

KING'S College LONDON

it's quite hard as a teacher sometimes, to be enthusiastic about your subject, when it's so dull…

Examining the role of teachers in the promotion of post-16 English Literature

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Context

- There has been a rapid decline in the number of students studying English, English Literature and English Language and Literature at post 16 level over the past decade.
- This summer (2025), overall entries for A level English fell again to 57939, with entries for English Literature falling from 39673 in 2024 to 37931, of which only 7673 identified as male
- Undergraduate enrolments in English Studies in England fell by around 29 per cent between 2012 and 2021…

Charting the decline…

Bleiman, B. (2017). Decline and Fall? A-level English: The figures, Teaching English (15), 63–64

NATE. (2020). The Decline in Student Choice of A Level English, Teaching English (24), 24–28

Catchpole, G. (2022). The decline (and fall) of English: why aren't readers taking English Literature A Level? [Master's thesis], University of Oxford

Roberts, R., (2024). 'The Decline and Fall (?) of A-Level English', Teaching English, 34, 39–43

Context

A policy narrative that invests in some subject areas but not others…

DfE ITT Bursary cut for English from 2026 (and music, art and design, religious education…)

Cutting bursaries for English sends the wrong message at a critical time. If we are serious about building a strong, future-ready education system, we must invest in the teachers who make that possible. English must be valued not only as a subject in its own right but also as the foundation of learning - and of opportunity - for every child.

Dr Sarah Mullin MBE

Why removing English ITT bursaries is so worrying | Tes

'…we will shut down these rip-off courses and use the money to double the apprenticeship budget. Giving thousands of young people the chance of a proper start in life…'

Kemi Badenoch, Conservative Party Conference 2025



The sector…


Pearson
Let's talk
English
Secondary teachers
on GCSE English
Does the current subject content for GCSE English give schools and students what they need?
Over 800 secondary English teachers told us their honest thoughts. Their answers suggest that it's time for urgent reform in GCSE English.

Let's talk **teaching**



Only **a fifth**

of all secondary English teachers say their current

- **More than half** (53%) say it focuses on the wrong things.
- Just **1 in 10** say it includes enough **diverse texts and authors**

Let's talk **skills**



68%

of secondary English teachers say curren GCSE assessments **capture students' s**

- Just **1 in 20** say it **fosters creativity**.

Let's talk **students' futures**



Over half

(53%) of all secondary English teachers say GCSE English **doesn't prepare students for post-16 study.**

- **45%** say their specification **doesn't provide skills for work...**
  - ... a figure that rises to **55%** in the **most disadvantaged** schools.
- **0%** say it prepares students for a **digital future**.

Teachers have spoken. Their words point to a clear **need to revive GCSE English** to make it the **engaging, innovative and inclusive subject it truly can be**.

Reading…

Only a third of children aged eight to 18 enjoyed reading in their free time in 2025, a 20-year low, according to the National Literacy Trust. For boys, this falls to a quarter.

'That drop-off in reading for pleasure naturally leads to a lack of desire to study a subject later on…If that's happening disproportionately with secondary-age boys, the natural follow-through is that they are less likely to take English literature at A-level.'

Anna Trethewey, Executive Director, AQA



The problem with English at GCSE…



Geoff Barton, Chair of inclusion taskforce for the Institute for Public Policy Research; former English teacher; former head of the Association of School and College Leaders

'The emphasis on the 19th-century novels and a crowded curriculum means that inevitably [teachers] go for Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or A Christmas Carol, because it's short. I think we're too obsessed with teaching children to analyse texts, rather than just enjoying the reading of text…

…young people often could not '*recognise themselves*' in the syllabus and had *to 'grind their way through an anthology of poetry and read a 19th-century pamphlet.'*

Geoff Barton

Our study

Key Research Questions

1. From the perspective of teachers, why are fewer students pursuing English Literature at post 16 level?
2. From the perspective of students, why are fewer students pursuing English literature at post 16 level?
3. What actions might policymakers, stakeholders, school leaders and heads of English departments take to strengthen recruitment to English literature at post 16 level?

In our small-scale pilot project, focus group interviews were conducted with English teachers/heads of English and with A level students (both those studying English literature and those who have chosen not to study it, despite being qualified) in three schools.

Progression and subject promotion

The absence of an identifiable vocational pathway from A level English Literature was repeatedly cited as influencing post-16 course decisions:

'I don't know what type of job you'd do from A Level English'

'I feel like there's more demand and higher pay in jobs to do with STEM and maths, rather than English'

'the only career that you're thinking that you can get with English is becoming an English teacher'

'no one really says why you would do English and where it would take you - I don't think I've ever had a conversation with someone where they said, oh, English can get you into this degree or this career pathway, ever'



GCSE English experience

The vast majority of students (both those who had selected A level and those who hadn't) spoke with some enthusiasm about English Literature at GCSE:
'I don't think many people don't choose English Lit because they don't like it, I think they choose it because they feel like other subjects have a greater importance.'

Criticism of text choices:
'They were all a lot about death, all of the main characters are mostly men. They just felt stuffy…Lord of the Flies is a book about boys, there are no female characters in it. You can't really relate to that as a book.'

Lack of transparency in the assessment process. Shared feelings of helplessness:
'talking to people, they start to hate English because they're not good at it, because they don't know how to be good at it.'



GCSE English teacher experience

English staff were <u>much</u> more negative about the GCSE experience than the students.

The amount of content was seen as restricting:
'You can't make the kids love a subject when all you're doing the whole time is rush. Got to get through it. Where's the love of reading? Where's that passion?'

Perception of the subject as boring:
'I also think it's quite hard as a teacher sometimes, to be enthusiastic about your subject, when it's so dull.'





A level English Literature Experience

Those students who had selected to take English Literature at A level all spoke of the welcome contrast with GCSE:
'The disconnect between GCSE and A-level is just crazy.'

'I think most people don't pick it for A Level because they think it's going to be the same as GCSE. I think if they had talked to us about that, maybe more people would have taken it.'

And teachers recognised the enthusiasm from students for critical autonomy:
'I've had quite a few students say, oh if I'd been taught like this at GCSE it might have been more fun. They're not used to being able to actually be encouraged to think about texts themselves'

So what can be done?

Quick fixes…

- Focused input from English teachers on how to revise for English examinations, with systematic feedback on completed work
- Some movement away from memorization? Cambridge will make all IGCSE English literature exams open book | Tes
- DfE Curriculum and Assessment Review recommends that students study texts drawn from the '*full breadth of our literary heritage, including more diverse and representative texts*'…
- …but keeps expectation of at least one play by Shakespeare, a selection of poetry, fiction or drama from the British Isles from 1914 onwards, and at least one 19th century novel – with no increase in the volume of content



'inquiring professionals'?

Our research suggests that English teachers and English teacher educators need to do more if we are concerned about the future of our subject:

- There is a need for English teachers to promote creativity and criticality in their approach to the texts at GCSE
- There is a need for English teachers to promote dialogue between teachers/students about the 'point' of English Literature
- There is a need for teacher educators in ITE to give space for future English teachers to 'think, reflect, critique, analyse and explore' the role of English teachers and the nature of English teaching



'we don't actually learn how useful English is. So, people don't see the point of it' [student participant]

Thank you – any questions?

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