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# **The decline (and fall) of English: Why aren't readers taking English literature A level?**

Gemma Catchpole

Department of Education

University of Oxford

Kellogg College

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My thanks to my participants for taking part in this research. As someone who has always loved reading, I am encouraged to see, at first hand, that young people continue to enjoy the pleasures of reading.

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## Abstract

This study investigates why students who enjoy reading are not taking English literature at A level. It is undertaken during a time when there are concerns amongst English educators about the decline in the numbers of students taking an English A level, by focusing on the most popular of the three English A levels – English literature. The research asked a small sample of students in their first year of sixth form who did not take any English A levels about their choice of A levels, specifically their decision not to take English literature A level. It focused on students who enjoy reading, as it was predicted that readers might be more interested than other students in taking the A level. The research aims to contribute to an understanding of how students experience and view English literature by hearing from the students.

The study used opportunistic sampling to attract participants, advertising across a variety of sixth form educational establishments. Despite the only criteria being those who were studying A levels, not taking English literature, and enjoy reading, the students who responded were all taking mathematics A level and had achieved high grades at GCSE. Through the use of individual semi-structured interviews, it was found that students had a number of reasons for not choosing to continue with the study of English literature post-GCSE. The interviews were coded and thematically analysed. One of the key findings related to their future ambitions. Participants reported they had based their decisions regarding their A level subjects in consideration of their university subject choice which, in most cases, related to their anticipated career. Additionally, it was found that participants recalled a less than positive experience of English literature at GCSE, identifying their difficulties with essay writing and the subjective nature of English. However, they did recall the texts they had studied with enthusiasm. The students' reading tastes were discussed and it was found that most participants enjoyed reading science fiction and fantasy novels for 'escapism'. They reported a confidence that they could continue to enjoy reading without receiving further formal literary instruction through studying A level English literature.

These findings suggest that while students are required to limit their A level choice to a maximum of three or four subjects, facing a difficult choice about which A levels will best

serve them, English literature will continue to see a decline in numbers. It is acknowledged that this small and highly skewed sample, consisting of ambitious young people, may not be representative of sixth form students as a whole and generalisations cannot be drawn from the data. The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on this group of students is also discussed. While recognising the limitations of the research, the study concludes with suggestions for further research in this area.

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## List of Abbreviations

BCS70	British Cohort Study
BERA	British Educational Research Authority
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DfE	Department for Education
EBacc	English Baccalaureate
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
KS2, 3, 4	Key Stage 2, 3, 4
NATE	The National Association for the Teaching of English
OCR	Oxford Cambridge and RSA
Ofqual	The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
YA	Young Adult (fiction/literature)

## Chapter 1: Introduction

There has been concern expressed recently by the English teaching profession in the United Kingdom about the decline in the number of young people choosing to study English at A level in England (Roberts, 2022). A levels are one of several post 16 qualifications offered in England, but the most popular in terms of exam entries and traditionally acknowledged as the main entry route to university (Gill, 2018; Hupkau et al, 2017). The subject of English at A level can be studied as one of three options – English language, English language and literature, and English literature – with English literature being the most popular of the three (see Table 1). Despite reforms to the English literature GCSE and A level in 2015, student numbers at A level have continued to fall, and there has been little change in the type of texts chosen by the exam boards for qualifications in English literature. This has led to demands for further changes to the curriculum (e.g., Bleiman, 2020). Additionally, recent research has demonstrated the lack of representation for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic groups and highlighted demands to make the teaching and learning of English literature more inclusive (Elliott et al, 2021).

Students who choose to follow the A level path on entry to sixth form, at the age of 16, are required to select three to four subjects: a reduction from eight to ten subjects studied at GCSE level. Students can choose any combination of subjects which they may have studied to GCSE or which are new to them in the sixth form. They may have a number of reasons and motivations for their choice of subjects, and it is this which is explored within this research. It aims to reflect on how young people decide on their A levels, specifically why they did not choose English literature.

Research on English literature A level has tended to focus on the relationship between the study of the subject at sixth form and university (e.g., Eaglestone, 2017; Snapper, 2007) rather than between GCSE and A level. While English teaching organisations such as the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) have called for investigations into the decline of the broader subject of English <sup>1</sup>, there has been less of a focus solely on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/NATE-Post-16-position-paper.pdf>

English literature, although some English educators have however called for research into aspects of literature and reading (Elliott & Hodgson, 2021). The study of English literature often focuses on an enjoyment of reading and so, following this logic – readers might be presumed more likely to take English literature A level than those who do not read – this research aims to uncover some of the reasons why those who enjoy reading chose subjects other than English literature at A level.

Thus, this research aims to answer the question, ‘Why aren’t readers taking English literature A level?’. Employing a qualitative and exploratory approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted to further explore this idea. It emerged, as expected, that a number of factors are considered by students when they choose their A levels. In addition, the participants were asked about their experience of reading, including the texts they enjoy. These findings will be presented through hearing from the students themselves in Chapter 4, and further discussed in Chapter 5.

This is not to say that only readers study English literature A level. There are many students taking the subject who state they do not to read for pleasure (e.g., Jamshidi, 2016), while ‘not all students who study English literature in the sixth form do so because they have a passion for the subject’ (Knights, 2017, p. 35).

The initial idea for this study came from my awareness that conversations were taking place between English educators amongst themselves about their concerns over the decline in numbers taking English A levels and English at university. As a parent, I am aware that children are not routinely consulted about their views of their education and thus do not have the opportunity to provide the answers sought by educators. Additionally, as the parent of a sixth form student, I recognise there are numerous factors considered by teenagers when deciding upon their A levels. Having attended open day events held by sixth forms, I have observed different approaches by departments in attracting students to take ‘their’ subject at A level. Aware of the current English literature syllabi from this parental perspective it appeared that, despite recent reforms, little has changed since I was at school.

## **A note of the effect of COVID – 2020-2022**

Since 2020, students at schools in England have had their education affected by the closure of their schools due to at least two official lockdowns. For the majority of students, the first lockdown occurred from March 2020 until the new academic year began in September 2020. A second lockdown came into force in England at the start of January 2021 and continued until the beginning of March.

The students in this research were in Year 10 in 2019/20, and Year 11 – their GCSE year – in 2020/21. Like the previous year, they did not sit their GCSE exams but were instead awarded their GCSEs based on teacher assessed grades (TAG). They experienced changes to their GCSE curriculum, particularly in their final school year, Year 11. In this year, the exam boards, on the instruction of the government adapted the GCSE syllabi for teacher assessment. The students entered the sixth form, or Year 12, in September 2021.

While some of those students – notably the children of key workers – may have been present in their school over this period, all young people faced major disruption to their learning between 2020 and 2022 and often received their education online. Most students studied at home during the official lockdowns and there were further disruptions to their education when, despite the schools being open, individuals were either asked to isolate because of a COVID contact in their family or class or by testing positive for COVID themselves. Early research into the disruption to education caused by the lockdown found that students made little or no progress while learning from home (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2021).

The effect of COVID was seen in every area of life. Related to reading, it was found that children and young people reported they were both reading and enjoying reading more during lockdown (Clark & Picton, 2020), while sales of paperbacks and hardbacks surpassed 200 million in 2021 (Bloom, 2021).

The last two years have been far from a typical experience for this cohort, and it can be extrapolated that examination figures and educational data pertaining to this year will not

be representative. It is asserted that students' experiences and motivations will be unique and the findings from research will not be comparable across earlier or later years.

## Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

### 2.1 English as a taught subject in school

#### 2.1.1 GCSE English

All pupils in England experience taught English classes in schools. The study of English language to GCSE is compulsory in English schools and, along with maths, is one of the measures of achievement for 16-year-olds included in the government's Progress 8 measure. Introduced in 2016, this is an accountability measure which determines students' progress across eight subjects. It is also a value-added measure whereby students' results are compared to other students who had the same attainment score at Key Stage 2 (KS2) and is used by the Department of Education (DfE) to demonstrate the input of the teaching by the school on its pupils. If students study both English language and English literature (the majority of students), whichever is the higher grade is counted twice for the Progress 8 measure.

Related to the Progress 8 measure is the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) which consists of a core group of subjects. Both English language and English literature GCSEs must be taken to be counted in the EBacc. Along with the two English subjects, there is also the requirement to take GCSEs in maths, the sciences, a language and either history or geography. The intention behind the EBacc is that young people will, by taking a broad range of subjects, keep their options open for both their further study and future careers (DfE, 2019). The government aims to have 75% of pupils studying the EBacc subjects in combination at GCSE in 2022, and for 90% of pupils in the next three years (DfE, 2019). As with the Progress 8 measure, the EBacc score is also reported in information on schools available to the public on the DfE website.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> for an example, see <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/school/137970/the-cherwell-school/secondary>.

Along with the compulsory study of English language for the schools' Progress 8 measure, schools are required to record pupils entering the EBacc, with the result that English literature is a compulsory subject in the majority of English schools. This compulsory/near compulsory status of the English subjects means that over half a million students study English at GCSE every year.

To summarise, the study of English, like mathematics, is compulsory to the age of 16 and nearly all students in England will have experienced many years of formally learning English in the classroom. The students' knowledge of English literature is examined and often taught as a separate subject, particularly in the lead up to the students sitting it at GCSE.

In consideration of reforms to GCSEs, in 2014 the DfE published a report, *English Programmes of Study: Key Stage 4 National Curriculum in England*. In this, the importance of the role of the study of English, particularly through the teaching of English literature, in the school years 10 and 11 which culminate in the sitting of the GCSE exams, is outlined:

*English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others and through their reading and listening, others can communicate with them. Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development. Reading also enables pupils both to acquire knowledge and to build on what they already know. All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society; pupils, therefore, who do not learn to speak, read and write fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised.*

(DfE, 2014a, p. 3)

The government, through the DfE, clearly demonstrating its belief in the role of reading in the development of its future citizens. The reforms were implemented in 2015, with the first students studying the new English literature curriculum examined in 2017.

The new English literature GCSE was 'designed to be more stretching than its predecessor, to support preparedness for A level' (DfE, 2014a). In addition to the requirement to study a broader and more challenging range of texts, the revised English literature exam also

includes previously unseen texts in the paper with a greater emphasis on critically comparing and contrasting a range of literature (DfE, 2014a). While the previous GCSE English literature had been assessed by way of an 'open book' exam, from 2017 the students were to sit 'closed book' exams (DfE, 2014a). Following announcement of the changes to the English literature curriculum, there were concerns that American authors would be removed from the curriculum and only British authors would be studied (e.g., Kennedy, 2014; Bate, 2014). Such was the outcry, the DfE produced a 'myth busting' guide in the same year to address these issues (DfE, 2014b). Within the guide, concerns regarding the banning of texts, specifically the perception that American authors would be removed, and only British authors would be studied, were addressed but this did not satisfy English educators (Snapper, 2018).

In research conducted for the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) to evaluate the reception of the new GCSEs (maths was also reformed at the same time), it was found that the changes to the English literature GCSE were met with a mixed reception by English teachers (Howard & Khan, 2019). However, one of the stated objectives of the new GCSE was to better prepare students to study A level English literature and the English teachers reported that the new English literature GCSE was successful in this regard (Howard & Khan, 2019).

Within the myth busting guide (DfE, 2014b), the DfE pointed out that while the Department is responsible for the curriculum and sets the subject content for GCSEs and A levels, it is Ofqual, a non-ministerial government department, which is responsible for the regulation of the assessments, examinations, and qualifications in England through the exam boards. There are currently three exam boards in England – AQA, OCR, and Pearson Edexcel. They are responsible for developing, marking, and awarding GCSE and A level qualifications and each offer their own selection of texts to be studied. Schools decide which exam board they will follow for a particular subject and thus choose from the selection of texts offered by that exam board. Looking at the texts offered at GCSE, there is considerable overlap across the three exam boards. For the Shakespeare set text, all offer *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The common 19<sup>th</sup> century novels are *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* while the common post-1914

works of fiction are *An Inspector Calls*, *Animal Farm* and *Anita and Me*. The poetry is presented in themed anthologies. Despite the presence of works by Black, Asian or minority ethnic authors such as Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, on the set modern text lists, exam candidates overwhelmingly answered questions on *An Inspector Calls* (Elliott et al, 2021). It has been argued that this lack of representation in set texts results in some children never studying a full-length text by a writer of colour, despite their desire to study diverse literary texts (Elliott et al, 2021).

Following the reforms, the new English literature GCSE was first examined in summer 2017. The fourth cohort (2020) did not sit GCSE exams with their grades awarded by way of an algorithm, while the following cohort of students (2021) also did not sit GCSE exams with their grades awarded by teacher assessment.

#### 2.1.2 A level English literature

Following on from the changes to the English literature curricula, the first cohort to take the reformed English literature A level did so in 2019. As with the GCSEs, subsequent A level students did not sit formal exams in either 2020 or 2021, with their grades awarded by way of algorithm and teacher assessment.

Looking at the data for A levels taken in England over the last four years in Table 1, a general decrease in numbers can be seen across all three English A levels. There is a 6% decrease in the number of students taking English literature from 38,310 entries in 2020 to 36,135 in 2021. This was despite the overall entry for A levels in 2021 seeing a 3% increase when compared to 2020.

Subject	June 2018	June 2019	June 2020	June 2021
English literature	40,990	37,475 (-8.6%)	38,310 (+2.2%)	36,135 (-6%)
English language	17,875	13,815 (-23%)	14,715 (+7%)	14,230 (-3%)
English language & literature	9,000	7,580 (-16%)	7,250 (-4%)	7,155 (-1%)

Table 1: Numbers of students entered by their schools and colleges in England by English A level subjects in 2018 to 2021 with percentage change on previous year (taken from Ofqual, 2021).

Ben Knights in describing English A levels and the UK examination structure to an American audience, explains how this works for English A levels:

*Although students can choose among various syllabi, both assessment objectives and curriculum are the subject of tightly controlled national standards. In general, across the sectors, the culture of learning outcomes, guidelines, and transparency about marking criteria has proved two edged. This apparatus quite clearly helps students to understand what is required of them. But simultaneously it enhances a mechanistic approach to gaining marks and, in an increasingly commodified culture, tends to mean that student work is assessed against standardized taxonomies.*

(Knights, 2007, p. 336).

Looking across a variety of school and sixth form college websites, which offer information to prospective students on the A levels which can be studied at their institutions, a difference can be seen in their approaches. A large sixth form college in the southeast of

England, describes from the type of students they believe should take English literature A level:

*Those who love reading literary texts, thinking about how they are written, who wrote them and what other readers think about them, discussing and writing about what they might mean should take this course.<sup>3</sup>*

While a smaller sixth form attached to a secondary school in the southwest of England describes the students the course produces:

*The English department is proud of producing critical, creative and thoughtful students who combine their love of reading with a range of enriching extra-curricular opportunities that stretch and challenge their perception of literature.<sup>4</sup>*

Another (larger) school sixth form, in their video presentation to prospective sixth formers, describe the type of person who should take the course:

*'You should think about how much you love reading, obviously we're a subject where you read a lot – whether that be the set texts or around the texts. If you don't like reading you really have to consider whether this is the course for you'<sup>5</sup>*

Despite the differences in both approach and emphasis for attracting students to the study of English literature, all three English departments stress the love of reading as being a key requirement for taking the A level. They do not explicitly state the advantages studying an A level in English literature will give to a student over other A levels. Beyond A level English literature requiring a love of reading, it has not surprising to find that experienced English teachers discover that, '16-19 literature students do not always have a clear view about why they are studying literature and why (and for whom) it might be valuable' (Atherton, Green & Snapper, 2013, p. 13). If those students who have elected to study English literature A level are not entirely sure of their reasons behind their decision, or indeed the subject's

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bhasvic.ac.uk/courses/english-literature-a-level>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fromecollege.org/assets/Sixth-Form/Sixth-Form-Course-Guide-2022-24-v2-March-2022.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sixthform.cherwellschool.org/35/subject-information/subject/10/english-literature>

value, it can be proposed that when considering their A level choices GCSE students will not be clear about what the subject will offer them.

## 2.2 A levels

### 2.2.1 A level options

In the sixth form, students are able to decide on the subjects they want to study. They can either continue with those subjects they have studied at GCSE and/or take subjects which are not routinely offered at GCSE level in schools, such as philosophy, graphic communication, and further maths. For some, the sixth forms may narrow the students' choices through course availability and time constraints (Abrahams, 2018). While for others, especially those large sixth forms with a number of A level subjects on offer, students may choose their subjects basing their decisions on the options for entry into universities and specific careers. There is the perception that students should be more independent learners at A level because they select their subjects rather than being required to take them as part of the EBacc or other school requirements (Deuker, 2014). However, young people's experience of education to this point has been largely performance driven and they can find it difficult to envisage and enact the skills necessary for independent learning (Hernandez-Martinez & Williams, 2013). As a result, this transition between adapting to A level study from GCSE has been described as 'fraught with difficulties' (Deuker, 2014, p. 64).

One of the factors likely to influence the choice of A levels is the performance (or the expected performance) in the equivalent GCSEs. Understandably, students tend to progress to study those subjects in which they have previously obtained good grades (Davies et al, 2009; Vidal Rodeiro, 2007). It is therefore of interest to look at the uptake of subjects at A level in the relation to the mark awarded at GCSE.

In addition to considering the long-term value of studying certain A levels, students have views regarding the difficulty and constraint of A level subjects. In comparison with the study of science, specifically physics, (e.g., Kessels, Rau & Hannover, 2006; Gill & Bell, 2013; Mujtaba & Reiss, 2013) and maths (Nosek, Banaji & Greenwald, 2002; Onion, 2004), which

are associated with both masculinity and difficulty, sixth formers perceive English as giving them the most freedom to express their ideas while maths and physics allow them the least freedom (Watson, Dawson & McEwen, 1994). Beyond the perceptions of gendered subjects, there is the recognition of the gender imbalance in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects. This worldwide underrepresentation of females in science has been addressed by the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017) and by the DfE in England with the promotion of these subjects to female students for study in the sixth form (DfE, 2020).

### 2.2.2 Facilitating subjects

In 2011, the Russell Group of universities published a list of 'facilitating subjects'. In this, eight A level subjects were identified as being essential for many degrees and thus were useful in 'opening doors' at university by giving students access to a wide range of degrees at Russell Group universities. In the guide, it was recommended that prospective A level students should ensure that at least two of their three or four options at A level should be facilitating subjects for the best opportunity of admission to a degree at one of the group's universities. The eight facilitating subjects were English (in 2015 this was changed to English literature), mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, geography, history, and a language. This was covered in the media as avoiding 'soft' subjects.<sup>6</sup> Despite the publication of the list of facilitating subjects, critics pointed to a lack of evidence that these eight subjects were required for entry to universities in the Russell Group (Arora, 2019). For example, to study for a degree in geography at the University of Oxford, geography A level was not required, yet students were expected to have studied music A level to gain access on to a music degree (Camden, 2016).

In 2019, the Russell Group replaced the guide on facilitating subjects with an interactive website titled *Informed Choices*. This, it claims, will enable students 'to build up a personalised picture of the subject combinations which suit (your) talents and ambitions'.<sup>7</sup> The website has moved away from the core eight subjects to a representation of all the A

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-12365050>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.informedchoices.ac.uk/FAQs>

levels currently on offer. Highlighting these individual A level subjects on the screen, brings up those degrees which may be open to the student based on one of more of the subjects they have chosen. The website also shows those other degrees which have no essential subjects and are therefore open to the student for consideration for application.

The popularity of the facilitating subjects can be seen in Table 2 which compares data from a large sixth form college and a small school sixth form.<sup>8</sup> This shows that at the college, apart from English literature and a classical or modern language, all the other facilitating subjects are present in the top ten, while at the small school sixth form which offers less choice at A level with 15 subjects, English literature is the ninth most popular subject. If the numbers of students sitting the three English A levels are combined, this finds English at fifth position in the ranking of the most popular subjects at the college, and fourth at the secondary school. This is behind maths and biology at both institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> Data taken from <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/find-a-school-in-england>

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Southern Sixth Form College</u>	<u>Oxfordshire School Sixth Form</u>
Art and design	327 (5)	4 (11)
Biology*	489 (2)	15 (2)
Business studies	237 (9)	18** (1)
Chemistry*	373 (4)	13 (4)
English language	117 (17)	9 (6)
(English lang and lit)	68 (>20)	not offered
<b>English literature*</b>	<b>180 (11)</b>	<b>5 (9)</b>
French*	50 (21)	1 (13)
Geography*	255 (8)	2 (12)
History*	274 (6)	7 (7)
Mathematics*	620 (1)	15 (2)
Mathematics (further)	139 (12)	1 (13)
Media/film/tv studies	41 (22)	7 (7)
Physics*	256 (7)	1 (13)
Psychology	407 (3)	13 (4)
Religious studies	not offered	5 (9)
Sociology	231 (10)	not offered

Table 2: A level Exam Entries 2020/21: A comparison of two sixth forms showing exam entries and popularity of subject.

\*'Facilitating subject'

\*\* offered as an Applied subject rather than A level

Studies which have investigated perceptions of the main school subjects have found maths as perceived to be the most difficult while English is considered to be the most interesting, as well as offering the most freedom to students (Watson, Dawson & McEwen, 1994). Despite this, recent data would appear to support Dilnot's (2015) findings that students choose those subjects which they believe will offer them the strongest likelihood of being offered a place at a Russell Group university beyond the 'facilitating'/'non facilitating' dichotomy. Maths is such a subject and continues to be one of the more popular subjects at A level yet few of those who study it continue with the subject at university, instead using the A level qualification to gain entry to medical and engineering courses (Bewick & Southern, 1997). Additionally, there were found to be gender differences in the reasons

given for why students took maths A level. In maths, girls reported that they continued to study the subject because they enjoyed it, while boys took the subject because they had achieved a good GCSE grade in the subject (Bewick & Southern, 1997). There may also be a consideration of which A levels produce higher returns (Dilnot, 2018). Research analysing longitudinal data from the British Cohort Study (BCS70), found that wage returns are greater when an A level in a STEM subject is studied compared to A levels in other (non-STEM) subjects (Conlon & Patrignani, 2015). It is not suggested that young people are aware of such results but there would be a general assumption based on cultural norms that working as a doctor, having gained a medical degree with STEM A levels, will pay more than someone working in a creative field, who studied for a degree in the arts or humanities.

### 2.2.3 School factors

A further distinction between GCSEs and A levels is where they can be studied. Some secondary schools in England range from 11 to 16, while others have an attached sixth form and can educate students from 11 to 18. In some areas of England, where the schools end at 16, students attend stand-alone sixth form colleges. Offering a wider selection of subjects at A level to a larger number of students, sixth form colleges will have teachers who are specialists at teaching their subject at A level, while sixth forms attached to secondary schools will usually have teachers who teach both GCSE and A level curricula.

To inform the development of the Informed Choices website, the Russell Group surveyed hundreds of pupils and teachers to discover when and how decisions on subject choice at school are made. From this they found that when considering their successful application to university, students placed a greater emphasis on factors such as putting in a strong application, or performance at an interview, while teachers ranked the choice of subject at A level as the most important of the factors (Turhan, 2019). This difference of opinion between students and teachers is perhaps not unexpected given that university application is a novel situation for the students and as such they will be basing their beliefs on information provided by their school and friends and family (Battiston et al, 2020), while teachers will have the experience of previous students' applications (Turhan, 2019).

## 2.3 Reading

Looking at the extracts above taken from school promotions for the study of A level English literature, an association is clearly identified, at least by teachers, between the study of English literature at A level and an enjoyment of reading. While much attention has been given to encouraging young children to read through parenting programmes, specially created activities at libraries, and nationwide events such as World Book Day, in addition to more formal activities and teaching in the early years pre- and primary school, this encouragement does not appear to continue throughout children's later years. The annual literacy surveys carried out by the National Literacy Trust ask questions regarding children and young people's reading habits such as their reading enjoyment and reading frequency and draw conclusions from the large data gathered from 9- to 18-year-olds. From this it is observed that young people between the ages of 14 to 16 report enjoying reading less and were less likely to read daily than their younger or older teenagers (Clark, 2019; Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2020). Once children reach secondary school, and progress to adulthood, there is the 'assumption is that reading is a skill, not unlike riding a bicycle, that once one has learned how to do it, one simply does it, without much thought, when the need arises' (McCormick, 1994, p. 1). It is perhaps because of this assumption that there is a lack of research examining reading motivation in this age group (Conradi, Jang & McKenna, 2014).

Despite this assumption that reading is an acquired skill, there is the additional expectation that reading should be a pleasurable experience, with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) reporting that not enough schools show evidence of encouraging a love of reading (Ofsted, 2012). In the DfE guidelines for teaching English at KS4, one of the expected outcomes from the teaching is that pupils should 'read whole books, to read in depth and to read for pleasure and information' (DfE, 2014a, p. 4). However, despite research on reading and pleasure in children (e.g., Clark & De Zoysa, 2011), and adults (Billington, 2015), there is little data on why reading for pleasure is important for this KS4 age group – students who are aged between 14 to 16.

In considering what young people in this age group might read, it might be presumed that young adult (YA) literature consists of literature written for this age group – young adults.

However, there are a variety of definitions with assumed ages. The Waterstones bookshop chain has a section on its website titled 'Teenage and Young Adult Books'<sup>9</sup> while Blackwells Bookshop in Oxford displays a notice on the wall in the children's department explaining that the Young Adult readers section is 'curated for older teens and young adults, and as such some content may be inappropriate for those under the age of 16' with advice that the '12+ section contains a great range of amazing titles for younger teenagers.' (observed June 2022). For others, the category of YA books includes those for younger teenage readers such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (Crowe, 2001) and the *Sweet Valley High* series of books (Daly, 1989). Additionally, YA literature is often viewed as a genre, not books specifically designed for young people but consisting of a range of other genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian fiction, which became popular following the publication of the *Twilight* series of books and *The Hunger Games* trilogy (Garcia, 2013). It has also been noted that there appears to exist a gender bias in YA literature, with books in the category 'largely written, edited and marketed by women' (Taylor, 2019, p. 75).

## 2.4 Summary

The literature review has highlighted several interconnected issues surrounding the study of English literature, A level choices, and students' reading. As a result, the aim of this research is to investigate why the number of students taking English literature are in decline by focusing on those who might be presumed to be most interested in studying it – readers.

It is recognised that students may possess a variety of reasons behind their choice of A level subjects. Additionally, their experience of compulsory English classes across their secondary education may be an influencing factor in not choosing to study A level English literature. It is also acknowledged that there may be variations in the enjoyment of reading and reading tastes across students in this age group. In answering the overarching research question – Why aren't readers taking English literature A level? – four sub-questions were addressed:

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.waterstones.com/category/childrens-teenage/teen-and-young-adult>

1. How do students decide upon their A level subjects?
2. What was the students' experience of GCSE English literature?
3. What would encourage students to take A level English literature?
4. What do students enjoy about reading?

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1. Research design

This is an interview study which adopts a phenomenological approach to examine student readers' own perceptions about their decision not to study English literature A level. It is noted that other studies which have investigated students' subject choices at A level often employ a quantitative approach using multilevel modelling analysis. This is performed on large scale data sets to explore the influence of characteristics such as gender, motivation, and class on the decision-making process regarding the A levels chosen (e.g., Mujtaba & Reiss, 2013; Gill & Bell, 2013). Such quantitative research techniques are unable to fully explore and explain the complexities behind students' decision-making processes. The participants' past experiences both in studying English and their other subjects are anticipated to play a major part in their choice of A levels, in addition to other factors previously discussed in Chapter 2 such as career ambitions (Vidal Rodeiro, 2007).

This decision to use a qualitative approach reflects the philosophical underpinnings of the study – the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Following Cresswell (2013, p. 21), the consideration of students' decision-making processes reflects the ontological belief that reality is seen through a multiple of views. The research – through the administration of a semi-structured interview – examines different perspectives towards both English literature and reading identifying themes as they emerge during the study. The characteristics of this approach, epistemologically, is on the reliance of quotes as subjective evidence from the participants, while axiologically, the researcher acknowledges that research is biased and value laden. These philosophical assumptions result in an interpretive paradigm being adopted for the study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Qualitative research is deemed more suitable for this research because it allows for the nuances of the students' A level decision making process, the participants' past experiences, and their views on reading to be explored. Previous qualitative research in this area employed focus groups to discuss topics with students (Onion, 2004). While it is acknowledged successful management of focus groups can draw out responses from all

members, hearing from a group runs the risk of the discussion being dominated by one or two voices (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Recognising that everyone's experience will be unique and related to a number of factors, individual interviews also allow the participant time and freedom to express their own thoughts without the larger influence or presence of the group and can allow the researcher to pick up on the subtleties that can lie behind what are arguably important decisions for young people. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow for an in-depth understanding of the topic, and it was deemed important that the participants were able to offer thoughtful descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2007).

The intention of the interview was to learn more about the students' lived experience of English literature instruction, their reflected beliefs on their A level choices and their reading practices. It recognises the students' agency at this age, at a time when they have the freedom to make their own decisions about their future. While it is presumed that none of the participants will have intentionally misrepresented their actions or beliefs it is recognised that, in answering and reflecting on the questions posed in the interview, the students will recount not only how they did behave but how they should behave (Scott, 1996).

### 3.2 Selection of participants

This study chose to focus on those students in the lower sixth because, being in the first year of their A level studies, it was considered they would be able to easily reflect on their decisions on their chosen A levels and recall their recent experience of English literature lessons at GCSE. Overall, ten students were interviewed.

A poster advertising the study (see Appendix 2) specified the research was interested in recruiting those students in the lower sixth studying any A levels apart from English literature. The poster was sent as an email attachment to sixth form heads, teachers, librarians after requests to advertise the study in several schools and sixth form colleges to advertise the study within their premises were denied (see 3.6 Challenges and limitations). The educational personnel offered to advertise the study to those students in the lower

sixth through assemblies and personal contact. The students who responded to the poster were therefore self-selecting. In addition, those students who registered their initial interest were asked to forward details of the study to their friends. Those participants who completed the interview were asked during the post interview briefing or closing comments to further promote the study to their peers via social media channels and word of mouth. A prize of a £15 book token was advertised on the poster as an incentive to attract participants, specifically readers, to take part in the research. After emailing their interest, participants received, by return, an information sheet, and a consent form to consider before agreeing to take part in the research (Appendices 3 and 4). They were also asked to suggest periods of time when they might be available for the interview to take place. The interviews were then scheduled and a Teams meeting invitation was sent to the participant. All students participated in the interviews from their homes.

As a result of this unintentional convenience sampling, the research took place with students who attend different schools across England. As the students were self-selecting, and largely unknown to each other (see 3.6 Challenges and Limitations), this resulted in participants attending a variety of 16+ institutions. There were students from sixth forms in their secondary school (2), a sixth form attached to a school not previously attended by the participant (1), a sixth form attached to a selective grammar school (1), sixth form colleges (3), a sixth form attached to their independent school (2) and a sixth form attached to an independent school not previously attended by the participant (1). Some of the participants had continued into the sixth form from their school whilst other participants had changed institutions, either through choice or because their secondary school stopped at 16 (see Table 3).

The students interviewed were all in the Lower Sixth (Year 12) and were aged either 16 or 17. They had taken their GCSEs in 2021 which were awarded through assessment by their teachers – teacher assessed grades (TAG) – instead of sitting examinations due to the effect of the COVID pandemic and the resulting school closures. Although they had taken exams at various points throughout their GCSE years, as with the students the year above them, the participants did not take the final formal GCSE exams. In addition, students reported they

had not completed all of their intended English literature syllabus with some texts being 'dropped' from further study and/or assessment.

### 3.3 Methods of data collection

#### 3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

The administration of the semi-structured interview was aided using an interview schedule developed following consideration of Kvale's (1996, p. 30) key characteristics of qualitative research interviews. The interview schedule was developed following piloting with two upper sixth form students to check that all the questions and prompts were easy to understand and answerable.

The interview schedule (Appendix 5) was separated into sections which broadly corresponded to the sub research questions. Following initial greetings and a check that the participants had read the information and consent forms, and once it was verbally and visually confirmed the participant was comfortable in the virtual interview environment, the questions followed the interview schedule in the following order.

The students were first asked to expand on the reason to volunteer to take part in the research. The questions concentrated on a definition of 'keen reader' both to further confirm that the participants viewed themselves as readers and thus met the requirements for the study and to elicit their views on what being a reader as opposed to someone who reads meant to them.

The second section, their current situation, focused on the students' chosen A levels. It included questions about the participants' GCSEs – the subjects and grades attained – aimed to discover if they had chosen those A levels in which they had previously performed well and to learn if they had received a high mark for their English literature GCSE. This section also asked how the students had decided upon their A levels, whether they were enjoying them and if they had decided on a future career path.

The third section, concentrated on the participants' enjoyment of reading. It asked questions designed create a picture about the reading choices of this age group; to elaborate on their reading practices, their reading environment, and the books they choose to read.

The final section asked questions specifically about English literature A level. It was designed to elicit information on the participants' thoughts and awareness of the A level, and to provide further detail about how the subject was perceived by those not taking it. It included questions to help create a picture of what students might find attractive about taking English literature in the sixth form and about what would have encouraged them to consider it as an option.

### 3.3.2 Data collection

Data collection took place over two weeks in June 2022. This timeframe was chosen as it was calculated that students in the lower sixth would have completed their end of year examinations and were still in their school setting before breaking for the summer holidays. The interviews were conducted via Teams to the participants who were at their homes. The interviews had been advertised as consisting of one session of 30 minutes to provide participants with the anticipated knowledge that the interview would not be too burdensome. All the participants engaged in the interview and answered all the questions. None of the participants exhibited any difficulties in understanding the questions and all were forthcoming in their replies. They did not display any verbal or observable physical discomfort which teenagers have demonstrated in other research employing one-to-one interviews (Curtis et al, 2004). Neither did they exhibit challenging behaviour previously identified in research as a challenge of interviewing teenagers (Bassett et al, 2008). It is proposed that this is because the topic under discussion was not viewed as controversial or emotive and the students were in familiar surroundings. Some of the participants were 'chattier' than others in their replies; considering the question and welcoming the opportunity to expand on their initial answers while others exhibited their comfort in the situation by asking me to elaborate on a point or repeat a question. The average interview

time was 32 minutes, with the longest interview taking 45 minutes and the shortest, 23 minutes.

The interviews were conducted on Teams. All of the students, having studied online during the COVID lockdowns, were familiar with online meetings and were confident in their use of Teams. One of the practical advantages of using Teams to conduct the interviews was the ease of conducting the interview. Following two years of official and personal lockdowns due to COVID, with much communication taking place online on platforms such as Zoom, Teams and Google Meet, amongst others, many people – particularly younger people – are comfortable with talking on camera. Any concerns about online interviews and a lack of familiarity with the technology which are discussed in research methods literature published in the years before the pandemic (e.g., Salmons, 2016) could be confidently dismissed. This also enabled the interviews to be recorded and stored remotely. Following Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) guidelines, the videos were stored on a server and not remotely on the cloud.

### 3.4 Methods of Data Analysis

#### 3.4.1 Participant data

All of the participants were ascribed a pseudonym. Background questions administered during the interviews were used to construct a picture of the individual participants. As has been noted in chapter 2, because students often choose to study those A levels in which they have performed well at GCSE level (Williamson & Vidal Rodeiro, 2022), the decision was made to ask both the subjects and grades obtained at GCSE in addition to asking about their A level subjects. Acknowledging that some students have already decided on a career, choosing their A levels accordingly, they were asked about their future intentions. Similarly, noting that participants can often change educational settings for sixth form study, which may or may not have an influence on their A level choices, they were asked about their educational establishment. All of the sixth forms were either state schools or colleges unless indicated otherwise. This background information created participant profiles, the results of which can be seen below, and permits some surface-level comparison across participants.

Participant	GCSEs	Grades	A levels	Intended degree	Sixth form	Same?
Alice	Maths English lang. English lit. Triple science  History Spanish RE	9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9	Maths Biology Chemistry Psychology*	Medicine	School	Yes
Amelia	Maths English lang. English lit. Triple science  History Geography DT Mandarin	9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9	Maths Biology Chemistry Mandarin	Medicine	School (ind.)	Yes
Archie	Maths English lang. English lit. Triple science  History Spanish Hospitality	8 6 7 8 8 7 5 (Dist.)	Maths Biology Psychology Chemistry*	Biomedical engineering	School	Yes
Claudia	Maths English lang. English lit. Biology Chemistry Physics History RS Music French	9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 8	Maths History Politics	History	School (ind.)	No
Freya	Maths English lang. English lit. Biology Chemistry Physics Geography RS DT Further maths	9 7 8 9 9 9 9 9 9 8	Maths Biology Chemistry Economics	Medicine	School (ind.)	Yes

Lewis	Maths English lang. English lit. Biology Chemistry Physics Psychology Statistics Geography Media studies Music French	9 8 7 8 8 7 8 9 7 6 6 4	Maths Further maths Psychology Media studies	Psychology	Sixth form college	No
Lily	Maths English lang. English lit. Triple science  History Spanish Drama Further maths	9 9 9 9 9 8 8 8 8	Maths Biology Chemistry Further maths	Medicine	Sixth form college	Not possible
Max	Maths English lang. English lit. Biology Chemistry Physics RE Music Further maths	9 7 8 9 9 9 9 9 8	Maths Further maths Physics Chemistry*	Aerospace engineering	Sixth form college	Not possible
Maya	Maths English lang. English lit. Biology Chemistry Physics Computer science RE Music	9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9 9	Maths Biology Chemistry Physics	Medicine	School	No
Owen	Maths English lang. English lit. Triple science  History Computer science Music	9 7 7 9 9 9 8 9 9	Maths History Computer science Physics*	Computing	School (grammar)	Yes

Table 3: Participant information

\*A level later dropped

### 3.4.2 Interview data

Once the interviews had been conducted, they were immediately transcribed. This was to ensure that any pertinent points raised during the interview, or relevant context could be included in the interview analysis. As well as taking brief notes during the interview, as an aide-memoire to help phrase subsequent questions with that participant ('You said that you didn't enjoy.... why was that?') a journal was also kept to record subsequent thoughts after the interview. This enabled clarification of issues or topics which were raised during the interviews as well as a consideration of common themes that were emerging from the conversations.

In a discussion about coding, Saldaña (2021) elaborates on research design:

*One cannot help starting a project with some knowledge about what may be found. Yet, investigators must also remain open to new discoveries and constructions of knowledge about the human condition. Otherwise, what is the point of research?*  
(Saldaña, 2021, p. 41)

The data was coded using both inductive and deductive approaches. Although conscious of the need to remain open and aware to new information, it became apparent after the first few interviews that across the participants some similar experiences and outlooks were emerging. I was able to predict some of the answers to the questions based on participants' earlier answers and those from previous participants. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), I followed a process of data reduction which resulted in key themes. Organising the themes that were occurring across the interviews, I began to draw conclusions based on this data. This resulted in the selection of key themes presented and discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

## 3.5 Ethical considerations

### 3.5.1 Ethics

Although the topic was not considered to be sensitive or contentious, I was aware that 'qualitative researchers, whatever the topic of their research, often cannot help discovering

secret, discrediting or sensitive information' (Lee, 1993, p. 180). Additionally, asking the participants to reflect on their decision-making processes might have created some discomfort particularly if their memories of their early years or recent periods were unhappy. To ensure the participants felt comfortable, before the interview, they were reminded of their right to decline to answer any question/s and their right of withdrawal.

Care was taken to ensure that the research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). As the research involved the participation of those aged 16 and 17, particular attention was paid to the description of 'competent youths' within the guidelines published by CUREC.<sup>10</sup> The research was deemed 'unproblematic' and received ethical approval from CUREC before any data collection was undertaken (Appendix 1).

On receipt of an email expressing their interest in the study, potential participants were emailed further information about the study. This outlined details of the study, the individual's rights as a participant and details about what would happen to their data (Appendix 3). Prospective participants were also emailed a consent form at this point so they had time to read it before the interview (Appendix 4). Their oral consent both for participation in the interview and for the interview to be recorded was affirmed at the beginning of the interview. I reiterated there was no contact with their school or teaching staff and that all the information would be anonymised and remain confidential. As I know the parents of two of the participants, these participants were additionally reassured that anything discussed during the interview would not be passed on to their parents. Indeed, the fact that they had participated in the interview was not relayed to their parents.

Following transcription, the video recordings were deleted. The transcripts were anonymised immediately with the participants given pseudonyms in place of their names. These transcripts were stored on a hard drive on a password protected folder on a password protected laptop for the remainder of the study.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/bpg04competentyouthspdf-0>

One ethical issue encountered during the study concerned a school which agreed to promote the research to pupils but placed conditions on their pupils' participation. The sixth form head wanted the students to register their interest in participating through her so that she could arrange to be present during the interviews. After consultation with my supervisor, I replied that, ethically, I was required to give my participants confidentiality – not only regarding what was said during the interview but whether they had chosen to participate in the research. I confirmed the study had been granted ethical approval by the university and further confirmed that sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds are considered old enough to give informed consent for non-problematic research such as this. The head replied that this was satisfactory and stated the study would be advertised in a sixth form assembly.

### 3.5.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

In undertaking this research, it is important to consider my position as a researcher and the impact this could have on the findings for 'researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers' (Cresswell, 2013, p. 51). My interest in this topic is largely influenced by the fact that I have always loved reading and consider myself a keen reader. Despite not taking English literature at A level, I decided to study for an English literature degree as a mature student some years later. Recognising that the formal instruction in literary criticism I received from the degree has enhanced my reading experience, I realised I had potentially missed out on this in the intervening years by not continuing with English literature at A level. Wanting to understand more about why the numbers of young people taking English at A level are in decline, and recognising my own situation, I decided to ask those students who are keen readers about their decisions to follow subjects other than English literature. Despite my experience, I acknowledge students may have a myriad of reasons for not taking English literature.

I also considered my positionality as a parent, especially as I have children currently studying for their A levels and GCSEs in English literature. Through my children I am also aware of the schools' and colleges' input with regard to the discussions surrounding the selection of A level subjects.

Whilst my personal experiences may have shaped my initial interest, I ensured I continuously questioned my own 'insider knowledge' (Labaree, 2002, p. 108) to allow for a better understanding of the data.

### 3.6 Challenges and limitations

The greatest challenge encountered in this study was in the recruitment of participants. While several senior members of staff did agree to advertise the study through assemblies, bulletins, and word of mouth, the potential reach of the research was not as widespread as anticipated. Schools either refused to allow the display of a poster in communal areas where it would be seen by students or did not respond to emails asking for their participation in the study. Agreement from the heads of English at two large sixth form colleges to advertise an earlier version of the study had originally been received at the initial planning stage of the research. This earlier research focused on a comparison of the reading habits of those studying A level English literature with those who were not: the heads of English, interested to learn why students were not choosing to take English literature, had offered their assistance with advertising the study. The current study was developed following a review of the literature, and the development of the overarching research question changed to concentrating solely on those not taking English literature A level. The result of this decision meant that there were no previous contacts upon which to draw support for publicising the research. Without the agreement from the senior management team at the schools and colleges, it did not feel appropriate to approach individual heads of other subject departments. Additionally, this may have resulted in a skewed sample of students all taking geography or physics A level, for example. This lack of support from the schools and colleges to publicise the research meant that the recruitment of the students presented challenges.

While it was recognised that those in the upper sixth would be studying for, and sitting their A levels, it was presumed that the sample group of lower sixth students would have less time constraints. The period of interviewing was selected as being free from the pressure of their exams. However, the students in the lower sixth were also occupied – with those

students initially expressing an interest in the research citing their decision not to proceed with the research because they were either undertaking work experience or attending university open days. Others were additionally busy preparing their personal statements for university admission particularly for those competitive courses such as medicine, and to Oxford and Cambridge universities and conservatoires which have earlier deadlines than other universities. As a result, there was more reliance on recruiting through personal contacts – friends with children in the lower sixth – and snowball sampling through these friends. Those participants who initially registered their interest in the study were asked to forward the details to friends. Additionally, those who completed the interview were asked to forward the details of the study to their friends, yet this did not yield further participants. As discussed in chapter 4, the majority of participants explicitly reported having friends who were not keen readers while others additionally reported friends who were taking English literature A level and thus did not meet the requirements of the sample. Despite the incentive of the book token on the poster which was designed to attract readers' attention and participation in the research, only one participant asked for confirmation that he would be placed in the draw for this, potentially indicating that this was not enough of an incentive to appeal to potential participants.

As a result of the challenges in recruitment, this study is limited by its small sample size (n=10) and thus lacks generalisability. However, it does offer a snapshot about the decline in numbers of those taking A level English literature by hearing from a small sample of the students themselves. The unintentional skewness of the sample is a result of high achieving individuals, the mode GCSE grade held is a '9' (n=58), offering their participation in the research. The students' high marks enabled them to choose from a wide range of A levels and yet the fact that all of the participants are studying maths is of note and leads to suggestions for further research which are made in chapter 5.

## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter draws on the participants' interview responses in developing an understanding of why the students had not chosen to study A level English literature, their decisions behind the A levels to study in the Sixth Form and their enjoyment of reading generally. The findings are presented by the answers to the four sub research questions, with the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

### 4.1 How do students decide upon their A level subjects?

#### 4.1.1 Skill and interest in the subject

In the discussion of how the participants had chosen their A levels, several expressed very clear reasons for at least two of their A levels. They described how being very good at a subject and/or the enjoyment of the subject at GCSE level or earlier had determined their choices. For the majority of participants, the A levels chosen were those subjects in which they had scored high grades in their GCSEs. All but one of the students had initially started with four A levels, but four of the ten had dropped an A level before the end of the Lower Sixth and were studying three. This would suggest a degree of uncertainty at the point of entry to the Sixth Form about which three they would study for the two years with the result that subjects were tried out at A level before the decision was made to continue or stop studying them. Three students had started studying psychology which was a new subject to two of them at A level, although one had subsequently dropped this. Five participants were studying further maths. For one (Lewis), this was an unknown qualification before he moved to the Sixth Form College from his secondary school. Lily had studied further maths outside school as it was not offered by her school as an option at GCSE level. She had been, instead, taught by her father, a maths teacher at an independent school. Two of the three students who had been able to take further maths GCSE at their school were attending an independent school. One participant (Owen) expressed the wish that he had chosen to study further maths at A level and was regretting the fact he had taken physics, a subject he had studied at GCSE level and subsequently dropped at A level.

Maths was overwhelmingly the most popular option at A level in the sample, as it is nationwide, with all ten participants studying it. In Lily's case, one of her options was 'always going to be maths', and this certainty was reflected by some of the other students. On discussing the popularity of maths A level, Owen remarked:

*It fits into so many other things. It's quite universal, isn't it? So, it's very popular.*

Claudia confirmed this: 'at least half my year take maths.'

For those who had considered other A levels, some participants discussed how they had weighed up competing options. Freya explained how she was concerned about the grade boundaries in English:

*I know for English lit the grade boundaries are also very high and I wouldn't particularly want to take a subject where there's quite little room for error in terms of the grade boundaries.*

As a result, Freya had decided to stick with what she viewed as the more 'reliable' STEM subjects.

#### 4.1.2 Career choice

There was no uncertainty expressed by the participants regarding their future ambitions. All of the students were planning on going to university and had decided on their course of study. For some of the participants, their decisions had been made earlier in their secondary school career. The five who wanted to study medicine and become doctors, explained that this ambition meant that they had already decided on their A levels when considering their GCSE options in Year 9. They were all taking maths and biology and chemistry as three of their A levels. Similarly, Lewis who wanted to study psychology at university, was taking psychology A level and had taken psychology GCSE in Year 11, having decided on this in Year 9.

Amelia admitted that through the lower sixth she had been having ‘fluctuations’ and had considered oriental studies instead before returning to her original choice of medicine.

There was only one participant who had changed his degree ambitions since starting in the lower sixth:

*I spent a lot of Year 12 wanting to do history, but after the exam period I sort of came to the realization that I really don't like writing about it as much as it's an interesting subject and I like learning about it. I didn't enjoy the writing aspect. I found it quite difficult, and I just didn't see the enjoyment there. So, I thought, 'Why dedicate so much of my life to it?' and rethought things.*

(Owen)

As a result, Owen had decided he would not be applying to study history at university. Instead, he was intending to study computing, another of his A level subjects.

#### 4.1.3 Social pressure

Lily (who scored highly across all her GCSEs) felt that there was a societal pressure to continue with her early-demonstrated skill at maths and science by taking A levels in the subjects. She reported that:

*If you're good at maths, then you're considered smart. If you're good at English then you're 'good at English', you're more creative but maths is viewed as being better and then you're pushed down this route.*

She continued to explain that this expectation to continue down a ‘maths/science route’ had started early in school and that her enjoyment and skill in subjects such as English and drama were not viewed as serious contenders for her future. This expectation, in Lily’s case, had not come from specific teachers, rather it was a feeling she had picked up on since her time in primary school.

Overall, teachers were reported as not being involved in the students’ choice of A levels. Thinking back to when he chose his options for GCSE study, Owen reflected:

*There was always an encouragement of sort of stick with subjects, both that you're good at and that you enjoy. Which was the case for all of my subjects. So there wasn't any particular encouragement from teachers, like beyond that.*

Of all the participants, only one reported encouragement from individual teachers who had wanted her to study 'their' subject at A level. Staying on at the same independent school for sixth form, and being taught by some of the same teachers as earlier in her school career, Amelia stated:

*I was heavily pushed to do history and English literature as well and DT. I got 9s in those subjects, and you know, if you're getting 9 in the subject, the teacher would generally want you to do that subject... And yeah, it was just all my teachers kind of being a bit like you're good at this subject so I want to see you in my subject kind of thing.*

Amelia was awarded a 9 for every subject she took at GCSE and was following her ambition to study medicine at university. She was taking maths, biology, chemistry and Mandarin at A level.

Surprisingly, parents did not appear to play a part in the students' decisions regarding their A levels. Two students recalled that their parents may have wanted them to take other subjects, but these were recounted as passing comments rather than advice. Claudia said that her mother would have been happy if she had chosen English literature as she had studied English at university, while Max reported his father wanted him to study a broader range of subjects.

#### 4.2 What was the students' experience of GCSE English literature?

The participants' two GCSE years were affected by the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, when these participants were in Year 10, the year above did not sit their GCSE exams and their grades were awarded based on an algorithm. Following ongoing closures to schools, and nearly halfway into the school year at the start of 2021, it was decided that GCSE students would receive teacher assessed grades instead of sitting exams. Following the announcement and guidance from the exam boards, schools dealt with this assessment of

their pupils in different ways. Owen explains how this affected the GCSE English literature curriculum in his school:

*We never really fully finished that (poetry) because it was sort of split across when the lockdowns happened and the way that my school did it was... because we had sort of reduced GCSEs, you only had to do one of the four.*

While Owen was able to choose the text he wanted to study, for other participants, the decision on the texts was made by the teacher. For at least two of the participants (from different schools), this resulted in poetry being removed from the syllabus:

*We were meant to do a poetry anthology. We didn't really get much into it, so I wouldn't talk about that because of COVID and everything. We didn't get to do the whole syllabus.*

(Alice)

These changes resulted in a different experience of the English curriculum in comparison to students who had studied it in previous years.

#### 4.2.1 Mixed experience

Only one participant recalled that she had enjoyed her English classes without reservation:

*It was my best lesson of the week. But I think that's partly because I've got dyslexia. So I was in a small English class with four people and we had a great time and it was really good and the teachers were amazing.*

(Freya)

For the other participants, there was a noticeable split in the experience of English classes between KS3 and KS4 with most reporting enjoying their early secondary English classes. Claudia recalled reading aloud in Years 7 and 8:

*We just kind of like spent the lessons... someone reading... we'd take turns and doing the characters and like, I just found it so fun just reading it through as a class.*

While others remembered enjoying the creative writing they did in these years. For Archie this resulted in:

*...periods where English would just become my favourite subject.*

However, once the participants embarked on their GCSE curriculum, this enjoyment lessened:

*It really depended how I felt that lesson. So if I thought I'd done really, well, that lesson, I'd be like, 'Oh my God, I love English.' Like I've got this and the next lesson I just would be like, 'What the hell is going on?'... I can't think of anything. And I'll be like 'Oh, I hate English and I never wanna do this again'...*

(Lily)

The analysis of texts also came in for criticism:

*I enjoyed reading all of them. They were really interesting. But again, like when I had to answer like, 'How was kingship represented in so and so...', I didn't find that too enjoyable.*

(Archie)

While the analysis of the books made the study of them repetitive:

*I liked all of the books. It was just the sort of 'doing them to death' kind of thing.*

(Owen)

This repetition was a feature of Alice's experience too:

*There are always lessons where you do like the mocks stuff and then doing practice tests and I recall lessons just doing like one essay or going over an example essay going over the same thing over and over again.*

For others, it was the memorisation of quotes and poems that caused concern.

*There was like 20 poems and only two would come up. I was like, this is hell. This is too much to memorize and be able to talk about... If we maybe studied a few, I would have enjoyed it more.*

(Lily)

Lily later expressed relief at her school's decision to remove the poetry anthology for the teacher assessment.

#### 4.2.2 An appreciation of the GCSE literature texts

Despite their reported dislike of essay writing and the analysis of the texts, overall, the participants recounted the texts they had studied with enthusiasm. All were in agreement regarding their enjoyment of Shakespeare. Seven students had studied *Macbeth* as their Shakespeare play, while three had studied *Romeo and Juliet*. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was another popular text in schools although it was not viewed favourably by Owen's classmates. At his school, students were required to choose one text for GCSE:

*I chose 'The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde' for that, which got quite a few weird looks. To be completely honest, it was not a popular choice in my year. Not at all. But to be fair, we'd done a lot of it in one of the later lockdowns, in the second one, so it was understandable that not a lot of people wanted to do that.*

(Owen)

The inclusion of the play, *An Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley as a GCSE text was also appreciated by the participants. It was viewed as an unusual choice in the GCSE by one of the participants, and his unexpected enjoyment is evident in his recounting of the play:

*'An Inspector Calls', I really liked that. That was a very good book, quite odd to read as a script. But surprisingly enjoyable for being in an English curriculum.*

(Lewis)

The anthology of poems had a more mixed reception. The effect of the COVID pandemic meant that the number of texts studied was reduced. Lily's earlier quoted view on the anthology shows her relief at the removal of this text by her school.

Lewis was forthright in his dislike of studying poetry:

*I did not like them at all. I did not like poetry. I have never liked poetry. That was a bit odd because I quite liked writing poetry but, when studying it, it was never personal and dull.*

While only one participant recalled that it was his favourite text:

*I actually enjoyed the poetry anthology, the most of any, because it was the most varied part of it.*

(Owen)

Owen's expression of his enjoyment may reflect the recognition that he was in the minority.

#### 4.2.3 Essay writing

Whilst the majority of participants reported enjoying the GCSE English literature texts in class, across the participants there was a general dislike of essay writing. In Archie's case this was mediated by the teacher's input:

*Although my teacher was really nice, so it made the essays bearable.*

Alice sums this up disassociation between reading and writing, expressing the opinions of others when she explained succinctly:

*I've never been one for writing, but I do love reading.*

This dislike of essay writing was particular to English literature. Claudia (taking history A level) reflected on the distinction for her between English and history essays:

*I feel like English is probably more subjective and so that's why like there are so many things you could write about and so many different themes. Whilst like history is more narrow, which is why I enjoy it more, I think.*

Owen, the other participant studying history, also acknowledged the role of essays:

*I do history. But beyond history, I'm not a massive fan of essay subjects. I never really have been. It is more the writing aspect more than anything. I've never been particularly good at writing.*

However, unlike Claudia, who is intending to study history at university, Owen had changed his degree aspiration from history to computing towards the end of lower sixth, possibly in acknowledgement of his perceived difficulty in writing essays.

Freya, too, remarked on the different structure of essays in her experience of writing of economics essays for A level. She reflected that she could take a more perfunctory approach when writing these in comparison to her experience of writing essays for GCSE English literature.

Despite evidence to the contrary, Claudia (awarded a 9 in her GCSE English literature), was not confident in her abilities in the subject:

*I just felt like I never really improved. I always kind of stayed at the same level and they'd say to improve, 'Oh mention that' and then I try and do it but then it still wouldn't improve the mark.*

This uncertainty about the 'right' answer is clear in Lily's remark:

*And I always thought I could never tell how I had done in essays like I thought I'd done well, no, get a bad grade. And I thought I'd done well and I would not get it right or a good grade... it was just a bit confusing.*

Alice (awarded a 9) expressed her doubts:

*I get stressed about that and I get very insecure about how I write, even though I do write well.*

This acknowledgement of the stress she had experienced at GCSE influenced her decision not to study the A level:

*I've never really regretted not taking it, mainly because of the career direction I want to go, to be honest. But, you know, also I feel like it would be a lot of added stress to me.*

(Alice)

While Alice specifically mentioned feeling stress when writing essays, it was apparent that nearly all of the participants lacked confidence in their essay writing despite all of them scoring highly in their English literature GCSE.

#### 4.3 What would encourage students to take A level English literature?

As can be seen above, for some of the participants, taking A level English literature was never a consideration and they stated that they could not have been persuaded to study it in the sixth form. Max, who earlier in the interview described his father as being keen on him considering a broader range of subjects including English literature to give himself more options, reflected that his decision not to take it had made him feel like he had ‘dodged a bullet’.

Few of the participants knew fellow students who were taking English literature and there was therefore little awareness of how their peers were finding the course. While those that did have friends taking English literature reported that, as with other subjects, there was little discussion about it. Instead, their conversations were about non-school topics. The participants were unsure how their friends were finding the course and were reluctant to be drawn further on this.

For those who had either considered taking it at an earlier stage, or who thought about it over the course of the interview, there were two themes that emerged.

##### 4.3.1 More varied texts

There was consensus that Shakespeare had a definite place on the A level curriculum and should always be taught. The majority of participants had studied *Macbeth* at GCSE, the most commonly studied Shakespeare play at secondary schools in the United Kingdom (Elliott & Olive, 2021). For Lewis, not all Shakespeare’s plays were equal, and he was clear in his dislike of the text his class studied for GCSE:

*I do quite like Shakespeare. I do not like 'Romeo and Juliet'. Quite infamously, that's one of the worst ones to study. Earlier on, in Year 9, it was 'Much Ado about Nothing' or 'The Taming of a Shrew', which I did really like.*

Archie recalled his enjoyment of his GCSE text and stated his desire to study more:

*I wouldn't have minded reading some more of Shakespeare's stuff. Because a lot of it sounds really cool and enjoyable, albeit I don't really remember many of the titles off the top of my head. I liked 'Macbeth' so I wouldn't have minded doing others.*

Amelia's English literature class, pre-GCSE study, had read Chinua Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart*, and she declared she would have liked to have had the opportunity to like to have read other books by non-English writers. Describing her experience of *Things Fall Apart*, Amelia reflected:

*I really enjoyed it. That was one of my favourites, just because of the varying culture differences. Learning all about that... Yep, I'd say probably one of my favourites to this day just cause it's something that gives me interest in other things I'd never really thought about before.*

Lily too, wanted more variety from authors who were not currently represented on the English curriculum:

*We don't get many books to analyse, but it's not that much to ask for, and there are many amazing authors out there that don't get the chance to rise because of their colour, their gender and their social class.*

Claudia and Archie both noted the lack of American authors on the curriculum. Despite being at different schools they both recalled their enjoyment at reading *Of Mice and Men* at KS3.

*I just remember reading 'Of Mice and Men'... I particularly loved that book. I haven't read it since but I thought it was really impactful.*

(Claudia)

Claudia also recounted reading *The Great Gatsby* in her earlier secondary year English lessons and lamented the fact that the class would often read excerpts from books which she enjoyed but that they didn't return to them or read the whole book.

#### 4.3.2 Better promotion of the benefits of studying A level English literature

While the participants explained they had based their decision on subjects to study at A level in part on those subjects they had most enjoyed at GCSE, there was also the belief that they would not need the instruction from studying English literature at A level to enhance their pleasure from reading:

*If they're good books, I'd be like I can read that in my own time. And that is what I feel about a lot of English. That is actually one of the reasons I was like, no, I'm alright because I love reading and I can read whatever books I want. That was also the case with A level history. I can read history books. I can read up on history without having to memorize all the facts.*

(Lily)

A sentiment echoed by Alice:

*It would be fun to read about, like read the books and stuff, but I figured I could just do that on my own. It's not something that I need to do in class or anything, and it's not like I wanted to go into a career with it, so I might as well just leave it as a hobby.*

It was clear that the students were not aware of any benefits to be gained by continuing to study English literature.

#### 4.3.3 A less didactic approach/more creative writing

Having expressed their dislike of writing English essays and memorising quotes, the majority of participants reported enjoying the freedom offered by creative writing, only Maya was the exception to this. One participant would have liked to have seen more opportunity for creative writing within the English literature A level because:

*That's what I remember and adored about studying English.*

(Lewis)

On being told there had been a creative writing A level available for a short period from 2013 until it was withdrawn five years later in 2018, he was not surprised and speculated that the withdrawal of it may have been the result of it 'not being very creditable to universities.' Further support for the proposition that this group of students viewed their choice of A levels with an eye on how the subject was perceived by the admission bodies at universities.

#### 4.4 What do students enjoy about reading?

Most of the participants had enjoyed reading since early childhood. Lily reported that she was considered a 'bookworm' at primary school and had delighted in being able to read 'bigger books' than the rest of her class. Two participants continue to enjoy reading despite stating they found reading hard, either reading slowly or rereading.

Alice recounted reading in her early school years:

*I've loved reading since I was like a little child. I've always been the person that's loved reading. And in lower school I would spend like all my time reading.*

While Archie developed an interest in reading later than the other participants:

*I started around Year 7. I never read in primary school, but when I entered secondary, that's kind of when it started. I actually remember a bunch of my teachers had issues with me reading in class cause like I'd be in a geography lesson and I'd finished the task and I'd just pull out my book and start reading and they would end up having to go at me.*

It is interesting to note that reading in primary school was accepted by Alice's teachers while Archie experienced a negative reaction to reading in secondary school.

#### 4.4.1 Escapism

A number of participants reported that reading was part of their bedtime routine because it was relaxing. Max reflected that reading was an aid to sleep:

*I think I'll always find a bit of time to read, particularly before I go to sleep because yeah... it just helps me sleep I guess.*

Removing oneself from the current situation and 'getting lost in a book' was reported as one of the appeals of reading:

*The sense of kind of extracting yourself from the world and really kind of being inside your mind, inside the book and just feeling completely detached from all the stress and everything else going on.*

(Amelia)

*You enter into that world when you're reading so you can zone out from everything else. So I think that's really nice because it just allows you to, like, stop worrying for a second about other things.*

(Maya)

The pleasure that the participants reported experiencing from reading was recognised by them as being unique to reading. Several participants identified other pleasurable hobbies such as watching television and films, and explained how reading offered a fully immersive experience:

*I mean you watch TV and movies and stuff. You can find a story and you can get immersed in it. So there's a escapism in that way, but it's different with books, it's... I can't put it into words, but definitely, it's a very unique experience to other activities.*

(Alice)

*It's similar to the enjoyment of watching a TV show and it's just entertaining and it's nice to imagine the world, but I feel like what sets reading apart, it's much more flexible in how you imagine the characters and events going down. So whilst when you're watching a film or TV show, how you see it is exactly how that happens. Words can be interpreted differently with books, and you can take things to mean your own personal way.*

(Archie)

This sense of the reader possessing control was echoed by Maya:

*Whereas reading you can read at your own pace. Stop when you need to and also read the way they're able to convey it. Books don't need the music and the background and the effects to be able to convey the story, instead it's in the words how exactly someone has said something.*

Others compared the enjoyment of reading as being similar to their experience of music or dancing although reading was distinguished as being different in that the participants recognised that reading required their full attention:

*I think that is specific to reading, because I think when I'm dancing or when I'm singing in my head, I can still kind of think about other things. Whereas when you're reading, your whole mind is, you know, fully stuck into the novel. And so I think because your whole mind's taken up by that, you don't have the opportunity to think about other things.*

(Amelia)

This independence was appreciated by Claudia:

*I guess the other hobbies I do are with other people, but with reading... it's like you're envisaging your own scene. You're coming up with your own characters, what they look like... And I find that quite cool.*

This immersion in a book proved a welcome break from the stress of the pandemic:

*I think it's really good just to have that as a kind of removal from all the corona-crazy thoughts that might be roaming around your mind.*

(Amelia)

A sentiment echoed by Lily:

*It's like, a relief from the world, it's like an escape from it... It takes you away from whatever it is. And it's a really good coping mechanism with all the stuff going on.*

This escapism was mentioned by Max, with reference to the lockdowns:

*It's a relaxing activity... I sort of started reading more in quarantine because it was something to do and it's... I mean, I find it fun. It's enjoyable.*

This increase in reading by young people during the pandemic was observed in work by the National Literacy Trust (Clark & Picton, 2020).

#### 4.4.2 Popular genres

The most popular genres were fantasy and science fiction with some participants volunteering that reading fantasy novels offered an escape from the pressures of A level study with the books described by Maya as 'a guilty pleasure' because they are not viewed as complicated as other fictional genres. Fantasy also offered comfort:

*Fantasy is kind of like a comforting thing for me. Like, I'll read it if I don't really want to read something... if I don't really have lots of energy to concentrate or I just don't really feel like investing myself in something. I'll just reach for something quite easy to read, like a fantasy book.*

(Lily)

Authors mentioned included Stephen King, Terry Pratchett, VE Schwab and HP Lovecraft.

The fantasy books named in the interviews often formed part of a series, such as Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series. One participant reported that she was often introduced to these through film adaptations:

*Like sometimes I go off movies or TV series that I found interesting, and I'd like be brought into the book series, which is always better. But you know, it's a way of discovering it, isn't it?*

(Alice)

Regardless of how they had discovered the author, participants often sought out other books by that author.

Three participants were either reading, or had recently read, classic texts. For Max this was George Orwell's *1984*, for Amelia, this was *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, while Owen was reading Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. All three reported their enjoyment of

the novels and stated that they intended to read more classic texts. For Amelia, her reading of the classics was part of a longer-term plan:

*That was actually a mission I had last summer after GCSEs... I wanted to read more novels that most people would know about and that we're seeing as classics. Just so I had a knowledge of them and also just to see what I liked really, because I thought I would probably enjoy them.*

Lily, too, felt that she felt she should be better versed in the classics:

*It's hard to call yourself a reader and then people say, 'Have you read...?' And you feel that you should know that book if you love reading as much as you do.*

Freya, who is dyslexic, said that she found reading 'older books' hard to read, but wanted to access them and had listened to some classics as audiobooks. She was the only participant to mention audiobooks.

Alice and Lily both expanded on their earlier reading with Alice naming the *Harry Potter* series as a favourite and Jane Austen her favourite classic author. For Lily it was books by Jacqueline Wilson.

#### 4.4.3 Reading to learn

Participants were often reading more than one book at a time. As well as reading fiction for escapism, some participants reported reading non-fiction books in conjunction with fiction. These were often those related to the participant's current studies or future ambitions so that they could be used in personal statements for university admission, and for further discussion at a university interview: evidence of their interest in the subject they are applying to study. Titles mentioned by the future doctors included *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* by the neurologist, Oliver Sacks, and *The Knife's Edge: The Heart and Mind of a Cardiac Surgeon* by Stephen Westaby. While Lewis, planning on studying psychology at university, and taking it for A level, was reading *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently* by Steve Silberman. Owen, who was studying history A level was reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

The interest in non-fiction wasn't solely related to their subject. Describing his current interest in reading nonfiction, Owen explained:

*I like the exploration of new ideas and getting the idea of these new concepts, I find that really enjoyable.*

While Lily, described her love of historical fiction:

*I like to feel I'm being educated in some way while also enjoying it. So that's one reason I like nonfiction and historical fiction. I'm learning about that time period, and there's certainty or something to do with inequality, so like, race or gender.*

Another participant, Maya, mentioned reading self-help and motivational books and gave an example title of *How to increase your productivity* as representative of the type of non-fiction she liked to read.

#### 4.4.4 The solitary nature of reading

As has been seen above, 'escapism' was the most frequently cited reason when the participants were asked why they read and what they enjoyed about reading.

Perhaps, because of the participants' view of reading as a largely solitary act, they reported little 'book talk' with friends despite knowing others who read or who were taking English literature A level. Lewis explained that he didn't get much of an opportunity to talk about books. On being asked if he recommended books to friends, he replied:

*I can state the fact this is what I'm reading. This is how I think about it. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it.*

Instead of conversations with friends, discussions about books occurred mainly within families. All participants reported that there was at least one member of their family who enjoyed reading, shared their books, and made recommendations to the participants. Although within families, conversations about books could get heated:

*I don't talk too much about books with my friends, but I mean, I tend to like rant to my family. We speak about certain books, mostly a positive kind of ranting. Occasionally not. But like, really, when I call it a rant it's just because they don't like it.*

(Alice)

While for others it was a shared experience. Maya explained how she and her sister had read a whole series together during lockdown:

*And that was really nice because we read a chapter before bed, and then we'd like talk about it and we'd be like, 'ohh no... but did you read that bit? I thought that was so dramatic....'*

There appeared to be a gender split in families however, with some reporting their mothers, and their maternal grandmothers were the main readers in their family. There were recognisable differences in the type of books read by parents compared to their children. One student explained, with some disdain, that his mother only appeared to read books where the central characters were midwives, presumably based on the popular television series, *Call the Midwife*. Another student explained that his parents read detective fiction in their native language. There were also published writers in the participants' families, both female – a mother of one and a grandmother of another. The male members of the family did not feature so strongly in reports of readers. When fathers were mentioned, they appeared to either read infrequently or not read at all with two fathers seen only to read on holiday. Another father was described as, 'very maths, a maths teacher, so no' in answer to the question about which, if any, family members read. This suggests that for this participant, and despite the fact that she enjoyed reading and was taking maths A level, she held a belief that mathematicians are not readers.

Beyond the immediate family and their recommendations, several participants mentioned social media as providing recommendations and enhancing their reading experience. Discovering and subsequently following *BookTok*, available on the social media app, *TikTok*, had encouraged Lily to try new books:

*I thought that it was quite a nice community and just about stuff in general. But it got me into Greek mythology, which I'm gonna be forever thankful for because I love it.*

While Maya and her sister, watched *BookTok* on *YouTube*:

*Often me and my sister go on YouTube and we just watch BookToks. Because they seem more like you actually get more than what the blurb is giving you. And I kind of like the vibe of it.*

Max, too, was influenced by recommendations he found online:

*I mainly get what I want to read next on YouTube. So, watching videos about books. There's a guy called Jack Edwards... He does a lot of book content and he talks about, like, how good classics are and, you know, I want to read like good books. So I guess I'd read that.*

While Archie described how he used an online site, *Light Novel Pub*, to directly access Japanese, Chinese and Korean novels which have been translated into English.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will discuss the findings in consideration of the research question: ‘Why aren’t readers taking A level English literature?’. As a result of the small number of participating students, generalisations from this research cannot be drawn to the wider population of lower sixth form students. However, this does not mean the results are not of interest.

The students who volunteered to take part in the study were asked to be those who enjoy reading and who are not taking English literature A level. They attended a variety of sixth form educational establishments, from across towns and cities in England and were not known to one another, and yet despite meeting these two research requirements the participants exhibited other similarities. All of the students had performed very well in their GCSEs and all were taking maths A level. With one exception, all the participants were studying those subjects at A level in which they had received at least a grade 8 in the corresponding subject. Looking at the sixth form entry requirements across randomly selected sixth forms, most specify a minimum entry requirement of 5 to 6 GCSEs at Grade 4 or above, including mathematics and English. This means that the participants could have followed any one of their GCSE subjects through to A level.

When students are performing well across their subjects and can choose any subject for further study, it is of interest to see which A levels they decide upon. The four participants with 9s in every subject want to study medicine at university (see Table 3) and are taking maths, biology and chemistry in addition to following another A level – either further maths, physics or mandarin. The popularity of this combination is long-standing; these three A levels were observed to be the most common combination of subjects over 15 years ago (Vidal Rodeiro, 2007). Medicine has always been a popular subject to follow at university and since the pandemic there has been a marked increase in the number of applicants to medical courses (Medical Schools Council, 2021). However, while most universities state they require chemistry A level, with others requiring maths or biology, they do not specify that all three must be taken to gain entry to a medical degree: at least one of the medical schools on *The Medic Portal* website, Brighton and Sussex, specifies that they welcome

applications from students who study a non-STEM subject because such subjects 'are considered to broaden academic horizons'<sup>11</sup>.

Despite this degree of flexibility over A level subjects, there would appear to be a precedence for taking these subjects when students plan to take medicine at university. This may be due to a personal preference for these subjects over others but there was also a perception of the difficulties of various subjects, pertinent when the participants need the highest grades for competitive places at university. Freya, another participant planning on studying medicine, expressed her belief that achieving a top grade at A level in maths and the sciences was attainable with hard work whereas she felt that her skill in other subjects – specifically English literature – would be more difficult to predict given the subjective nature of the A level.

Maths, of all the subjects available to the participants, appears to be viewed as the key A level to take in the sixth form, and this is confirmed by its popularity nationwide. As it is one of the two subjects required by employers as evidence of their core education, along with English language, the two are often viewed in direct competition with one another. Alice's explanation that her father was 'very maths' with the unspoken acknowledgment that he was not a reader portrays the stereotypical and polarising view of 'maths versus English people': one can not be good at both. The perception of maths as one of the most difficult subjects (Watson, Dawson & McEwen, 1994), would appear to increase credibility for those studying and gaining an A level in maths over other subjects. Lily, who had been considering drama as one of her A levels before deciding on double maths, biology and chemistry, expressed the view that 'smartness' (defined by her as those people who are good at the STEM subjects) were viewed with more prestige than 'creative' individuals (those taking the arts). She continued to explain, reflecting on her experience, that to follow a creative path when one is smart would be considered a waste of her talent. That her academic ability across the board had been identified from a young age meant that she had always felt a pressure to follow STEM subjects over other subjects. Lily was unable to identify where this

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.themedicportal.com/application-guide/choosing-a-medical-school/what-a-levels-do-you-need-to-be-a-doctor/>, no date

pressure had come from, although she acknowledged the praise she had received in primary school had made her feel clever.

The other participants also denied receiving encouragement or input from teachers regarding their A level choices. The lack of continuation of study within the same school experienced by half of the participants, who either changed schools or moved to a sixth form college, may have been a factor in this regard. It is of note that the two participants who did report discussions with teachers – Amelia and Freya – both attend an independent school which covers the school years 7 to 13 and were being taught at A level in the sixth form by some of their secondary school teachers. These teachers therefore knew them well. For Amelia, who scored 9s in all her subjects, this input she received from teachers took the form of encouragement for her to continue to take ‘their’ subject. The advice for Freya went in the opposite direction; Freya, who had attended smaller English classes with other pupils with dyslexia, was advised not to take English because she would find it hard. Owen did reflect that his teachers would offer generic advice in encouraging pupils to ‘stick with what you’re good at and enjoy’. Although, as Owen pointed out on considering his GCSE grades, and applicable to the other participants: ‘this was everything’.

Parents, like teachers, were not credited with being influential in the participants’ choice of A levels. However, it transpired through passing reference rather than direct questioning that at least two of the participants were planning to follow their parents’ occupations. One of the prospective medics has a mother who is a doctor, while the participant who plans to study psychology at university has a mother who is a psychologist. One participant did recall that his father expressed that he would have liked him to have taken a broader range of subjects at A level to keep his options open, but this appeared to be a throwaway remark and not one that his son had seriously considered. Another participant believed her mother would have been happy if she had taken English literature as an A level as her mother had studied English at university. Again, this was considered more an acknowledgement of a memory by the participant as the subject of English was under discussion rather than recalled as active encouragement on the mother’s part. It is proposed that if the high grades at GCSE are indicative of the participants’ academic ability over the years, the lack of input

by both parents and teachers on A level choices may reflect both groups' acknowledgement of these students' independence in this regard.

Beyond the clear attraction of maths to the students, few participants considered English literature. All participants scored at least a 7 in their GCSE English literature which would have enabled them to continue studying English literature for A level at any sixth form. Following Davies et al. (2009), whilst it could be proposed that students will naturally choose those subjects in which they perform well, one of the participants (Lewis) was taking media studies at A level despite receiving a 6 for this at GCSE. A 7 at GCSE is a very good grade although, perhaps, in this sample of students, not considered by them to be good enough, and with 8s and 9s in other subjects they continued to study those instead. The students expressed their uncertainty of their skills at GCSE English literature despite all of them achieving a high grade in the subject. Even those who scored the top grade of a 9 for their English literature GCSE remained unconvinced of their proficiencies in the subject and this came across in the participants' interviews. This uncertainty of their skill in the subject may have been related to the GCSEs being awarded by teacher assessment, a feeling that they had not 'earned' the grades (Batty & Otte, 2021), yet all their subjects were assessed in this way. It was noticeable during the interviews that the participants were generally more confident when talking about subjects other than English. Following Knights (2017) quoted earlier it is possible these students read the set texts and achieved high grades because they were strategic in their approach to assessment in English literature. In other words, 'a proper literary education is as much about strategy as about a genuine understanding of the text' (Pennac, 1992, p. 137).

This lack of confidence in their skills in English was not a reflection of their entire experience of English in secondary school. Students' recollection of their English lessons in their early secondary school years was almost universally positive and in contrast with their less than positive experiences in their later Year 10 and Year 11 classes. This brought similarities to previous English curriculums. In the late 1980s, the traditional O level examinations changed to new GCSEs. In English literature GCSE, this was awarded based on 100 per cent coursework. When, in the mid 1990s, it was changed back again to assessment by examination, teachers were reported as fearing a return to the O level English experience; in

which English, changed from being a ‘lively, enjoyable and subject in the first 3 years of secondary school (to) an exercise in practising repetitive tasks which would gain the necessary grades’ (Fleming & Stevens, 2010, p. 202). This ‘assessmentisation’ of subjects has been noted beyond educationalists. In his later foreword to Daniel Pennac’s treatise on reading in *The Rights of the Reader* (1992), the English writer and illustrator, Quentin Blake espouses:

*In our country, one senses not so much a respect for the subject as an urge to convert an elusive entity into something that can be tested.*

(Blake, 2006, p. 7).

Students are increasingly assessed over their years in school and this group were no exception. In fact, they experienced more assessments than previous years because of the pandemic and the introduction of TAGs in place of their GCSE exams. If students lack confidence in their skills in English literature, particularly in essay writing, expressed in the interviews as feelings of stress, it is not surprising that increased assessment in the form of essay writing deterred students from considering continuing with English literature at A level. Additionally, it was reported that nationally students in this year group felt that too much time was spent on assessments at the expense of further learning (Ofqual, 2022).

Beyond the essay writing, the students reported an appreciation of the set texts at GCSE. Of the texts to be studied at GCSE – a Shakespeare play, a pre- and post-nineteenth century text – it transpired that most of the participants had studied *Macbeth*, *An Inspector Calls*, and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* despite attending different secondary schools. They enjoyed studying the texts in detail and engaging in class discussions. Again, the effect of the pandemic will have altered this experience as students accessed their lessons online during the school lockdowns. Another factor which may have been unique to this group is that despite a professed enjoyment of class discussions about the books studied for GCSE English literature, there was a noticeable lack of discussion about their reading interests outside the classroom or home. Few reported talking about books with friends, mainly because they stated their friends were not readers. This was either directly reported during the interview in the discussion about book recommendations or revealed at the end of the interview following the request to recruit further participants to the study. Participants

instead looked for their next book to read seeking inspiration from book promotions in bookshops or school libraries or, notably, following up on book recommendations made online. Despite participants identifying at least one family member who enjoyed reading, few had conversations within their families about books. This may be because participants reported experiencing reading as a solitary activity, with some participants stating that they only read before going to sleep. This may have been one of the indirect effects of the pandemic – as people were forced to spend more time in their homes, with their families and online, so they became accustomed to their own company and more reliant on entertaining themselves through activities such as reading.

The students were reading a variety of texts, both fiction and non-fiction, and most were reading one of each simultaneously. There was a clear split between those books read purely for pleasure – fiction – and those for learning purposes, non-fiction. Within the fiction books, apart from one romance novel, all the other books named by the participants were from the science fiction or fantasy genres. The students also reported finding their non-fiction books interesting. As they were coming towards the end of the lower sixth, the participants were aware they needed to read around their proposed choice of degree subject to help them in writing their personal statement for their university admission forms. One of the future medics was reading *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks; number one on a list on a website designed for students considering a career in medicine entitled ‘5 Books to read before writing your personal statement’ (Fox, 2020).

Although the participants were not continuing to study English literature A level, there appeared to be a disassociation for them between the subject and their enjoyment of reading – they did not express a need to understand more about literature to access fiction. Through the lower sixth all of the students had continued to enjoy reading and were able to identify the specific pleasures they gained from it. Most participants reported reading fictional titles, the most popular genre being fantasy, and identified how reading helped them escape the stresses both of their A level studies and the anxieties caused by the pandemic.

It is this distinction which the young people appear to make in regard to their decision not to continue studying English literature. Their stated enjoyment of reading and considered view of themselves as readers supports Pennac's view on the subject:

*What we need to understand is that books weren't written so that my son/my daughter/young people could write essays about them, but so that they could read them if they really wanted to.*

(Pennac, 1992, p. 138)

It was surprising that there was little discussion about books between the readers for the importance of discussion about books in creating and maintaining readers has been identified in research with younger school children (Cremin et al, 2014) and the popularity of book groups would indicate that people enjoy conversing about books. This may have been a result of the reduced social encounters that this sample of students had experienced due to the lockdowns. That two participants mentioned accessing book recommendations through social media demonstrates an interest and curiosity in expanding their reading knowledge, actively seeking out and following suggestions from sources beyond their immediate acquaintances. The behaviour of these two participants is part of a common trend observed in young people and reading. Lily, who mentioned *BookTok* as introducing her to Greek mythology, continues to read books recommended on the site, and she is not alone. *BookTok's* influence on teenagers' reading habits has been claimed to have created a new online community of readers, seen through reports of increased sales of those books which have been discussed on the site (Flood, 2021; Armistead, 2022). On another site, Jack Edwards, the YouTuber mentioned by Max, presents short films with titles such as, 'Books I'd sell my soul to read again for the first time', as well as reviewing classic novels and books mentioned by celebrity actors and musicians. With over a million subscribers, it is clear Edwards has a dedicated following.

'Why do English?' asks the professor of English Robert Eaglestone, in the conclusion to his book for prospective undergraduate students, *Doing English* (2017), before replying, 'The quick answer is because it's great, plus it gives you skills' (p. 141). Considering the responses of the participants on their A level choices, this would not convince this group of students. As a group of high achievers, with an interest in maths, they appear to have weighed up

their experience of English lessons over their secondary years and found English as a subject wanting. The difference in their reported enjoyment of lessons before the demands of GCSE English curricula started were noticeable in their answers with all students recalling they found the lessons and conversations stimulating and thought provoking at KS3. It was in their GCSE years, when the lessons moved from reading aloud, creative writing and classroom discussions to essay writing, sometimes under timed conditions and involving memorisation, that participants started to enjoy their lessons less and, for some, this proved to be a stressful experience.

In consideration of the question, 'how to encourage more students to take English literature A level?', an important point is raised by Gert Biesta (2020) in a discussion about educational reforms, but which could be applied to the students' perceptions of the similarities across GCSE English literature to the A level. He argues that:

*When sometimes it can be a good idea to recognize the importance of prior experience and learning by taking account of what the learner knows already and by building upon prior learning, there are other cases when a radical break with such learning is called for, for example when students have misconceptions that block them from making progress in understanding, or because students have learned and internalized something about themselves.*

(Biesta, 2020, p. 31).

The perception that A level English literature would be 'more of the same', a continuation of essay writing on Shakespearian texts and nineteenth century novels, could perhaps be broken by the study of more recent and innovative literature. Although it is proposed the sample of participants would have enjoyed, for example, the study of dystopian novels at A level, they appeared unaware of these texts on the syllabus. Additionally, the reintroduction of a creative writing element would appeal to some of the participants. In a later book on literature, Robert Eaglestone provides a more convincing description about its power:

*Literature and its study play a crucial role in our thought about how we live as individuals and as communities because of its deep involvement with personal and communal identity and because it broadens and reflects on our ability to think, feel and argue.*

(Eaglestone, 2018, p. 2)

Considering some of the findings of this dissertation, and noting the desire expressed by the head of an English department at a sixth form college eager to learn how to appeal to prospective students, it is suggested that more could be done by English teachers across secondary school years to promote their subject. It would appear from the answers by the participants that they had already formed opinions on their A level choices well in advance of any open day type events held by sixth forms and did not consider English literature A level an option for them. While acknowledging the strength of ambition and dedication exhibited by this sample of students may be unusual, their declarations that little would have persuaded them to take English literature demonstrates how firmly they held their beliefs in their other subjects – both in their ability to do well in them and the subjects' worth – regarding their future careers. Additionally, secondary school teachers could encourage their students to consider further studying of English by addressing their concerns over their skills in writing and memorisation in years 10 and 11. The students were clearly doubtful of their abilities in the subject over the GCSE years despite evidence to the contrary in their GCSE marks.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study offers an insight into understanding why students who enjoy reading do not choose to study English literature at A level. It considers their experiences and decision-making processes following the recent completion of their GCSEs and commencement of their A level studies. It shows that, within this small sample of participants, students base their A level choices on their prior knowledge of subjects in the upper secondary years and their career ambitions. The popularity of maths as an A level subject, and the subject to choose if an individual is good at it, is clear within this study. Considering the similar combination of A levels – maths and at least one other STEM subject – it would be interesting to look at those students who take both maths and English to examine their motivations for what would appear to be polar opposites from this study.

Students in this study made choices about their A levels well in advance of receiving the results of their GCSEs and/or attending sixth form open days and were planning to continue with their subjects into their second and final year of sixth form. While some of the participants had dropped an A level and were now taking three, none of the participants had changed their choice of subjects in the lower sixth and all reported to be enjoying their subjects with few reservations. It was apparent that the participants hold strong views which were not open to change. It is suggested that if teachers of English A level want to promote their subject, this needs to start earlier in secondary school before students take their GCSEs and weigh up their other options.

The research found that while students had enjoyed their earlier secondary English lessons, this enjoyment had not continued over the delivery of the English GCSE curriculum in Years 10 and 11. While the effect of COVID on this group's learning experience, cannot be ruled out, it is noted that all subjects were similarly affected. Beyond the observed changes to the English curricula, COVID was not raised as an issue in regard to English lessons by any of the participants. It is possible that English is a subject which requires teaching in a classroom setting, allowing for class discussions and reading aloud to take place, and thus the experience of it suffered because of the online presentation and the increase in assessment practices. If this is not COVID-related, future research in this area could include a

consideration of students' experiences in the English classroom in the secondary school as they move from KS3 to KS4 to enable an understanding of why students lose their enjoyment of the subject at this time.

Additionally, the research demonstrated that within this group of participants, students were unclear of the benefits in studying English literature A level when compared with STEM subjects and other subjects on offer, such as history. They appeared to desire the certainty of the 'right' answer that they encountered in their study of maths while they found comfort in history offering them a definitive date. Their experience in GCSE English literature had demonstrated to them that the study of English will always be subjective, and they lacked confidence in their abilities to develop skills in literary analysis even though they had proved themselves more than capable of this at GCSE level. The participants also recognised they had found this uncertainty at GCSE level stressful and assumed similar, if not greater, demands at A level.

In consideration of the methods employed in the study, the students all appeared to enjoy participating in the research. Several reported afterwards that they had found it a useful experience to reflect on their choice and experience of their A level subjects and appreciated the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their reading. Future research might consider employing a similar phenomenological approach to learn more about student motivations and practices.

Finally, the study found that students enjoyed reading a range of fiction books. During the period in which the research was conducted participants were also reading non-fiction titles in preparation for their UCAS personal statements. They acknowledged that such books increased their learning, introducing them to new ideas and skills. The students were resolute in their belief that they would always enjoy reading and that the pleasure they experience from it would continue. It was interesting to learn that the students enjoyed their GCSE set texts and that they did not talk about books outside the classroom. Future research into reading practices by this age group might look at whether those students who take English literature A level are more likely to be part of wider discussions about reading. If one of the concerns of English educators about the decline in numbers of students taking

English literature A level is that this reflects a general wane in reading practices, this should provide some solace that young people continue to recognise and reap the rewards of reading.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: CUREC Approval

#### **Readers Who Don't Take English A Level CIA-22HT-081**

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the procedures laid down by the University for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to inform you, then, that, on the basis of the information provided to DREC, the proposed research has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical standards, and accordingly, approval has been granted.

Please continue to follow all current guidance issued by CUREC during the pandemic, notably COVID-19: CUREC guidance on research involving human participants, <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/coronavirus>

*If relevant please also check the CUREC website for their best practice research guides, these can be very useful in refining the writing up of ethical considerations in your research - see <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/bpg>*

Good luck with your research study,

Keep well and safe,

Yours sincerely,

All good wishes,

Liam

Chair, DREC

**Liam Francis Gearon, PhD, FHEA, FRSA, Docent**

## Appendix 2: Poster

University of Oxford  
Department of Education  
15 Norham Gardens  
Oxford  
OX2 6PY



### Readers Who Don't Take English A Level

Ethics Approval Reference: CIA-22HT-081

## **VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR A STUDY ON READING**



**Love reading? Want to win a £15 book token?**

We are looking for volunteers in the Lower Sixth, aged 16 or 17, who enjoy reading and are **not taking** A level English literature to take part in our research. You would be invited to participate in an interview for 1 session, lasting about 30 minutes. You would be asked questions about your attitude to reading and the books you enjoy.

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact Gemma Catchpole - [gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk) by 1<sup>st</sup> July. There is no obligation to take part. Thank you!

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

CUREC Approval Reference: CIA-22HT-081

**Readers Who Don't Take English Literature A Level**

Study Summary: The study is looking at the reading interests of those people who enjoy reading and are not studying English literature at A level.

*Please initial each box*

- |                  |  |                          |
|------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1                | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version_____dated _____ for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2                | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without penalty.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3                | I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by designated individuals from the University of Oxford where it is relevant to my taking part in this study. I give permission for these individuals to have access to this data. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4                | I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5                | I understand that all information will be kept strictly confidential except in rare circumstances in which it is judged that I am, or someone else is, at immediate risk of serious harm, or where information is requested by a court of law.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6                | I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7                | I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8                | I agree to take part in the above study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Optional:</b> | I agree for my contact details to be kept in a secure database for the purpose of contacting me about future studies.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Optional:</b> | I wish to be entered into the draw to win a £15 book token.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Volunteer

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking consent

dd / mm / yyyy  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

## Appendix 4: Information sheet

Department of Education  
University of Oxford  
15 Norham Gardens  
Oxford  
OX2 6PY



Gemma Catchpole  
[gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk)

Readers Who Don't Take English Literature A'level

### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

CIA-22HT-081

We would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide if you would like to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information sheet and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask us.

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the reading interests of those people who enjoy reading and are not studying English literature at A'level.

This is an interesting area of research because little is known about the reading choices of people in this age group. In addition, there is a general decline in the number of students taking English literature A'level across England and, as this is a subject which is often associated with an enjoyment of reading, this research will provide further information on the relationship between reading and A'level English literature as perceived by those students who decided not to take the subject.

You will be invited to attend a one-to-one interview which will last up to 30 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your enjoyment of reading, your experience of English literature at school and your chosen A'levels.

#### **Why have you been invited to take part?**

We are inviting you to take part because you are aged either 16 or 17 and are in the first year of your A'levels. You have expressed an enjoyment of reading and are not taking A'level English literature. We are inviting up to 20 people to take part.

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. You can ask questions about the study before deciding whether to participate. If you do agree to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason and without penalty, by advising the researchers of this decision.

### **What will happen if I take part?**

You will be invited to take part in an interview which will last up to 30 minutes. The time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed in advance. Upon arrival, you will be asked for your written consent which will be recorded using a consent form. With your consent, the interview will be recorded using audio equipment so the researcher can have an accurate record of the conversation. The interview will consist of questions regarding your reading preferences and your perceptions on English literature A'level. The audio files will be encrypted and stored securely. These audio files will be transcribed by the researcher who will anonymise participants and their details and then analyse the transcription as part of their dissertation project.

### **What are the advantages / disadvantages of taking part?**

There is no intended advantage to taking part in the experiment, but it will provide participants with an opportunity to express their opinions and views on reading and English literature A'level. If interest is expressed, the broad findings of the research can be shared with participants and their schools/colleges once the project has concluded.

### **What happens to the data provided?**

The information you provide during the study is the **research data**. Any research data from which you can be identified, such as name and audio recordings, is known as **personal data**. During the transcription process, this data will be de-identified meticulously to anonymise details of the participants.

**Personal data** will be stored securely on the encrypted University of Oxford OneDrive network. It will only be accessible via a password protected computer. Following submission, it will be destroyed.

**Other research data** will be stored until submission of the research project. Following submission, it will be destroyed. The researcher and supervisor will have access to the research data. Responsible members of the University of Oxford may be given access to data for monitoring and/or audit of the research.

### **Will the research be published?**

The research will be written up as a student's dissertation. On successful submission of the dissertation, it may be deposited both in print and online in the University archives to facilitate its use in future research. If so, the thesis will be openly accessible.

The research may be submitted for publication in relevant journals.

### **Who is conducting this research?**

The research project is organised by Gemma Catchpole of the University of Oxford, who is a master's student studying on the MSc Education (Research Design & Methodology) course. This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee, CIA-22HT-081.

### **What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Gemma Catchpole (gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk) or Velda Elliott (velda.elliott@education.ox.ac.uk) and we will do our best to answer your query.

I/we will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Inter-Divisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JD

### **Data Protection**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data and, as such, will determine how your personal data is used in the study.

The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest.

Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from <https://compliance.web.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

### **What should I do next?**

Please reply to the email to arrange a convenient time for the interview. Please remember that you may withdraw at any time, without penalty and without giving a reason, by notifying the researcher. If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Student researcher: Gemma Catchpole (gemma.catchpole@education.ox.ac.uk)

OR

Student supervisor: Velda Elliott (velda.elliott@education.ox.ac.uk).

## Appendix 5: Interview schedule

### Formalities:

- Brief description of the aims of the study and a reminder of the participant's right to withdraw.
- Invite participant to reread the information sheet.
- Invite participant to sign consent form.
- Confirm details on the information sheet.

### Defining 'reader'

- Why did you respond to the advertisement?
- What do you understand 'love reading' to mean/how would you define it?
- Do you self-define as a reader?
- Why? On what basis?

### Academic background

- **Can you describe your sixth form to me?**
- What is the name of it?
- Is this attached to the school where you took your GCSEs?
- Why did you or your family choose this school/college?
  
- **Can you describe your GCSE experience...:**
- What is the type of school you attended to GCSE – secondary, independent, grammar?
- What subjects did you take at GCSE?
- What subjects did you enjoy?
- What grades did you get at GCSE?

## **Current education**

### **Thinking about when you applied to Sixth Form...:**

- What subjects did you consider taking/why?
- Did anyone – teachers/family/friends – encourage you to take a particular subject?
- What subjects did you apply to study?
- Are these the ones you are currently studying?
- Did you consider taking English literature?

### **After a year in the Sixth Form...:**

- Are you enjoying your subjects/pleased you chose them?
- Are they meeting your expectations?
- Why do you think you are enjoying them/not enjoying them?

### **Future plans...:**

- What are your future plans?
- Has this always been your plan, or has it changed?

## **GCSE English literature**

### **Thinking back to GCSE English literature...:**

- Did you enjoy your lessons?
- Why was this?
- What books did you study?
- What books did you enjoy?
- Were there books you didn't enjoy?

### **Thinking back even further...:**

- Did you enjoy your English lessons?
- Can you recall any books you particularly enjoyed/didn't like?

## **Reading**

### **What does reading mean to you?**

- Have you always enjoyed reading?
- What do you get from reading?
- Do you experience this feeling from other interests/activities?
- Do members of your family read?

### **What are you currently reading?**

- What made you decide to read it?
- Are you enjoying it?
- Have you read other books by this author?
- How would you describe it?
- Is this typical of the types of books you like to read?

### **Other reading...:**

- Are there other types of books you like to read?
- Are there other types of books you wouldn't want to read?

### **Choosing books**

- How do you choose what to read?
- What makes you select a book from a shelf/table?
- Do your friends or family recommend books to you?
- Do you recommend books to people?
- Do you discuss books with others?

## **A level English literature**

### **Not taking the A level...:**

- How do you feel about your decision not to take English literature?
- Have you regretted your decision not to take English literature?
- Do you have friends who are taking English literature?
- If so... are they enjoying it?
- Do you know what books they are studying?
- Has this changed your opinion of it?

### **What would have encouraged you to take English literature A level?**

- If you did consider taking A level English literature, what would have swung the decision for you?
- What books would you like to read for A level?
- Why do you think these are not on the current syllabus?

## **The future**

- Do you think you will always enjoy reading?
- Do you think your reading tastes will change?
- Do you think you will regret not taking English literature A level?