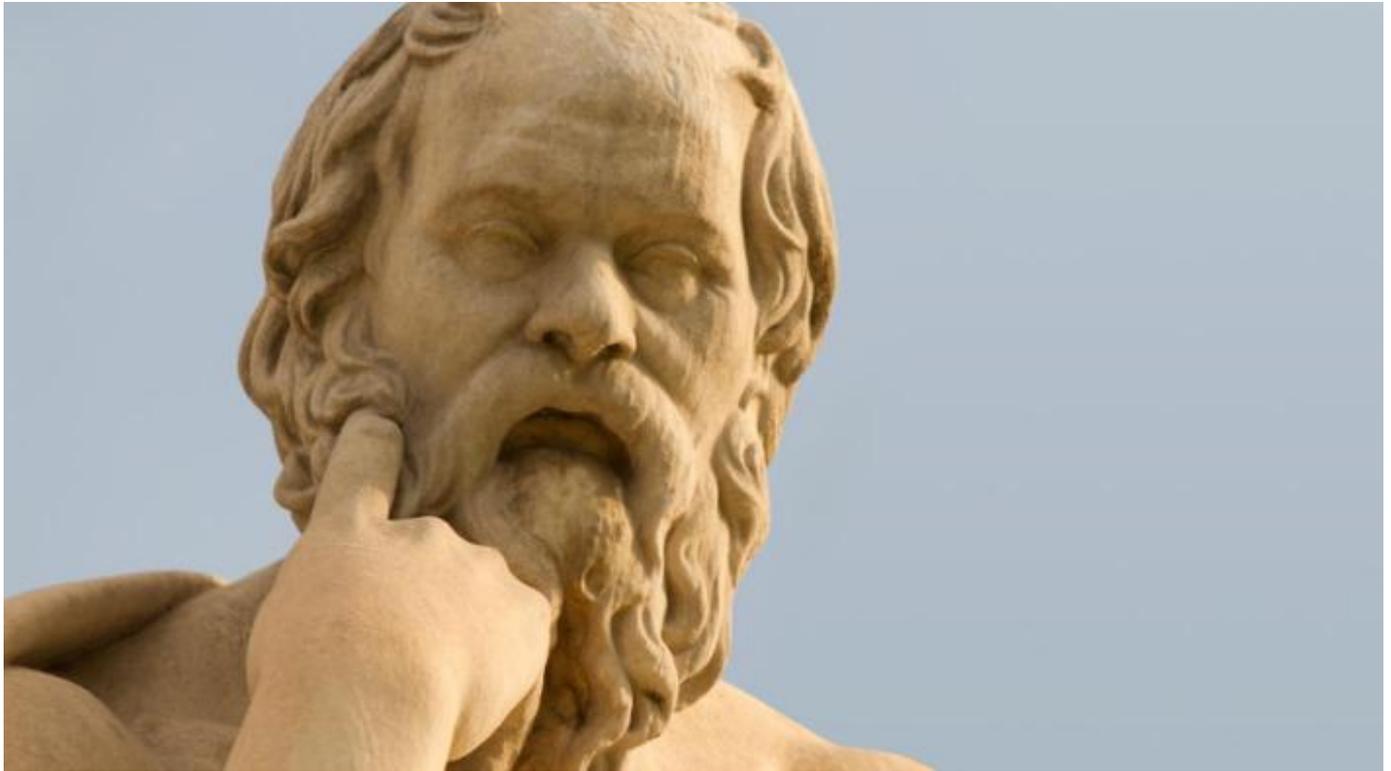# 'A Classics education can drive social mobility'

By **Matthew Fox** 19 December 2018

Dismissing the subject as elitist is wrongheaded – it's more relevant than ever, argues this expert in the field

Do you think of Classics as an elitist subject? The question reveals a great deal about prevailing attitudes towards education, as well as the problematic status of the subject itself. The presence of Classics in mainstream culture is reaching new heights, with an unbroken stream of TV programmes, novels, plays and video games set in the ancient world. And there is the enormous celebrity of Dame Mary Beard.

When it comes to the study of antiquity in schools, though, there is little trace of this popularity. Most children will leave school having had no contact with the subject beyond brief spells in primary school. In Scotland, provision of classical subjects was a particular casualty of a process of democratisation that gathered speed in the 1970s, and today the subject is rarely available outside the private sector. This is despite excellent curricula in classical studies and Latin within the Curriculum for Excellence.

So with the appeal of the subject mostly only recognised by private schools, it is understandable, though disturbing, that the subject itself has come to be seen as elitist. In fact, for most of its modern history, Classics has acted as an effective motor of social mobility, widely available, and acknowledged as a means to a more effective understanding of both history and the contemporary world.

Grasping thorny issues

Whatever the motivations that led to the subject's decline, in today's world, the value of Classics is greater than ever. Its capacity to transform is being increasingly recognised. Schools are well aware of how effective it is at enhancing children's opportunities, in particular their skills in literacy and analytical thought. It is multidisciplinary, encompassing history, literature, language, philosophy and archaeology. The classical world has strange and disturbing qualities, and it challenges all who engage with it to re-examine their own preconceptions, and develop a more generous view of different cultures and times.

But alongside this otherness, the ancient world contributed to most of the cultural and intellectual traditions of our own society. It acts as a powerful arena in which to confront thorny issues, from slavery to ecology, from gender roles to imperialism. So it helps us to understand the past, to understand ourselves and, through its powerful rhetorical models, to express all of that more effectively. Classics promotes a wider perspective, and, as a school subject, has the great advantage of being both rigorous and entertaining.

There are some reasons to hope for a revival. In March this year, we hosted an event in the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow, where about 50 people gathered to listen to inspirational accounts of the subject from teachers, educational leaders and pupils. The ACE project (Advocating Classics Education), is dedicated to increasing access to classical studies in state schools. We heard of the plans at Moray House in Edinburgh, which is working to reintroduce a Classics stream within postgraduate teacher training. The charity, Classics for All, offers funding to help schools wanting to introduce the subject. There is a welcoming and expanding teachers' network. And Glasgow City Council plans to roll out Latin in primary schools across the entire city during this year. At our universities, the subjects (Latin, Greek and classical civilisation) continue to recruit.

If we can find more schools that are willing to take a punt on Classics to provide training opportunities for graduate teachers, we will be well placed to open up this enriching world to new generations – and reverse a trend that, seen historically, is a small blip in the millennia-long dominance of Classics in education.

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Diversity   Equality   Private schools   Scotland   Social Mobility   Classics