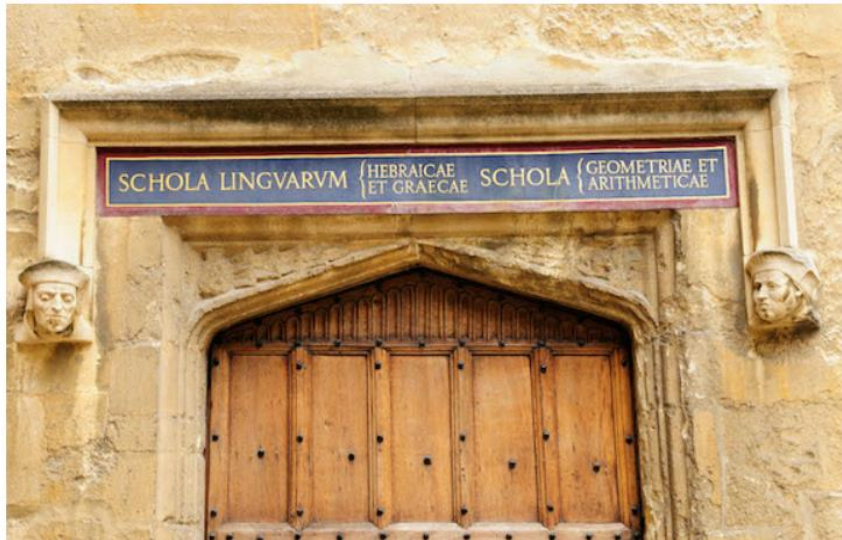


# Why Latin isn't just for posh boys

Attempts to democratise the classics are starting to bear fruit

By **Flora Bowen** August 4, 2021



Bodleian Library Language School in Oxford. Credit: Alamy

“There is an image of classics as a subject studied by rich white boys,” Mary Beard writes to me over email. For many this view is an accurate representation of a discipline far removed from 21<sup>st</sup>-century life—not helped by politicians such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg showing off their classical learning to prove their superiority over the plebs. But in recent years, a lively set of classicists—Beard included—have set out to dispel this myth, and the creativity of their different approaches may well be the key to the success of Latin’s survival and development in the modern world. The recent announcement by Education Minister Gavin Williamson that £4m will be directed to teach Latin in 40 state schools shows the message is getting through.

Beard’s most recent contribution is the Joyce Reynolds Awards, a gift on her retirement from Cambridge worth £80,000. **According to a statement** on the faculty website, the bursaries will support three disadvantaged, under-represented students at Cambridge. Her donation fits into the broader trend in which private institutions and individuals offer better access to classics for the underprivileged: Francis Holland

offer better access to classics for the underprivileged: Francis Holland school unveiled its Regent's Park Classics Centre on 21<sup>st</sup> June, and the existing ISSP (independent state-schools partnership) has been successful in teaching GCSE and A-level Latin (along with Ancient Greek) using private school resources. Still in 2019, only 68 state schools entered candidates for Latin A-level, representing just 2 per cent of the sector.

Opening the door to spaces of wealth and learning is one way of doing it; but this model is limited by the willingness of individuals to teach, and for institutions to let them. Lucy Huelin, an Oxford-educated classics teacher at Bootham School, York, is trying to “widen access to high quality resources—no matter where they are.” Her website, [Vocabulous](#), which has just received a £25,000 grant from the Northern education funding organisation SHINE, aims to improve Year 7 students' English vocabulary by teaching Latin root patterns with quizzes, videos and games. With this “fun and engaging” website, Huelin explains over Zoom, students can become “detectives” who develop the skills to code-crack Latin and Greek etymology in English.

Over 60 per cent of English words have Latin and Greek roots, a figure which rises to 90 per cent in medicine and law. Even a basic knowledge of classical languages would increase the confidence of those trying to break into these elite professions. So far the project is on trial in two York schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged students; soon it will be rolled out to more schools—enabling students without access to highly-skilled teachers to develop their own linguistic skills. Huelin herself reached Oxford via a scholarship-funded private school education, and as a teacher has always sought to develop a “wider reach.”

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These ad-hoc initiatives stem from a desire to democratise knowledge, in opposition to successive government initiatives that have increasingly marginalised the teaching of subjects such as Latin in favour of STEM. Collectively, they allow students to more or less patch together an education in Latin at the level they desire: the variety of these enterprises existing in contrast to the standardised blandness of national curricula.

Huelin's website also introduces students to the classical gods along the way, developing cultural knowledge. As with all arts and humanities subjects, studying literature and languages is inherently valuable as a means of exploring human nature and thought: "classics," says Beard, "is important in understanding western culture and its debates." She goes on: "Happily, our culture has many more roots than classical antiquity... that said, much of the history of the west has been in dialogue with classical texts." Still, she is emphatic about the "great employment record" a classics degree offers.

Just as Huelin's approach allows students to develop tools for improving their vocabulary day-to-day, so Beard also describes classics as giving us the tools to understand and (just as crucial) challenge our own history.

What might happen if everyone had access to studying classics? "It would be an even better subject," says Beard. "Academic disciplines thrive on diversity and different approaches." Take, for example, Dan-el Padilla Peralta, the Princeton academic (and *Prospect* **Top 50 World thinker**) whose studies of the early Roman Republic deconstruct classical justifications for slavery and race science: contemporary classics scholarship that is a world away from careful annotation of the *Iliad*.

The pandemic, too, is responsible for new approaches such as Huelin's project. As lockdowns and school closures accelerated online learning, both students and teachers alike have become more computer-literate. From wax tablets to interactive whiteboards, Latin is now more available for a new generation of learners.

In order to defend their subject, classicists such Huelin and Beard have demonstrated pragmatism and flexibility: skills honed through studying these versatile subjects, which incorporate language, translation, grammar, philosophy, history, literary analysis and logic. These approaches maximise intellectual ability, which in turn has created a raft of creative opportunities to share this learning with all students. Not everyone will want to devote their academic lives to studying Homer and Catullus, but all students deserve to access the legacies of their languages.