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Going astray

Classics and the NSS

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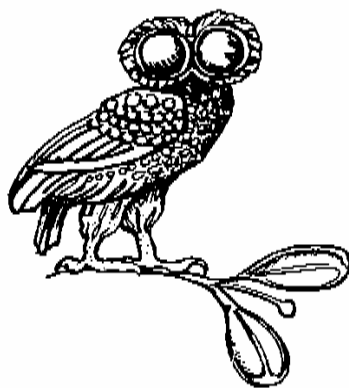
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Bulletin of the
COUNCIL of UNIVERSITY CLASSICAL DEPARTMENTS



Going Astray: Classics and the NSS*

Over the last few months, 'classical departments'¹ in the UK will once more have gone through the process of analysing the most recent results of the National Student Survey (NSS).² This survey, intended to solicit the views of finalists on their study experience, is increasingly used to inform institutional and departmental rankings across the country, published by leading newspapers in the form of league tables. Running for the seventh time in 2011, the survey results are subsequently published on Unistats.com so that '[...] prospective students and their advisors can use the results to help make informed choices of where and what to study', as well as to be of use to universities, colleges and student unions '[...] to facilitate best practice and enhance the student learning experience'.³ In a world where higher education is once more conceptualised as

* Thanks to colleagues across the country for discussion of and information on matters pertaining to the NSS, and in particular to Lena Isayev (Exeter), Jaap Wisse (Newcastle) and James Fraser (Edinburgh). The views expressed are those of the author.

¹ For the purpose of this exercise, 'classical departments' are defined as units that offer the teaching of subjects falling traditionally under the 'Classics umbrella' in the UK: Greek, Latin, Ancient History, Classical Art and Archaeology, Classical Studies/Literature in Translation/Civilisation. This is not to imply that all such units are Classics departments, or that they should be placed within a 'classical' set-up.

² <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>.

³ <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/index.html>; <http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>.

(also) an economic enterprise, the impact of the results of the NSS can potentially be very damaging for individual departments that fail to score high enough in student satisfaction figures.

Naturally, the views and comments of our students are of great importance to each and every teacher at a UK higher education institution: that is why these are regularly solicited in the form of course questionnaires throughout the academic year, as well as through the well-tested method of face-to-face discussion, be it in staff-student liaison committees, or simply outwith any formal framework, on a personal, *ad hoc* basis, between student and teacher. Thus, there is nothing wrong in principle with the idea of gathering the views of students on the teaching they have received – even if the question as to whether the recipient of teaching (i.e. the student) is best equipped to judge the value of the education received (just at the point of graduation), and the methods through which this education was delivered, remains open for future discussion. But there are a number of disconcerting aspects of the NSS – especially (but not only) for Classics – that have not been fully acknowledged in the past, and that may for all practical purposes be in fact unknown to those who are thought of as the primary beneficiaries of the NSS: school-leavers – i.e. potential students – and their parents.

Evidently, the method of soliciting comments merely from finalists can only result in a partial view of any one department and the programmes on offer. Moreover, the ways and means employed by institutions to solicit a high enough return rate of surveys – e.g. through repeated ‘telephone surveying’ of students who have hitherto ‘failed’ to complete the survey by Ipsos MORI,⁴ the independent market research agency that administers the NSS – is likely to influence the respondents’ comments in ways as yet to be understood. But there is a much more structural issue with the NSS that distorts the results in varying degrees from department to department: and that is the simple fact that individual student surveys may be returned to a teaching unit other than that in which the student was taught.

The NSS classifies programmes of study by subject groups following each programme’s standard ‘JACS code’: the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) has been developed by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in collaboration with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS); it classifies all programmes at UK HEIs. The overarching subject groupings are determined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and are applied consistently to all HEIs that make use of the survey. The problem that arises from using these subject groupings and JACS codes uniformly across all HEIs is that the actual subject groupings in departments (*vel sim.*, subject areas/schools/etc.) at HEIs can vary noticeably from HEI to HEI, and typically diverges as far as Classics is concerned from the groupings assumed by the NSS classification system. Thus, ‘Classical Archaeology’ is grouped with ‘Archaeology’ in the NSS – regardless of whether students on a classical archaeology programme were taught in an Archaeology department or in a Classics department (or other). As a result, the student survey returns from students on a Classical Archaeology programme will be used to inform the survey results for the subject group ‘Archaeology’ even if the programme is offered in a Classics department. Similarly, ‘Ancient History’ is grouped with ‘History’ in the NSS – regardless of whether students on the programme were taught in a History department (as for instance at UCL History) or in a Classics

⁴ <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/>.

department (as for instance at KCL Classics).⁵ Thus, ‘historical departments’ in the subject group ‘History’ typically receive survey data also from students who were not taught in a ‘historical department’, whilst ‘classical departments’ in the subject group ‘Classics’ typically lose survey data to other subject groups (such as ‘History’) that did not teach the students in question. A brief breakdown of typical UG programmes offered by ‘classical departments’ and the relevant NSS classifications highlights the underlying issues (Table 1).

Table 1: Programmes and NSS classifications

Programme	NSS classification
Ancient History	History
Ancient History and Greek	History and Classics
Ancient History and Latin	History and Classics
Ancient History and Medieval History	History
Ancient History and Modern History	History
Classical Archaeology	Archaeology
Classical Archaeology and Ancient History	Archaeology and History
Classical Studies (Classical Civilisation)	Classics
Classics (Greek and Latin)	Classics
Greek	Classics
Latin	Classics

As is immediately clear from this breakdown, the only undergraduate programmes that are automatically returned in the NSS to a ‘classical department’ (i.e. to the subject group ‘Classics’) are those involving the classical languages, and Classical Studies; whilst survey returns from students on Ancient History and Classical Archaeology programmes are instead grouped with ‘History’ and ‘Archaeology’ respectively: the students’ views, as expressed in the survey, are used to inform the results of the relevant institutions’ History and Archaeology departments even if the students in question were taught in a Classics department.

Whence the problem. The aim of the following analysis of student data – based on departments’ finalists figures (expressed in FTEs) as provided in the annual statistics returns to CUCD in 2009/10 and 2010/11 for single and joint UG programmes – is, then, to create greater clarity on the potential proportion of student survey returns that are harvested or lost by each ‘classical department’ in the UK.⁶ The analysis assumes a fictional 100% return rate of student surveys to the NSS (i.e. it is based on a full sample of finalists). Since finalist numbers on any one programme can change on an annual basis, the figures here offered are at best a rough guideline. Similarly, and for the same reason, the following analysis may not include all and every programme on offer by ‘classical departments’ in the UK; and programme titles at any one institution may vary from the generic titles here used. Lastly, the following analysis merely provides percentages of finalists on single and joint programmes, rather than actual figures; and it includes all ‘classical departments’ (except for Classics at the OU) irrespective of their student numbers, i.e. it includes departments whose student figures are too small to qualify for the NSS: the league table rankings of departments falling into this category are – for right or for wrong – not influenced by the NSS. In short, the figures here produced can only provide a rudimentary

⁵ The same applies to programmes such as ‘Art History’, ‘Architectural History’, etc.

⁶ The staff and student figures collected each year by CUCD from all departments in the UK offering the teaching of ‘classical’ subjects represent a snap shot of ‘classical’ teaching in the UK: they are not absolutely accurate.

benchmark for the respective NSS returns to 'classical' and 'non-classical departments' (Table 2): to gain accuracy on the matter, departments that offer programmes that fall under the Classics umbrella are advised to scrutinise their own institution's student data universe, and the relevant NSS statistics.⁷

Table 2: Fictional maximum NSS returns (in %) in 'Classics', 2009/10 and 2010/11

Key:

A: **Institution** (and programmes)

i: % of **2009/10** finalist FTEs returned to the subject group 'Classics'

ii: % of **2009/10** finalist FTEs returned to another subject group (e.g. 'History', 'Archaeology', etc.)

iii: % of **2010/11** finalist FTEs returned to the subject group 'Classics'

iv: % of **2010/11** finalist FTEs returned to another subject group (e.g. 'History', 'Archaeology', etc.)

v: **Average % (for 2009/10 and 2010/11)** of finalist FTEs returned to other subject groups (e.g. 'History', 'Archaeology', etc.)

A: **Birkbeck** (Programmes: Classics; Classical Studies/Civ.)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **Birmingham** (Programmes: Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 40.64%	ii: 59.36%	iii: 39.01%	iv: 60.99%	v: 60.17%
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A: **Bristol** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 65%	ii: 35%	iii: 61.82%	iv: 38.18%	v: 36.59%
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A: **Cambridge** (Programmes: Classics)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **Cardiff** (Programmes: Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 0%	ii: 100%	iii: 0%	iv: 100%	v: 100%
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A: **Durham** (Programmes: Classics; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 44.61%	ii: 55.39%	iii: 55.13%	iv: 44.87%	v: 50.13%
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A: **Edinburgh** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 58.97%	ii: 41.03%	iii: 52.25%	iv: 47.75%	v: 44.39%
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⁷ An analysis of finalist figures in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, based on university statistics and covering the last six academic years, was carried out by Dr James Fraser from Edinburgh University during 2010/11: concerning Classics, the results suggest an average migration of 60% of the maximum number of finalists survey returns to other subject groups in the NSS.

A: **Exeter** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 50.84%	ii: 49.16%	iii: 50.43%	iv: 49.57%	v: 49.37%
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A: **Glasgow** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **KCL** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 62.67%	ii: 37.33%	iii: 61.29%	iv: 38.71%	v: 38.02%
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A: **Kent** (Programmes: Classical Studies/Civ.)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **Lampeter** (Programmes: Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 31.14%	ii: 68.86%	iii: 30.43%	iv: 69.57%	v: 69.22%
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A: **Leeds** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **Leicester** (Programmes: Ancient History)

i: 0%	ii: 100%	iii: 0%	iv: 100%	v: 100%
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A: **Liverpool** (Programmes: Classics; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 50%	ii: 50%	iii: 43.75%	iv: 56.25%	v: 53.13%
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A: **Manchester** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 45.64%	ii: 54.36%	iii: 41.3%	iv: 58.7%	v: 56.53%
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A: **Newcastle** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 43.02%	ii: 56.98%	iii: 43.99%	iv: 56.01%	v: 56.5%
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A: **Nottingham** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 45.67%	ii: 54.33%	iii: 48.17%	iv: 51.83%	v: 53.08%
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A: **Oxford** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Ancient History)

i: 79.05%	ii: 20.95%	iii: 80.5%	iv: 19.5%	v: 20.23%
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A: **Reading** (Programmes: Classics; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 35.44%	ii: 64.56%	iii: 41.94%	iv: 58.06%	v: 61.31%
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A: **Roehampton** (Programmes: Classical Studies/Civ.)

i: 100%	ii: 0%	iii: 100%	iv: 0%	v: 0%
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A: **Royal Holloway** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 66.66%	ii: 33.33%	iii: 72.86%	iv: 27.14%	v: 30.24%
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A: **St. Andrews** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History; Classical Art/Arch.)

i: 70.81%	ii: 29.19%	iii: 75.28%	iv: 24.72%	v: 26.96%
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A: **Swansea** (Programmes: Classics; Greek; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

i: 36.43%	ii: 63.57%	iii: 33.12%	iv: 66.88 %	v: 65.23%
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A: **UCL** (Programmes: 'classical programmes' in Greek and Latin/History/loA)⁸

i: 71.64%	ii: 28.36%	iii: 72.79%	iv: 27.21%	v: 27.79%
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A: **Warwick** (Programmes: Classics; Latin; Classical Studies/Civ.; Ancient History)

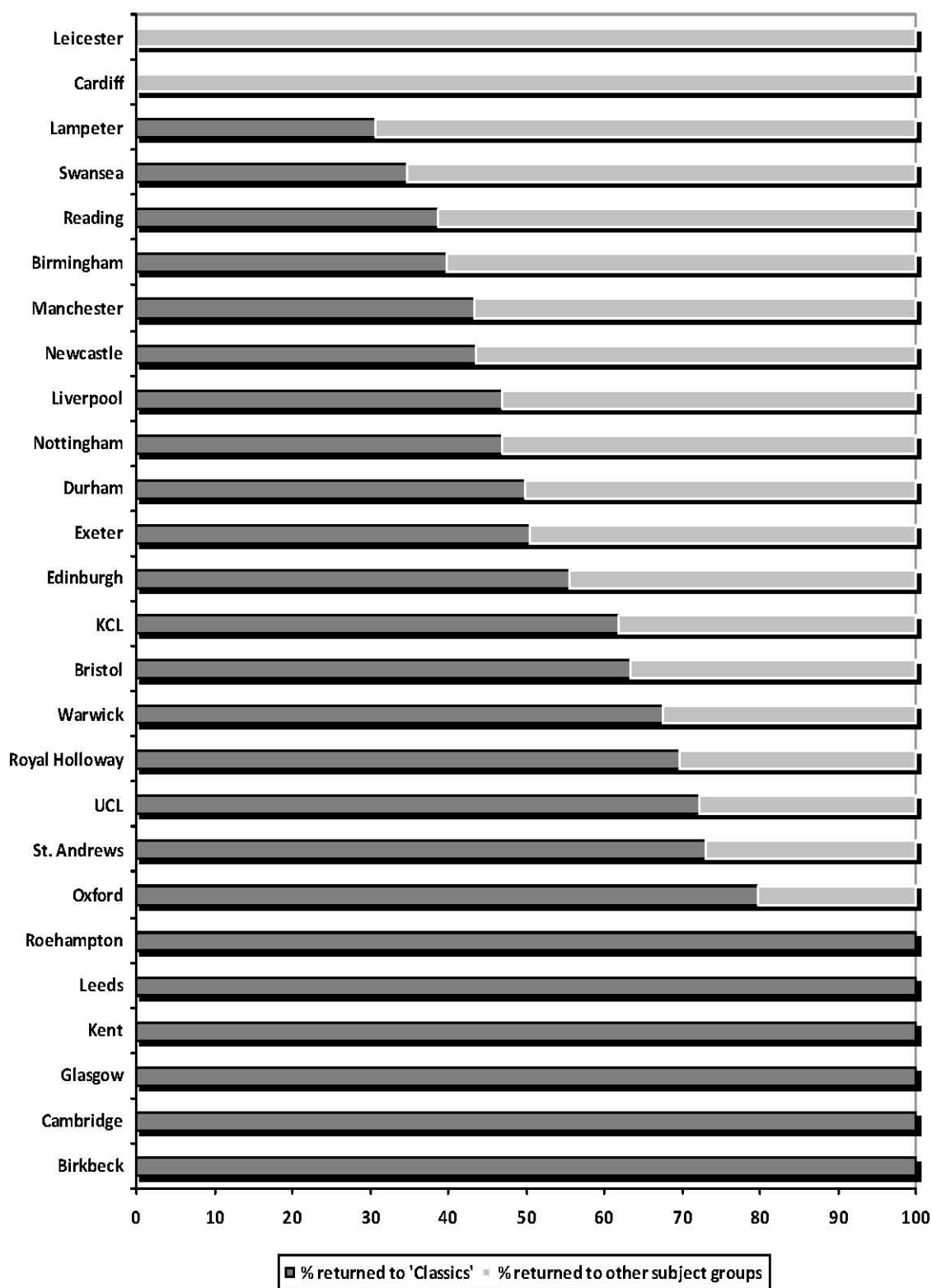
i: 73.33%	ii: 26.67%	iii: 61.84%	iv: 38.16%	v: 32.41%
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As the figures presented in Table 2 make clear, of the 26 institutions that offer teaching in one or other 'classical subject', only six have offered programmes in the last two academic sessions that are *all* returned in the NSS under the subject group 'Classics': Birkbeck, Cambridge, Glasgow, Kent, Leeds, and Roehampton. This is not to say that in the remaining 23 institutions the teaching units that offered programmes that typically fall under the Classics umbrella all lost student survey data to other teaching units: depending on institutional structures, the NSS subject classification system may accurately return the data to the (larger) unit in which the students were taught (as is likely to be the case for instance at UCL). But for the majority of 'classical departments' across the country, these figures nonetheless suggest a typical loss of crucial data. These figures also imply that the views and comments of students on, e.g., Ancient History programmes offered by a 'classical department' *regularly* influence the results of the subject group 'History', thus distorting that group's results through the inclusion of students who have not been taught in a 'historical department'.⁹ A graphic display of the differences between individual 'classical departments' may help to foreground the potential unevenness in the NSS classification system as far as Classics is concerned (Figure 1).

⁸ UCL submitted a joint statistics return to CUCD for 2009/10 and 2010/11 covering three departments (Greek and Latin, History, and the Institute of Archaeology), which does not allow one to separate student figures into each of the three departments for the purpose of the current exercise. In the light of the disciplinary structuring of departments in UCL, it is likely that only a small number of students might be returned in the NSS to a unit other than that which has taught them.

⁹ Evidently, degree programmes may also be fairly flexible concerning the type of courses that students can take in order to fulfil the requirements of the degree. E.g., a programme called 'History', taught in a 'historical unit', may list courses in Ancient History amongst the course options for this degree even if a programme called 'Ancient History', taught by a 'classical unit', is available at the same institution.

Figure 1: Graphic display of the fictional maximum NSS returns to 'Classics' and the corresponding migration of student survey returns to non-classical subject groups (by individual 'classical departments')



But the matter is not just a numerical one: obviously, departments would

like to know their students' views on *all* their programmes, rather than just on a sub-section of programmes. Furthermore, students on different programmes may reflect different social, economic or geographic backgrounds, with different attitudes, outlooks, likes and dislikes. By way of example, the body of finalists (from the UK) on programmes involving the classical languages at the University of Edinburgh is typically made up of students whose school education was received in England. In contrast, the body of finalists on programmes that do not involve the classical languages is regularly made up of a 'mixed' student population in relation to the students' place of school education south or north of the border (including Wales and Northern Ireland). Thus, in the case of Classics at Edinburgh, the views for instance of 'the Scottish student cohort' is currently not represented in the NSS results for Classics at Edinburgh – excluding from those results consequently also these students' evaluation of the work of the colleagues who teach them. This is not the place to attach any wide-reaching interpretation to this observation: the 'Scottish example' merely aims to indicate that there are issues beyond the 'numbers game' with the current NSS classification system for 'classical departments'.

In sum, anyone employing the NSS results for direct comparison between departments offering the study of subjects that traditionally fall under the Classics umbrella in the UK, compares apples with oranges. They may moreover be perceived as deliberately deceiving the potential body of 'customers'. The figures presented in this discussion paper aim at increasing awareness of the problems attached to the current use of our students' views; and to provide a basis for debate amongst the Classics community and beyond as to how one may initiate change in the NSS classification system.¹⁰ As is clear from the figures presented here (Table 2 and Figure 1), the answer cannot be a mere reversal of the current situation. To group, e.g., 'Ancient History' with 'Classics' in future would not solve the underlying problem of false groupings: the 'classical landscape' in the UK is – thankfully – too diverse in its institutional organisation to allow a rigid and monochrome application of subject groupings in the NSS; institutions that are based on disciplinary groupings, and that, for instance, offer the teaching of Ancient History in a 'historical' teaching unit, would not benefit from a reversal of the current situation. Rather, what is needed is a more sophisticated survey mechanism that allows institutions to set the subject groupings in the NSS in accordance with the subject groupings practiced at *their* HEI: a technicality, but an important one.¹¹ Before such a mechanism has been put in place, the NSS results for Classics can have little bearing on a meaningful comparison between the views of our students across the country. The manufacturers of league tables would be well advised to stay far away from the NSS results for Classics.

The diverse organisational structures in HEIs in which the teaching of subjects that traditionally fall under the Classics umbrella in the UK is carried out, and the resulting impact on the NSS results, may hitherto have been less clear; but ignorance should no longer delay the necessary confrontation of the issue. As Randell-Maclver put it nearly a century ago in relation to a quite different matter: '[...] if there are still scholars who protest that such things are not worth knowing, they can no longer have any excuse for asserting them to be

¹⁰ Representations on behalf of CUCD have been made to UCAS in 2010/11 without leading to concrete results.

¹¹ For internal purposes, institutions can already obtain the NSS data based on a coding system that is in alignment with their departmental (or other) structures.

unknowable.¹² To scholars add newspaper editors, university managers, market researchers, school leavers and parents.

Ulrike Roth, October 2011

¹² In his *Italy before the Romans* (Oxford, 1928), at 12.