

Examination News

Teacher perceptions of the new Latin examinations of 2010.

Stephen Hunt & Frances Foster

IN 2010 THREE examination boards - CIE, OCR and WJEC - offered new sets of specifications for the assessment of Latin. It seemed an appropriate moment to survey Classics teachers' perceptions of the new specifications, as well as the advantages and problems they thought each had, and to identify how their choice of examination was affected by their institutions. We did not want to find out how many centres were planning to enter candidates for the different examinations, nor how many candidates were to be entered: most of this information is already publicly available. Classics teachers have been anxious that the number of Latin examination specifications has been reduced over the last few years. AQA no longer offered a Latin examination after 2006, and the number of different pathways through the OCR examination has been reduced since 2003, following the merger of the two legacy specifications. At the same time, an upsurge of interest in teaching Latin has occurred in the state sector over the last six years, stimulated primarily by Gifted and Talented programmes. However, in these situations the subject is often taught off-timetable or on a reduced timetable, with the result that the examinations available through OCR and CIE might be considered to be inaccessible to pupils. Perhaps in answer to this state of affairs, in 2010 OCR offered for the first time a short course in Latin, in addition to the full Latin GCSE, while WJEC entered the Latin examination market with its Level 1 and Level 2 Certificates in Latin Language, Latin Language and Roman Civilisation, and Latin Literature. Shortly afterwards the new coalition government indicated its intention to remove the veto on state schools taking the IGCSE, which had been offered by CIE to pupils in independent schools in this country for many years. Thus after a period of scarcity of provision, for the first time Classics teachers have had a choice of three examination boards offering specifications to suit the different assessment needs of their pupils.

Research methodology

This research was carried out in late Spring 2010 before the examinations themselves were taken. We conducted a postal survey, which contained a mixture of closed factual questions (to establish what people knew) and open questions which invited the respondents to reveal their perceptions and attitudes to the examinations, and to consider who or what influenced their choices. The survey consisted of 60 schools, drawn from a database of schools known to offer Classics held by the Faculty of Education in Cambridge, proportionately from comprehensive, grammar and independent schools throughout the country. We received a 40% return rate, which is considered good for a postal survey, with schools from all sectors responding. It was interesting to observe that there was no correlation either between sector and examination choice, or sector and knowledge of the range of examinations.

CIE IGCSE in Latin

There has been much in the national and educational press about the IGCSE qualification. Michael Gove announced that the Department of Education would remove its veto on state schools from offering it, as part of his efforts to give their pupils equality of opportunity, as he put it, 'to leave school with the same set of qualifications as their peers from the top private schools - allowing them to better compete [sic] for university places and for the best jobs' (Gove 2010).

Despite the fact that this announcement has been widely publicised, the survey revealed that few teachers knew any details of the IGCSE at all. 58% admitted that they knew nothing about it. The 8 respondents who knew a little detail all came from the independent sector: of these, only 3 were generally favourable, seeing it as 'a good, intellectually demanding course'. The other 5 respondents were not favourable towards it: they saw it as having poor literature choices, which were more onerous. They also criticised it as having simplistic questions, for being 'dull and inflexible', and considered it inaccessible. In summary, the traditional style of the paper did not appeal to any of the respondents.

OCR GCSE in Latin

2010 is the first year of the new specification for short-courses, with the new specification full-course GCSE being available for certification for the first time in 2011. Respondents had many concerns about the new examination (particularly with the new literature resources), but these were outweighed by their familiarity with the examination format and their belief that it would prepare pupils well for A Level. A few respondents liked the practical convenience that the OCR Greek examination was of the same format as the Latin. The biggest anxiety, voiced by a third of all respondents, was the change of literature resources required by the new specifications. From 2010 OCR has specified that instead of the *Cambridge Latin Anthology* a new anthology published by OUP was to be used as one of the two literature options on each of the verse and prose literature papers. The new book, the selection of literature itself and the lack of online support for the literature were the cause of considerable concern. Respondents referred to the 'added inconvenience' of 'moving over' to the new text book, which was criticised for being 'badly produced' and beyond a school's budget. This concern about leaving the *Cambridge Latin Anthology* behind led to several respondents suggesting that they might consider changing to another qualification.

Two respondents suggested that the similarity of OCR's Latin GCSE to the Greek GCSE was for them an advantage.

Overall, despite qualms, 54% were satisfied with the course as a whole: they felt that it was 'manageable', allowed for 'complex options' and 'academic challenge'. It was felt, by and large, to be the best preparation for A Level, gave flexibility, and the greater emphasis on language was generally approved of. The short-course option was labelled by one respondent as 'good for stragglers'.

The remaining 46% were less satisfied: this had more to do with the change of the anthology than about OCR itself and what they were offering.

Significantly, three of the four comprehensive schools who replied to the survey said that they felt that OCR was 'too hard' for their candidates.

We observed that some further clarification was needed by OCR, as several respondents thought that the Latin examination contained controlled assessment just like the Classical Civilisation GCSE and also that some individual units would not be available for

examination in both January and June. Overall, OCR received the most favourable responses.

WJEC Level 1 and 2 Certificates in Latin Language, Latin Language & Roman Civilisation and Latin Literature

This is a new specification, available for full certification from 2011. In order to offer a different pattern of assessment from the GCSE, it is accredited as a Level 2 qualification, rather than a GCSE: controlled assessment is not permitted in the Latin GCSE, but can be taken in a Level 1 or Level 2 Certificate. 50% of respondents simply admitted that they knew nothing about this examination. 41% were concerned about the title of the Certificate as a 'Level 2' examination rather than a GCSE, and there was considerable anxiety about the legitimacy of the qualification. For those who did know about the qualification, there was a perception that this course was excellent for institutions where time was a problem, providing more flexibility. One respondent found this specification exciting: 'I heartily support this departure'. There was, however, some concern that candidates who took this examination might not be as well-prepared for A Level, and a very few were worried that there was no equivalent qualification in Greek.

Effect of the institution on choice of examination

Respondents said that there was little or no institutional influence on which examination department heads chose for assessment.

Conclusions

What came across most strongly from the responses was the range of concern and also lack of knowledge about the content of the new exams from teachers across the sectors. The perceived lack of equivalence of WJEC's Level 2 to the GCSE and the

misunderstandings about WJEC's accreditation were concerns for most respondents who at least knew of the examination. This was despite the fact that the GCSE is a subset of Level 2 qualifications, not the other way around, and that the course has been fully accredited by JACQA, and is accepted by the Council of University Classics Departments as equivalent to GCSE Latin. In the case of OCR it was the change of texts which came across most strongly. However, there is no need to use the OUP Anthology, as the *Cambridge Latin Anthology* remains in use on the Prose Paper as one option up to 2012, and the alternative option on the verse literature paper is Virgil, for which there is no prescribed edition: centres may use OCT, the Cambridge Latin Texts series, or copy the text from online resources. In addition, centres can elect to offer Roman Life Topics in place of one of the literature papers. The IGCSE was the least known, and also the least favoured option. Respondents simply did not consider it as accessible for their pupils. The CIE needs more promotion to convince teachers of the value of its Latin examination. The concern about progression to A Level affected all options, perhaps most of all WJEC. However, the feeling came across strongly that the WJEC specifications were a good response to the situations where Latin was taught off-timetable or over a short period of time. Further research is needed to explore whether people think the WJEC examinations are appropriate for pupils learning in these situations and whether they do, in the long term, provide the foundation for further study. It seems that more INSET provision and information might be provided by the examination boards across the country, and that more teachers should attend the courses that are available. JACT also should have a bigger role in publicising the changes which are occurring.

Gove, M (2010). Speech reported by BBC News, 17th June 2010.

*Steven Hunt and Frances Foster,
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.*

