'

'Classics has enriched every aspect of my life. It has given me an intense interest in human culture and politics, given me the tools to analyse what is going on around me and to make decisions and provided me with a long lasting and enduring love of Ancient Greek Drama and Mythology which continues to stimulate my imagination and provide me with emotional catharsis. I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to study classics to postgraduate level and I believe it has provided a wonderful foundation for life.'

'Reading Thucydides (out of interest, not as part of organized study) in translation in young middle age did something for me as a very 20thC techie. As much as anything, that encouraged me to study classics formally later on. People don't change nearly as much as the material world. The sack of Troy in the *Aeneid* isn't so different from today's horrors.'

'It showed me that thought is free, that every emotion we feel was felt two thousand plus years ago and expressed through art, music and memoir, just as we do today. The causes and brutality of war are now as they were then. In terms of technology, they probably thought of it first, only without electricity. Above all a knowledge of classics has taught me that there is nothing new under the sun—it's up to us to learn from that truism and develop as a species, or merely to repeat it and ultimately implode.'

'Along with organised religion, classics is among the best ways of keeping the pressures of life in perspective and providing a hinterland of values against which to judge the quotidian trivia which can otherwise dominate. It was somehow comforting, during the recent financial crisis, to remember Cicero's letters bemoaning the effect of regulated interest rates on the economy of Asia Minor.'

(Who said classics has no relevance to economics?!) For some, it is simply fun:

'All the enjoyment I get from art and archaeology as well as the enjoyment from using my brain. I am rarely bored.'

'Enrichment, insight, curiosity.'

'Once a classicist, in a sense, always a classicist. Even though one's language skills diminish over time, ones interest stays with you—I read far more books (ancient history, philosophy, translated texts) now than I did whilst at university, because I want to, not because I have the demands of an exam course to meet. It brings enormous pleasure.'

One quoted Machiavelli:

“When evening comes I return home and go into my study. On the threshold I strip off my muddy workaday clothes and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them ... and for the space of four hours, I forget the world, I remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death; indeed I pass into their world.”

The heartfelt enthusiasm of these answers is moving. Studying the classics, for these respondents, may have been challenging but was never a pointless chore; it was for them, and has remained, valued. This is perhaps one of the best arguments supporting the view that classics teaching should never be elitist, confined only to the rich or clever, but should be open to all: there are clearly many who would choose it.