

# BATTLING FOR LATIN: INSTRUCTORS AND STUDENTS ON THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING BEGINNERS' LATIN IN UK UNIVERSITIES

## ABSTRACT

Beginners' Latin courses play a crucial role in opening up the study of the ancient world to university students with little or no previous exposure to the language. Yet many learners struggle: in 2018, for example, 23% of undergraduates in UK universities either failed or withdrew from their beginners' Latin module. The current article reports on a series of semi-structured interviews dedicated to exploring with Latin students and their instructors the factors they perceive as contributing to success and failure, the overarching aim of the project being to identify potential strategies to improve student success.

**KEYWORDS:** Latin; Undergraduates; Pedagogy; Beginner's Language Teaching; Student Retention

## INTRODUCTION

Beginners' Latin modules represent a curious paradox. For students with little or no previous exposure to Latin before they reach university, these modules can play a crucial role in opening up the study of the ancient world and allowing their classical learning journey to take flight. However, what for many students is an eye-opening and potentially game-changing opportunity to take one step closer to the literature and thought world of ancient Rome is a far from positive experience for others. A 2014 survey of beginner's Latin teaching in UK universities conducted by the authors revealed that a sizeable proportion of undergraduates – 23% – either withdrew from or failed their beginners' Latin module (Lloyd and Robson 2018: 8). Or in other words, for

nearly a quarter of UK students the particular path into the classical world that Latin learning represents simply proved too challenging to negotiate. While acknowledging that “success” in the context of a beginner’s Latin modules can be understood in many ways, we were nevertheless keen to explore this unexpected finding further, not least because our own concerns about student failure on these modules were evidently shared by many institutions, too.

Universities in the UK commonly measure “student success” in terms of the number of students passing and completing modules – understandably so, perhaps, since “success” in these terms is closely linked to students’ ability to progress with, and ultimately complete, their chosen programme of study.

The current paper reports on a project specifically dedicated to examining the factors which Latin students and their instructors perceive as contributing to “student success,” failure and withdrawal amongst Latin beginners in UK universities, with a view to identifying potential strategies to improve pass and completion rates. One strand of this project involved collecting further statistical data from university departments. In 2019, we carried out a survey of 29 UK university Latin instructors – teaching 888 Latin beginners between them – to determine, amongst other things, whether pass rates had changed since 2014. The picture that emerged was all too familiar, however: 24% (212) of students who signed up for a beginner’s Latin module either withdrew or failed, with success rates ranging from 100% (in five institutions) to 50% and under (in another five). As part of this survey, we also collected information on variables such as class size, contact time, and textbooks used, but while these data offered some interesting food for thought, what they did not provide were simple explanations to account for the variations in student performance across different universities evident in figure 1.<sup>1</sup>

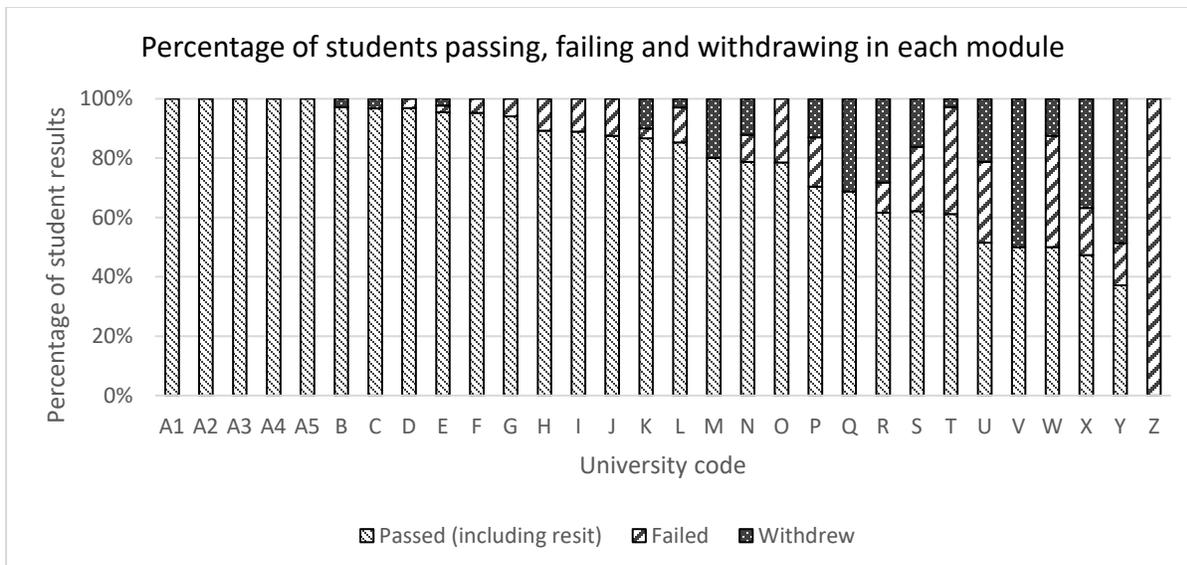


Figure 1 Beginners' Latin modules in UK universities listed by alphanumeric code,<sup>2</sup> showing starter pass, completer pass and withdrawal rates

Since statistics could clearly only take us so far, it was all the more important that we had built in a qualitative strand to our project. This involved face-to-face visits to a number of universities to observe lessons and conduct a series of interviews to help us understand better the challenges of *ab initio* language learning from the point of view of both instructors and students. It is the findings from the thematic analysis of these qualitative data that form the backbone of this publication. Importantly, then, this study breaks new ground by providing insight into the views and circumstances of those on the frontline of Latin learning on a depth and scale not attempted before, a key objective of our work being to furnish data and analysis which both exemplify and facilitate evidence-led discussions of Latin pedagogy in universities. This is not to say that all our findings will come as a surprise to seasoned instructors of Latin; rather, we see the data collected and analyzed in this study as important both for challenging *and* confirming individual's personal, and inevitably anecdotal, perspectives on how to support students to succeed. To aid discussions of this kind in the classroom itself, we also lay out the advice that learners would pass on to others about to embark on the study of beginners' Latin: study tips *in*

*the students' own words* which instructors can use to equip new learners with strategies to meet the challenges ahead.

Since a further aim of this paper is to contribute to current academic discussions of Latin pedagogy and its reform, we also seek to provide a formal research supplement to the work of those driving change in the field of ancient language teaching in schools and universities around the world.<sup>3</sup> As with many of these innovators, our work connects with emerging Modern Foreign Language (MFL) research on such topics as pedagogical approaches, error correction, perfectionism and anxiety, and the concept of communities of practice.<sup>4</sup> These connections highlight emerging fields for deeper exploration in future work rather than the focus of this exploratory project.

A study of this kind ultimately relies on the kindness and co-operation of others and our warm thanks go to the many Latin instructors and students who gave generously of their time in completing our surveys and answering our questions and particularly to those who made us so welcome in their classrooms. Our thanks also go to the British Academy and The Open University for their financial support of our work. It should also be noted that the data in this study was collected in 2019 and 2020 before the impact of Covid-19 was felt in the UK. At the time of the interviews, then, students and instructors were working in a context where face-to-face contact was the norm.

#### METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION: INTERVIEWS, OBSERVATIONS AND SURVEYS

In order to collect our data, we observed Latin classes at four universities, where we also spoke with groups of students either after or, in one case, during their class: a total of 28 students took part in a total of six group interviews. In addition, interviews were conducted with Latin instructors both at these four institutions and – to gain a broader base for our study – two others.

Interviews were semi-structured around a small number of open questions which invited comments about difficulties and mitigating factors connected with learning Latin, with interviewees also encouraged to introduce their own topics of concern and interest into our conversations. Lastly, students from the six universities in question were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire about their experience of learning Latin as beginners,<sup>5</sup> either instead of or in addition to speaking with us. 32 survey responses were received in total across the six universities. In the account that follows, generous use is made of quotations to illuminate and elaborate the points being made.

In terms of ethics, the project was run using best practice guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and our research plans were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Open University. We explained to participants that neither they nor their universities would be named in this report. Students were also promised that their feedback would not be passed on to their tutors, even in anonymous form.

## STUDENT AND TEACHER VOICES

Our account of the interviews and survey responses is divided into two main sections. The first looks at what are perceived to be the challenges of Latin learning – both general challenges, connected with students’ transition to a university life and learning, and subject-specific challenges, such as the perception of Latin itself as a challenging, time-consuming and sometimes “overwhelming” subject. The second section focuses on mitigating factors, that is to say, the “solutions” to the problems faced by Latin learners, generated either by instructors, jointly by instructors and students in partnership, or by the students themselves. Ahead of our conclusions – and to provide a counterbalance to the general focus in this article on the difficulties thrown up by beginners’ Latin – we provide an account of student enjoyment,

collecting together some of the positive comments that students made about their learning and sense of achievement.

In the attributions of quotations below, T indicates a comment made by a teacher/instructor, S a comment made by a student, and OSS a comment made in the anonymous online student survey. To preserve the anonymity of all involved to the greatest extent possible, we have not identified the home university of any participants.

## THE CHALLENGES OF LATIN LEARNING

### *GENERAL CHALLENGES: ADJUSTMENT TO UNIVERSITY LIFE AND LEARNING*

To begin with the difficulties of adjusting to university life, more than one instructor spoke of the challenges faced by first-year undergraduates who typically make up the bulk of *ab initio* students. For example, one respondent spoke of the “awful transition to university where they [students] are living away from home,” and students similarly spoke of their initial difficulties in making the switch to life at university.

S: Your first year of university [is] kind of like a battle for survival, you’re trying to keep everything in order and then you finally get the hang of it.

Several of our instructors also spoke of the growth in mental health problems amongst students, which could in turn be a factor in student withdrawal.

T: People who drop out tend to be people with really significant mental health problems and they ... they can’t attend anything, basically, or they are so far behind, or they can’t manage away from home, which has always been the case but is getting more so now.

A further common theme to emerge was the shift from school-style learning to the kind of independent study required at university level, which instructors saw as particularly challenging for students to negotiate.

T: At school there is a tendency for their hands to be held too much ... Every step towards their exam is hand-holding.

T: I think you also have actually a problem that if [students] have been pretty successful up to now and then they hit a bit of a wall and they suddenly can't do it ... do they have the strategies ... to say "this is a challenge, I am going to overcome it"?

Students were very much aware of this shift in the level of independence expected of them, too. Interestingly, a number evidently took pride in rising to the challenge, seeing this as part of a process by which they were maturing as learners.

S: GCSE [sc. secondary/high school study] is parrot fashion ... Whereas here, ... you're learning it properly.<sup>6</sup>

S: That's part of university: working it out for yourself.

A number of instructors also commented on the educational expectations and classroom behaviours of their students. A common concern here was students' fear of failure and making mistakes, which was thought to inhibit language learning.

T: Young people today are so risk-averse and anxious, and they are so terrified of making a mistake they won't open their mouths, and then that makes it very difficult to learn, if you are like that.

This was an issue recognised by students, too, some of whom clearly recognized the importance for language acquisition of feeling comfortable about making errors.

S: It's often a very difficult thing to accept that you make a mistake.

S: The fostering of this place where you're allowed to make mistakes is very important.

These comments intersect with recent MFL research into areas such as the importance of mistake-making in language learning, where “those who are fearful of making mistakes will simply not take the risks needed to make significant advances,” and with findings on the detrimental effects of perfectionism where “in children, adolescents, and emerging adults [it] is associated with a host of adjustment difficulties and related problems, including anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation” (Flett, Hewitt, Chang and Flett 2016: 77). Our own findings on factors that mitigate student challenges in Latin learning also coincide with the recommendations of various MFL researchers, who counsel the promotion of a supportive environment where mistakes are expected and accepted as part of the learning process (see below).<sup>7</sup> An important factor in encouraging learning from mistakes is the approach taken to error correction. For example, Truscott's reflection on meta-analyses of MFL research in this area highlights the difficulties of assessing the efficacy of error correction and the nature of conflicting findings.<sup>8</sup> Such formal research work has yet to be undertaken in relation to Latin beginners, though some teachers have recorded their own perceptions based on classroom experience,<sup>9</sup> or touched upon correction and quiz feedback in relation to learning theories.<sup>10</sup>

### *SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES: LATIN AS A “DIFFICULT” SUBJECT*

The instructors we interviewed were unanimous in their view that learning Latin presented a special set of challenges for university students, requiring the development of a distinct set of

skills. In particular, they noted that students often struggle with memorization and rote learning, with at least one respondent seeing these as skills which the study of ancient languages usefully helped students to develop.

T: They are not trained at the moment to memorise stuff, basically.

T: This generation of students finds learning by heart one of the most difficult things there is. ... I think we are giving them something very special when we make them learn in this way, it gives them another aspect to learning and what their brain can do.

One teacher felt that lack of linguistic aptitude held some students back.

T: Some people can be brilliant at maths, but in front of this kind of abstraction ... in front of Greek, in front of Latin, they lack it.

Certainly, a number of student respondents identified rote learning and memorization as challenging aspects of Latin learning.

S: I was really, really struggling with the endings.

S: [It's] just the memory, ... I *will* do it.

Some students educated in the British school system also lamented what they perceived as a lack of knowledge of English grammar.

S: The biggest issue that I had especially in the first couple of weeks was realising that because I've not studied any other language before ... I didn't really have any grasp of actual English grammar. ... I feel like if I'd have studied European languages maybe a little bit more, I'd be able to have something to compare that to.

In our interviews with students, one of the key areas we were keen to explore was what they had either struggled with themselves or had seen others struggle with in their Latin learning. In terms of subject content, while vocabulary learning was often found challenging, the area with which students found most difficulty was normally grammar.

S: Grammar, I think, is the hardest bit about Latin.

S: It's quite difficult for some of my friends to actually understand the working of the sentence.

S: The declension side of things has been quite complicated for a lot of the class.

Data from our survey revealed a wide range of views on how challenging students found their module: when asked how difficult they found beginners' Latin, 9 out of our 32 students answered "extremely" or "very" (28%), 14 "moderately" (44%), and a further 6 "somewhat" (19%). In contrast, only 3 of these 32 students (9%) found beginners' Latin no more difficult than their other modules.

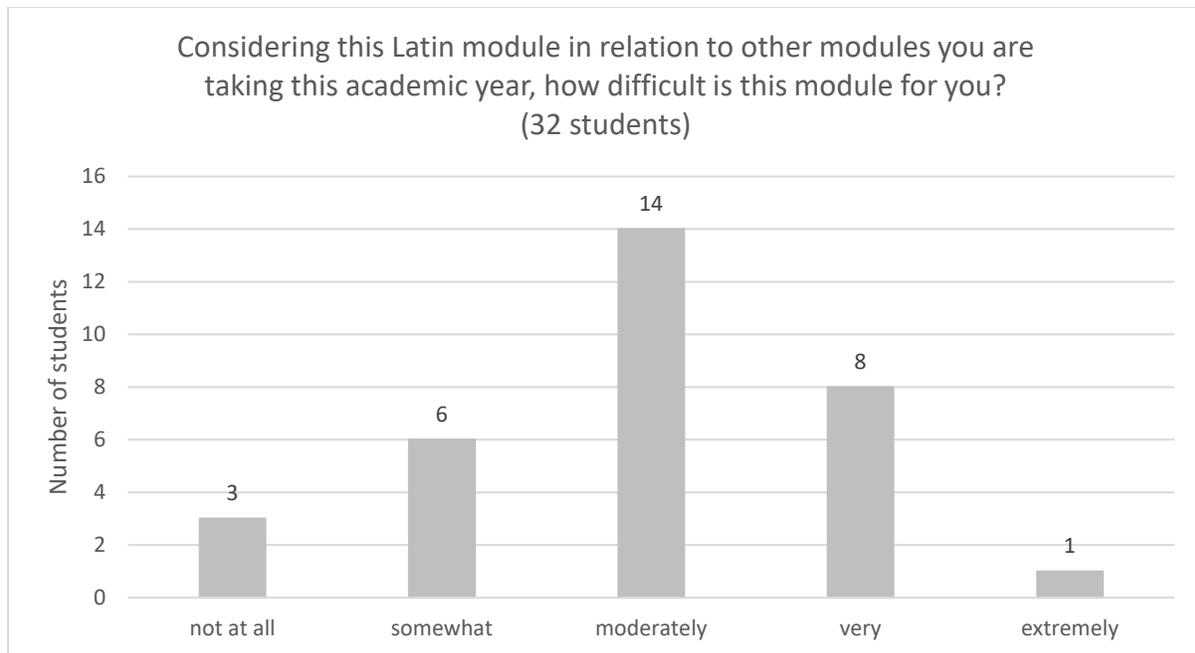


Figure 2 Student responses to the question “How difficult is this module for you?”

The challenge commonly identified by students of memorizing both vocabulary and, in particular, Latin’s numerous grammatical paradigms is worth reflecting on for a moment. It is, after all, important to note that the central role played by rote learning in much university-level Latin pedagogy in the UK is built on the assumption that the analytical understanding of grammar and ability to recall grammatical paradigms is key to “learning” the language, a view which conforms to the expectations of what is known as the Grammar-Translation method of language teaching.<sup>11</sup> As our interviews, classroom observations and survey revealed, Grammar-Translation is still the dominant method of teaching of Latin. However, in the world of modern language pedagogy, this method has been challenged and largely superseded by Communicative Approaches that foreground all four language skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing – and encourage use of the language in communication.<sup>12</sup> A similar challenge to the exclusive use of Grammar-Translation is slowly emerging in the field of ancient language pedagogy, too.<sup>13</sup> Most notably, in the USA and mainland Europe, but in other continents, too, fully

communicative approaches that foreground productive as well as receptive language skills are finding increasing use – though interestingly only a small number of UK university instructors reported using these in their teaching.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the most significant alternative approach currently employed in the UK is probably the “Reading Approach” which sees learners acquire their understanding of new vocabulary and syntax predominantly through reading stories rather than through direct instruction. A further pedagogical method called “Comprehensible Input,” that has evolved from ideas originally put forward by Krashen in the 1980s,<sup>15</sup> is widely practised by Latin teachers in the USA. Comprehensible Input foregrounds language acquisition through listening to, and then reading, target language material that gradually increases in difficulty while remaining comprehensible to the student, but, at least initially, does not promote production.<sup>16</sup> Of the four university classes we visited, only one diverged from the Grammar-Translation method to any significant extent by providing a lesson high in communicative content.<sup>17</sup> Further research into the effects of different pedagogical approaches could potentially lead to a shift in the primacy of memorisation of paradigms and vocabulary in Latin instruction, along with reconsideration of the central – and often exclusive – role these play in assessing student attainment.

#### *SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES: LATIN AS A TIME-CONSUMING SUBJECT*

The amount of time required for successful Latin learning was put forward as a significant factor in student success and failure by all the instructors we interviewed. A common view was that successful completion of a beginners’ language module required a level of time commitment over and above that needed to secure a pass in non-linguistic modules.

T: In theory the hours required are the same as any other course, we know that in practice it is not true. ... With their other subjects, if they don't put very much work into it, it doesn't matter that much, but with this if they don't it is very, very hard to catch up.

Indeed, for many instructors, the time commitment was the key to student success. Put simply, those students who put in the hours succeed, those who do not risk failing.

T: Every time I look at grade sheets, the students who get 2:1s or firsts or whatever [i.e. marks equating to the highest degree classifications], they have come to the classes. The students who are on the borderline of failing are not coming to class, they are not turning up.

T: [The reason why students withdrew] was the amount of time it takes if you want to do it properly, and not everybody was prepared to invest that time.

T: Usually, the reasons for failing, well, ... they have not put the necessary effort [in] ... .

Students, too, were very much aware of the amount of time they needed to devote to Latin learning and the importance of attending classes and completing work – as well as the benefits of a “little and often” study pattern.

S: It's probably the module that I have the most work in.

S: [It's] quite important to stay in the system either with turning up or going over what you know or regularly doing your homework at a certain time ... that sort of thing.

S: It's a different way of consuming knowledge ... It's something that you have to do a little bit at a time, and frequently. So, you need to do a little bit almost every day in order to have that consolidation.

Student comments about high workload are echoed in data from our online student survey, too, which confirmed that a large proportion of the 32 learners who responded found their beginners' module "extremely" or "very" time-consuming (14 students or 44%), with all but one of the students finding it at least "somewhat" more time-consuming than other subjects.

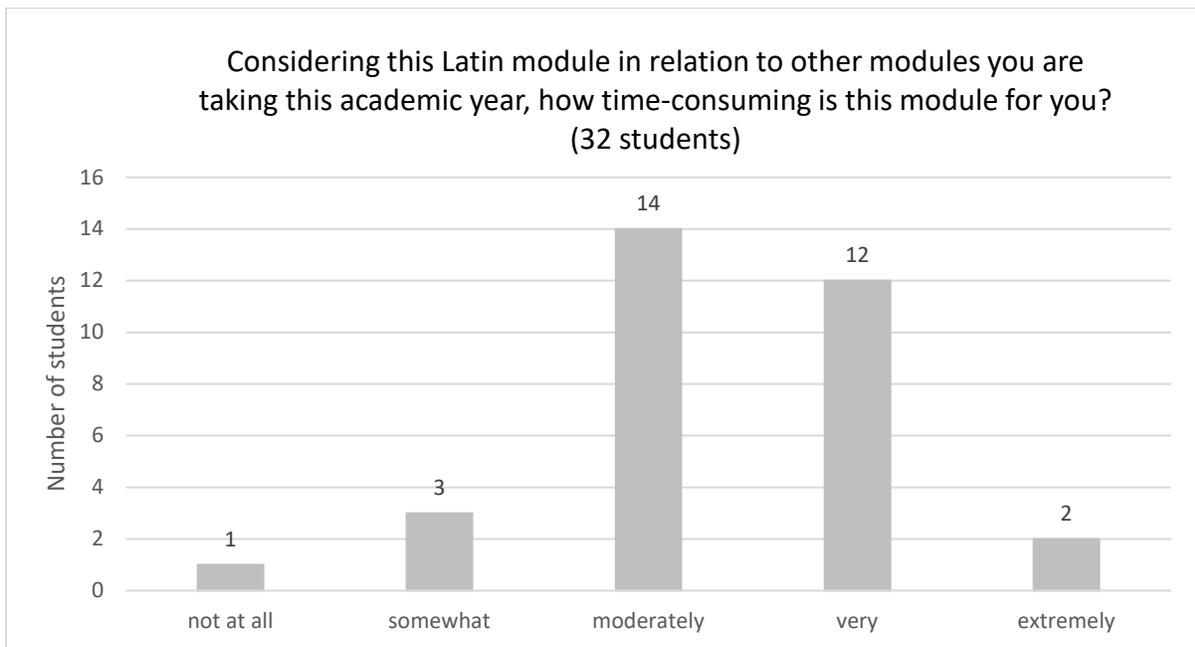


Figure 3 Student responses to the question "How time-consuming is this module for you?"

Something that makes a consistent and significant time commitment so important for most students is the cumulative nature of language learning, with the first few weeks of the module cited by more than one instructor as particularly key in building foundational skills and knowledge.

T: I think usually [failing students] have not put the work in early on, we have lost them in the first few weeks, really, the first three or four weeks and they just never catch up, and then they just panic.

T: Students ... might come to the first couple of classes, miss a couple of classes, come back and think, “What the hell is going on?” ... and I think in a way that isn’t necessarily as stark, as blatant with other courses that you take.

T: [With other modules] the week before the essay, or the night before the essay, they put all the work and they produce an essay, and you cannot possibly do that with Latin.

Although this has not explicitly emerged from the comments here, it seems likely that the time demands of Latin are at least in part related to the volume of vocabulary and grammar paradigms that it is considered necessary to memorise to succeed in most courses. The centrality of these skills in *ab initio* university level study of Latin has been evidenced in the authors’ previous research (Lloyd and Robson 2018: 20-25).

*SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES: BEGINNERS’ LATIN AS FAST-PACED – AND POTENTIALLY OVERWHELMING*

Perhaps inevitably given student comments about the high workload demands placed on them by Latin, several found the pace of their Latin module challenging.

S: I was quite, yeah, surprised by the pace.

S: Suddenly I’m just being handed, like, 15 different word endings in one chapter so ... I think it would have been much less effort on my part and much less stressful if that had been introduced more slowly.

OSS: A slower pace would help me to consolidate.

A particular concern voiced by many students was the difficulty of catching up if they were forced to miss lessons. Indeed, students of all abilities spoke of feeling overwhelmed at times, particularly in the initial stages of their studies.

S: If you miss a lesson you do kind of feel a bit overloaded with work because already you have to do quite a bit of work in your own time to stay up to the date with it. So, if you miss, like, a lesson for a reason ... you kind of feel a bit overloaded with the amount of stuff you now have to get through.

OSS: I find the workload between lessons can sometimes be overwhelming and I end up spending a lot more time on Latin than any of my other modules.

A common reaction here was to counsel anyone finding themselves in a similar position to stay calm and keep working and to look forward to a time when they will feel more confident.

S: If you just ... don't stress too much about being overwhelmed or being behind, then you'll be fine.

S: It's ... trying to stick with it ... it's bound to click eventually. Like ... everything's going to be tough in the beginning when you're new to it.

Interestingly, a number of instructors had reflected on how the pacing of their modules impacted on students – although presenting students with less material was not seen as a panacea.

T: The speed at which the module advances is sometimes what makes some students ... have difficulties. ... Sometimes these modules go too fast for them.

T: I often wonder to myself, am I driving them too much and how easy could I make it?  
But on the other hand, some people ... almost however little you did, somehow they still  
would not rise to it.

As with total time required, pace is no doubt influenced by the amount of vocabulary and grammar requiring mastery through memorisation (although the final teacher comment above also points to other factors that prevent some students from succeeding). This quantity is frequently driven by the perception that students should be able to access challenging authentic Latin texts by ancient authors as quickly as possible.<sup>18</sup> Revisiting the effects of this ambition on the curriculum and those who study it may be one worthwhile approach to making success more attainable.

#### MITIGATING FACTORS: TEACHER-GENERATED, SHARED AND STUDENT-GENERATED SOLUTIONS

Our research suggests that the instructor and student each have a role to play, both individually and jointly, in promoting student success. Here we first consider four types of “solutions” that teachers can be involved in generating either individually or in concert with students: the teacher-student relationship, the choice of textbook, the pedagogical approach and, with the collaboration of the students, the classroom atmosphere and peer support outside the classroom. We then go on to look at the actions and attitudes that students themselves perceive as driving success.

#### *TEACHER-GENERATED SOLUTIONS: INSTRUCTOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP*

The class instructor plays a hugely important role in student learning through determining factors such as the pedagogical approach, learning objectives and assessment of the module – as well as

being the personality which students will come to associate with their beginner's Latin studies. One point to come through clearly in the student interviews was the positive attachment that many students felt for their Latin teachers.

S: Credit where credit's due, ... this particular lecturer is amazing ... this isn't a political statement, but they make a difference to what's going on. ... It makes a massive difference having somebody that cares about what they do. And they're good at it.

Indeed, when asked in what ways their experience of Latin learning had been positive, many students made complimentary comments about their teachers, characteristically emphasising qualities such as instructors' energy, approachability, supportiveness, patience and inclusiveness.

OSS: The teaching is dynamic and exciting.

S: Our teacher's very patient and doesn't ... get frustrated with us and specially when each of us learn at a different level and have different confidence with Latin ... [s/he] makes sure that we understand, like, our terminology and the grammar behind the text and ... and [s/he] allows each of us to participate in class ... instead of having the most confident person always.

In the online student survey, too, when students were invited to comment on the "good points" of their module, many chose to single out their teacher.

OSS: Good teaching

OSS: Good teacher interaction

OSS: I have really appreciated the teaching method which has been used.

When asked about their teaching style, instructors articulated a wide range of qualities they sought to bring to the classroom, with many stressing the importance of approachability.

T: I hope [the way I teach] is quite approachable and friendly ... I don't want to be that strict grammar person at the front of the room.

The importance of making individual connections with class members was also highlighted by both students and instructors alike.

S: You need someone that knows what they're doing and someone who has the time and dedication to be able to interact with people on an individual basis.

T: [Students] always say that they enjoy the fact that they actually feel that in every single lesson they get individual attention.

Teachers mentioned striving to establish an atmosphere in which students felt comfortable about asking questions.

T: If they are struggling, they will tell me, even though I will obviously know, but they will come to me if they are struggling and they don't mind ... particularly this class, they don't mind presenting their difficulties in front of the others which is really, really nice. They don't feel foolish.

These efforts were clearly appreciated by students, especially when they felt that it allowed them to feel comfortable about participating in class.

S: [Our teacher] doesn't, like, judge us or, like, make us feel bad for making a mistake, [s/he] instead, like ... "Ah yes, this is why you made the mistake and here's how you can not make the mistake again," which is really useful.

S: I've messed up multiple times and I've never felt like I should be incredibly embarrassed or anything.

The evident importance of providing a classroom environment where students can make mistakes and ask questions while maintaining confidence in their own learning abilities is echoed in MFL research as a means of mitigating the effects of perfectionism, anxiety and mental health illustrated identified earlier.<sup>19</sup>

A further quality that many instructors were keen to convey to their students was their enthusiasm for the subject – something that students, in turn, often picked up on and found inspiring.

T: It is what I am here for, to teach Latin. I enjoy it, I enjoy it enormously and I think that is the best ever! I am here doing this, yay! ... And, if I am passing that to my students, it couldn't be better.

S1: You can tell [our instructor] really likes teaching Latin.

S2: Yeah, [s/he]'s passionate.

S1: So, it's almost infectious ... which is brilliant.

#### *TEACHER-GENERATED SOLUTIONS: CHOICE OF TEXTBOOK*

An important consideration for instructors was being able to display confidence in their teaching materials – which leads on to another common thread to emerge from our interviews with instructors, namely the struggle to find what they deemed to be the right textbook for their class. A key factor for instructors here was identifying a textbook whose approach aligned with their own teaching preferences. Indeed, more than one teacher reported recently changing the textbook used.

T: The thing that is of most concern to me is the book ... I have intentionally chosen a slightly easier book ... because I think it is important for the students to get the basics in a very straightforward way ... and I know that this is not ideal, but I just wonder how much the course book affects results, whether it affects retention rates. ... this is my biggest challenge.

T: My confidence in the [new] book means I am happy with the book and so I therefore think I give ... the students more confidence ... . A symbiotic relationship is going on there – if they are enjoying the book, which they do, and I am enjoying it, that enjoyment comes across to them and they want to learn it more ... progress is naturally quicker and undoubtedly better overall.

In line with this last comment, students' enjoyment of the subject, the class and the storyline of the Latin passages they translate were recognised by instructors as intrinsic motivating factors:

T: If they enjoy it, they will work.

T: They have to enjoy the class ... [and think] it's a nice lesson, they enjoyed, the story [is] interesting.

Some Latin textbooks were clearly found more appealing than others by students. Where learners had good things to say, they often singled out the pace at which material is introduced, the clarity and structure of the textbook, and the importance of a strong storyline for their motivation and learning.

S: I do actually really like the textbook that we have. I feel it progresses at like the exact rate that I want to be progressing at ... it's like each week feels like the next natural step.

OSS: Very structured textbook which is easy to follow and revise from.

S: You find yourself kind of wanting to know what happens next.

S: Having that ongoing narrative kind of makes a little memory garden.

These last two comments highlight the importance of appealing stories in driving intrinsic motivation to study.<sup>20</sup> This is a key factor in the design of school level textbooks, particularly those that rely on the Reading Approach,<sup>21</sup> but it is not always evident in the coursebooks used in UK universities.<sup>22</sup>

#### *TEACHER-GENERATED SOLUTIONS: PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH*

When it came to articulating their approach to teaching, a large number of instructors admitted to drawing on their own experiences as a (successful) learner of Latin and teaching as they had been taught themselves.

T: Certainly, I learnt in – shall we say? – the most old-fashioned way, but I guess because that is the way I was taught, that is the way I teach generally speaking – but obviously with some adaptations to the 21st century!

Interviewer:     What it is that motivates you to teach like this?

T:                    I think it was because it was how I was taught, I guess. ... I have done what worked for me.

This said, instructors characteristically recognized a variety of learning styles and often discussed different techniques for learning with their students.

T: I ... go through different things that I know have worked for people in the past, so from getting flatmates to test you on your vocab ... Or, putting grammar charts or translations

up around your room ... when you are trying to learn your endings and that kind of thing. And, one thing that used to work for me was just recording it, because I think I am just quite an auditory learner, so I used to record it and then you can be learning or you can be revising while you are sweeping the floor or walking to the bus stop and no one has to know you are listening to yourself reading Latin!

Some strong views emerged from our conversations with instructors as to how effective learning might best be realized, with divergent attitudes towards the efficacy of technology and the value of vocabulary tests, for example. Two instructors also articulated their bold experiments with spoken Latin (Communicative Approach) and with “active learning” through technology respectively. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the mastery of grammar and vocabulary were often seen as the key to student success, with grammar generally seen as the more important element by instructors.

T: I have privileged grammar because I want to make sure they understand it, because I don't want them to go away thinking, “Oh God, I have no idea what is going on there.”

T: I do see the importance of having a firm basis in grammar and syntax, before you are let loose with real texts.

T: I suppose ... the really solid essence of [my teaching] is a really strong grammatical emphasis and then they can fly, as long as they have learnt their vocabulary.

These three quotations seem to legitimise taking a grammar-led approach to Latin teaching, but in their turn rest on the assumption that grammar learning is central to Latin learning. This is closely linked to the belief that Latin language learning takes place through direct and explicit grammar instruction and the memorisation of forms. As signalled above, this once common

belief is, however, now strongly contested in relation to MFL, where language development is held to take place through active use in situations of relevance to the students.<sup>23</sup> The question as to whether MFL learning theories can be successfully applied to ancient languages is very much a live one and is the subject of an emerging body of research, especially amongst adherents of Comprehensible Input and Communicative Approaches.

While proponents of these two pedagogical approaches have so far failed to win many converts amongst instructors of classical languages in UK universities, this is certainly not to say that Latin teaching practices have remained static in UK universities, however. Indeed, one of the striking aspects of our interviews being the extent to which instructors had reflected on their teaching and had often made major changes to their classes, e.g. researching and changing textbooks, creating significant online materials, and occasionally effecting a radical change in teaching methods (e.g. the enthusiastic adoption by one instructor we observed of a Communicative Approach).<sup>24</sup> However, for many instructors, problems of student dropout and failure evidently remained frustratingly difficult to solve.

T: I have put, I have to say, a huge amount of time and effort into this and sometimes I get extremely demoralised by it, because, you know, I sort of think, “What more can I do?” ... and I try so hard, and I sometimes even ... I want to say, “I want to get into your head and try to work out, what is it? What do I need to say differently? What is it that you are not getting about this?” and, you know, I try to get them to tell me what it is that they don’t understand about it. Very, very difficult.

Lastly, we did see that where a communicative method and dramatization were used in class, these elements were generally (though not always) very well received.

OSS: It's a fast, effective method of learning the language in context.

S: It's more interactive and ... a mix, more visual really, so you're reading what's on the pages but then also seeing it ... it is funny, so you remember it more because it's entertaining.

S: ... this is genuinely learning [Latin] it as if it was, I don't know, as if you were becoming like bilingual in a way. You are associating it [meaning] with the language itself rather than your first language, if that makes sense.

Exploration of wider pedagogical approaches may be a promising avenue for action research among UK university instructors – though the time constraints that many teaching staff find themselves under may well act as a deterrent to undertaking the necessary training and engaging in experimentation.

#### *SHARED SOLUTIONS: CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AND PEER SUPPORT*

Another common theme to emerge in our student interviews concerned the importance of peer-to-peer interaction, with a strong group bond clearly in evidence in some of the interviews we conducted and the classes we observed. At a number of institutions, students spoke positively of the group dynamic that they experienced in their Latin classes – and which their instructor had taken time to build.

S: I think [the teacher] does create, like, a little Latin community ... we were happy to talk with each other and help each other out ... [the teacher] stimulates that as well and inspires confidence in that sense.

A number of students singled out the usefulness of collaborative learning both inside and outside the classroom.

S: I find the best way that I learn is interactively, so like in a group. So, when we're doing the exercises in class, that's perfect for me because we're discussing. ... And it's the same for vocab for me. So, it would either be like meeting up outside a class, like going to the library or meeting up in a kitchen and just chilling and going through these words.

This sense of a "Latin community" was sometimes strengthened by students using modern technology. One class reported forming their own WhatsApp group and Quizlet set, while a student in another institution talked of developing a customized Memrise course and sharing it with a friend.

S: We formed a WhatsApp group and Quizlet class set to work together in ... learning the vocab or if we needed to like ask questions between each other about any work in the class.

In comments like this, students articulated the importance to them of learning through interaction with others – both instructors, who have greater mastery of the topic, and peers with a similar level of subject knowledge whose co-participation also leads to learning. These insights are very much in line with the findings of MFL theorists who follow the lead of Vygotsky in highlighting the important role that social interaction can play in language acquisition.<sup>25</sup>

#### *STUDENT-GENERATED SOLUTIONS: PEER-TO-PEER ADVICE*

Where student interviewees responded in a particularly engaged way was in response to our questions about what advice they would offer to someone embarking on the study of Latin at university for the first time. A representative selection of comments is reproduced below,

presented as 12 key points with illustrative student quotations and grouped under 3 main headings: expectations, actions and attitude.

### *Expectations*

#### ***1. Accept that it's going to be tough at first.***

S: Don't fight it, like, let it happen, let [the instructor] help you, don't get snarky, don't go home and be annoyed that ... you had to sit through an hour lecture and you didn't understand it. Like, accept that it's the flow of it and that, eventually, you will get the hang of it ... give yourself time to understand it, and I think most people will be surprised how, in a few months' time, the last thing on your mind is how difficult the genitive is, because it's not anymore.

S: You just have to stick and to stay strong in the beginning, but it will get easier.

#### ***2. Accept that you will feel overwhelmed at times.***

S: Just [don't] panic, because it *will* be overwhelming. It's not that bad, it calms down, and it's quite regular and quite predictable as a course.

#### ***3. Accept that learning Latin is time-intensive and requires frequent recapitulation.***

S: I think it is just a case of accepting that you are going to do a lot of work for it ... It is that constant repetition and constantly going over things that is going to take a lot of time.

S: It's just hard work. Latin is just working and keep repeating, it's the only way. That's quite a boring answer, but that's the only way I did it.

S: I think going over things you've done before because you don't realise how much doesn't stick into your head.

S: Grammar ... that's something you ... need to learn in small intervals in order for it to really sink in.

***4. Be prepared to make mistakes.***

S: It's often a very difficult thing to accept that you make a mistake. ... [It] happens all the time, so you just get used to it which has really helped.

*Actions*

***5. Don't miss classes.***

S: Stay on top of the work. ... Don't miss any of the lessons.

S: Learning [grammar] on your own is very difficult process versus learning in a classroom environment with a teacher that has such a wealth of knowledge to ... correct you if you make an error or understand why you don't get that.

***6. Don't get behind with work.***

S: I'd definitely say do the work at the start ... otherwise it really comes back to bite you.

S: I would recommend not to fall behind, it's quite hard to catch up.

***7. Adopt a regular, "little and often" study pattern.***

S: Just do little by little. ... It's maybe ... a discipline; Latin is very much a disciplined subject, I think.

S: I know that if you work efficiently a little bit every day or every, like, often enough, you can get easily around.

**8. Ask questions in class – and ask for help as soon as you need it.**

S: Don't be afraid to ask questions.

S: If you don't understand something, you, kind of, have to sort it out straightaway, and if you don't, it becomes a recurring problem.

S: Don't be intimidated by individual learning [i.e. one-to-one sessions with an instructor].

**9. Focus on learning grammar – and vocabulary.**

S: My advice would be focus on the grammar at the start.

S: [Vocabulary is] quite easy to pick up because a lot of Latin has similarities with English ... So that's ... much easier than grammar rules to try and memorise.

S: Just learn the vocab. Just learning vocab will help you because ... you can translate if you've got the vocab, and then that makes it easier to see the grammatical concepts if you actually know the words.

S: You have to just make sure you have the vocab, you have the grammar, otherwise you're, like, sinking and going down very deep.

**10. Find a learning style that works for you.**

S: I find the best way that I learn is interactively, so like in a group.

S: I just find copying the tables down like helps me memorise it.

S: I ... wrote down a load of vocabulary on a piece of paper... I've put them on my wall and ... on my desk right in front of me.

S: I learn very much from ... reading [a Latin passage] and trying to understand it in the moment, and then going back and finding out exactly what's happening ... what I learn from is writing out the grammar behind it and then going and reading it again.

S: When you focus on pronunciation, it helps with spelling as well.

S: I listen to the audios [of Latin passages] on my way to class, which I know is kind of sad ... .

S: I use Memrise and that's my saviour.

### ***11. Build a Latin community.***

S: We formed a WhatsApp group and Quizlet class set to work together in ... learning the vocab or if we needed to like ask questions between each other about any work in the class.

## *Attitude*

### ***12. Enjoy it!***

S: It's really refreshing to not be learning about the history part of [the ancient world], but literally just [to be] learning a language.

S: It's nice not to have backlogs of essays.

S: The translation is the fun part ... there's something very satisfying about getting to the translation stage.

OSS: It's so outside what I normally study! Was a new way to study, but is good fun.

## STUDENT ENJOYMENT

So far, this discussion in this article has largely focused on the perceived challenges of teaching and learning beginners' Latin, but the last piece of peer-to-peer advice outlined above – “Enjoy it!” – is also worth dwelling on, not least since enjoyment of the subject was identified as an important motivating factor for students by our interviewees. When asked what they enjoyed about Latin, many of our student respondents expressed their sense of achievement and pleasure at making progress in what they perceived to be a challenging subject.

S: I wouldn't say it's easy but ... even where I struggle, it's sort of like I'm enjoying ... tackling it.

Particularly striking was the excitement that a few of our student interviewees conveyed about making etymological connections between Latin and English.

S: I was looking at the word “door” [*ianua*] and then I was like, “Oh, that looks similar to ‘janitor’.” I clicked on it and then it was like “doorkeeper,” and I was just like, “Oh, this is just so cool.” I was studying with my friends in their kitchen who didn't do Latin and I was just like, “Guys, this is the best thing!”

For some students, Latin was thought to be refreshingly different from other modules, especially because it did not involve writing essays. When students voiced these opinions, they tended to single out as positives the self-contained nature of the subject and the clarity as to what was expected of them as learners. A small number of linguistically confident students – who clearly

enjoyed the kind of structured rote learning which their modules involved – even went as far as saying that they found Latin a straightforward subject in which they found it easy to succeed.

S: I think it's probably one of the easiest courses to do ... It's just very easily set out and you can revise quite easily. ... and you understand what's required of you in the exam.

S: It's very good to just have one subject a week that you know you're going to be right or wrong, and you will understand quite easily why you're wrong or right.

S: I can easily just sit down and smack a vocab test or a translation.

Finally, some students expressed a genuine sense of joyful achievement when they succeeded in their Latin studies – felt all the more keenly, perhaps, given the perception outlined above that Latin is a challenging subject.

S: You do feel such a high when you get things right in Latin. It's just so satisfying!

In fact, a large proportion of students responding to our online survey claimed to enjoy their Latin studies. Of the 32 learners who responded, 8 (25%) found their beginners' module "extremely" enjoyable, 12 (38%) "very" enjoyable, a further 8 (25%) finding it "moderately" so. Only 3 (9%) of the 32 students who responded to our survey said that they did not enjoy their beginners' Latin module at all.

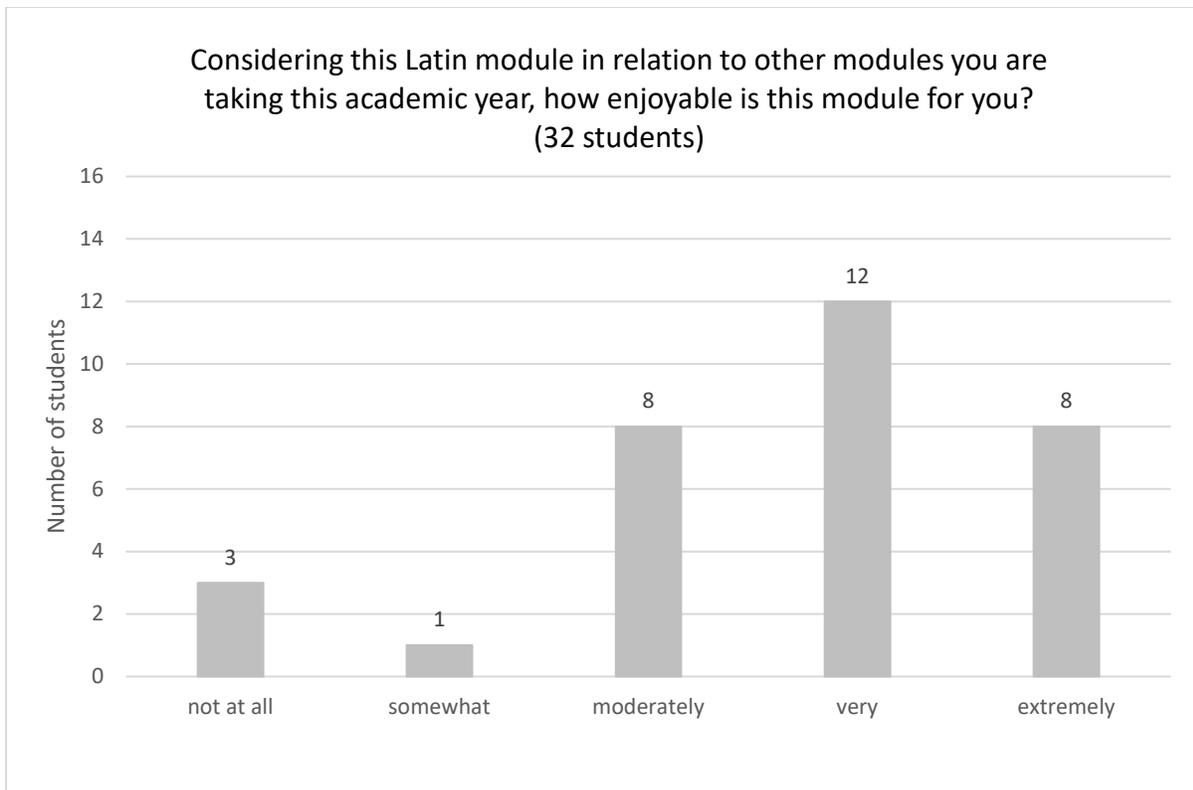


Figure 4 Student responses to the question “How enjoyable is this module for you?”

While it is heartening to find such enthusiasm among the students who engaged with this research, it is plausible that those who were enjoying their studies were more motivated to complete the survey. Certainly, these proportions do not reflect the number of withdrawals and failures identified in our initial survey of UK university departments.

## CONCLUSION

A particularly rewarding part of this project is that it allowed us to have stimulating conversations with some extraordinary teachers and learners whose thoughtfulness and passion for their subject were often inspiring. These conversations allowed us insight not only into the perceived challenges of learning *ab initio* Latin at university, but also the range of strategies that instructors and students had developed in response to these. Importantly, our conversations – along with the classroom observations we undertook – allowed us to see that variables such as

class size and the choice of textbook (the kind of factors we had initially mapped statistically against student outcomes in a bid to find a straightforward explanation for variations in pass rates) were only of limited value in helping us to understand students' learning journeys. Rather, for any given module and/or cohort of students a complex series of interactions was in play, often on the human level.

Crucially, our classroom observations and interviews with students and instructors provided some useful insights into what these interactions might comprise. We were repeatedly struck by the importance of a whole series of interactions between the teacher (and their preferred pedagogical approach) and the students (and *their* preferred learning approach) with the textbook and class dynamic both inside and outside the classroom also forming a crucial part of the mix. Instructively, too, we saw how a wide range of teaching styles – some more traditional, some more experimental than others – could work for many, though not necessarily all, students in a given class. In short, while the pedagogical approach adopted by the instructor is clearly important, so are the commitment and enthusiasm of the participants (the instructor included); students' contentment with the teaching, textbook, and expectations on them as learners; and the existence of a supportive and collaborative learning culture. Our interviews certainly revealed how positive interactions – especially between student and teacher or student and textbook – contributed to students' motivation and self-assurance as learners of Latin.

Capturing student voices was particularly rewarding, since these allow for a better understanding of not only the struggles that students face but also the numerous things that they value and take pleasure in when learning Latin (not all of which may be obvious to their teachers in their day-to-day classroom interactions). The enthusiasm with which students greeted the task of advising future generations of Latinists was particularly heartening to witness and, indeed, the advice that

they would pass on to future learners of Latin seems to us to be particularly important for instructors to take into account. Striking, too, was the admiration and affection that many students held for their teachers and a number of instructors, too, mentioned how their own Latin teachers had provided inspiration for them to pursue their own careers in teaching. While such relationships continue to flourish, the future of Latin in universities can only be full of hope.

Meanwhile there are important factors that need to be explored further. We have touched upon the effects of perfectionism, anxiety and mental health and also the mitigating effects provided by a supportive classroom environment. However, we have neither probed nor understood the ways in which such perfectionism is encouraged nor whether this is a particular problem for Latinists as opposed to learners of other languages. Might the damaging effects of perfectionism be addressed through the adoption of either different or a more diverse range of pedagogical and assessment approaches – ones that are more accepting of the learning value of making mistakes and that place less emphasis on the precise analysis of linguistic forms and more on meaning-making? This also begs the question of whether what is assessed in *ab initio* Latin courses does actually lead to the learning ambitions we have for our students in terms of allowing them to access and derive pleasure from ancient literature.

In future research there is no doubt scope to take on these bigger questions and to understand student perspective better still, as well as to capture the thoughts of an important group of learners who are rarely represented (e.g. in end-of-module surveys or, indeed, projects like this one), namely students who withdraw or have failed. A useful question to ask such students would be what could be done to help those struggling with Latin as they did. Our interviews suggested a number of potential strategies here, including additional academic support in the early stages of learning and facilitation of peer group interaction and mentoring. It would also be

valuable to undertake research to evaluate the effectiveness of such initiatives. With nearly a quarter of UK university students failing to complete their beginner's Latin module successfully, reflecting on how the battle for beginners' Latin can be won for a greater proportion of learners has never been more vital.

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<sup>1</sup> To summarize our findings boldly, our analysis suggested that while some factors, such as module length and credit weighting, have no statistically demonstrable impact on student outcomes, a high number of contact hours, the use of certain textbooks, and the inclusion of “other assessed coursework” on a module were often associated with stronger student outcomes. These data and the results of our analysis will be reported in a separate article: Lloyd and Robson, in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> Alphanumeric codes represent university modules and are used to preserve the anonymity of institutions. This table orders universities from A1 to Z according to the starter pass rate (i.e. the percentage of students initially enrolled who passed the module), with those achieving 100% all coded A. One institution had two distinct cohorts of students, each taught using a different textbook and different teaching methods. These were given separate alphanumeric codes, with the result that there are 30 codes covering 29 universities.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Carlon 2013; Rasmussen 2015; Hunt 2016; Lloyd 2017; Holmes-Henderson, Hunt and Musié 2018; Lloyd and Robson 2019; Adema 2019; numerous worldwide contributors in Lloyd and Hunt 2021; Manning 2021.

<sup>4</sup> For summaries of MFL methods and approaches, see, for example, Celce-Murcia 1991; Ellis and Shintani 2013: 31-51; Richards and Rodgers 2015; Lloyd 2017: 56-66. For accounts of theories, see Mitchell, Myles and Marsden 2013, and Lloyd 2017: 38-56. On perfectionism and

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anxiety, see for example: Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Pishghadam and Akhondpoor 2011; Flett, Hewitt, Chang and Flett 2016. On error correction, see Truscott's meta-analysis of research (2016). On communities of practice, see Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015.

<sup>5</sup> A minority of students may have studied some Latin in school, but all the students in our survey had been placed in beginners' modules by their universities.

<sup>6</sup> Students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland typically take GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in the academic year in which they turn 16 – and subsequently take A Levels (which qualify students for university study) two years later.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Gregersen and Horwitz 2002 and Pishghadam and Akhondpoor 2011: 439.

<sup>8</sup> Truscott 2016. See also Krashen's affective filter hypothesis which posits low anxiety as facilitative of language acquisition (1982: 29-31), and more recently in the field of ancient languages, Van Houdt on the role of emotions in the reading process (2008: 58).

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Tunberg in Lloyd 2016; Toda 2016; Lloyd 2021: 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> See Geller-Goad 2018.

<sup>11</sup> See Lloyd 2017: 40.

<sup>12</sup> Richards and Rodgers 2015: 4-6; Lloyd and Hunt 2021: 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Lloyd and Hunt 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd and Hunt 2021 contains case studies from various continents. Out of the 29 universities in our survey, just five reported using (simple) interactions in Latin in class. However, an additional two student-led Latin speaking initiatives taking place in other UK universities (and not captured in our research) are recorded in Lloyd and Hunt 2021: 179-186.

<sup>15</sup> Krashen 1981. Krashen's original ideas on comprehensible input have subsequently been refined and superseded by more recent research, notably Swain's output hypothesis (see Swain

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1985 and 1993) and the interaction hypothesis (see, *inter alia*, Long 1996 and 2015; Gass and Mackey 2007).

<sup>16</sup> See Rogers 2019 and further articles in the same volume of *Journal of Classics Teaching* for a compendium of views on Comprehensible Input and its practice. See also Patrick 2015 and Piazza (no date) for materials and links to related publications.

<sup>17</sup> The prevalence of grammar-translation teaching in UK universities is borne out by the account of learning activities in beginner's language modules recorded in Lloyd and Robson 2018: 20.

<sup>18</sup> Since the beginners' modules covered by this research almost exclusively covered classical Latin, "authentic" indicates original Latin texts from the classical era. These can include inscriptions as well as literary texts.

<sup>19</sup> See Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Pishghadam and Akhondpoor 2011: 439.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Patrick 2011: 14

<sup>21</sup> E.g. the *Cambridge Latin Course* and *Oxford Latin Course*, which both feature a continuous narrative across several volumes revolving around a central set of characters.

<sup>22</sup> The two most commonly used textbooks according to our 2019 survey were *Reading Latin*, used in eight out of the 30 modules, and Wheelock, which was used in five.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Rivers 1987: 4.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting, too, that two modules in our survey made use of Powell's *Veni, Vide, Vince!*, which promotes what might be described as a skills-based approach, exposing students to authentic Latin from an early stage and explicitly equipping students to use tools such as dictionaries.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner 2015, whose work builds on insights from Vygotsky 1978.