

## **Final Report: Festival of Reading and Writing 2024**

### **Robinson College and Faculty of English**

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#### **1. Introduction**

This project has run in various forms since 2018 led by Dr Claire Wilkinson, firstly through the Faculty of English with WPPF funding and then via Murray Edwards College with INT support. With Dr Wilkinson on leave it seemed likely it would not go ahead this year, so the Faculty of English is very grateful to Robinson College for agreeing to partner with them and especially for Isaac Newton Trust's support which enabled the project to carry on for another year. Dr Wilkinson has worked hard to develop relationships with the teachers and schools who take part in the project, which is a significant factor in its success, and the teachers were relieved it would still be happening as it is something they build into the summer term planning.

Participating students completed a study module in school based on the BBC's National Short Story Award before writing and submitting an essay of 500-750 words in their own time. In Dr Wilkinson's absence the project was scaled back slightly compared to previous years with no visits to schools and the Peterborough schools not being included this time. Despite that we still had 78 essays submitted to the competition and 83 students attending a day at Robinson. The day in Cambridge involved a taster lecture, a tour of the college and a prize-giving ceremony.

#### **2. Report**

##### **i. Aims and Targeting**

This year's project carried on with the aims and targeting of previous years, so the principal aims were to develop subject interest in younger students (Year 9) and to increase aspiration both in

terms of showing them that Cambridge is a welcoming and inclusive environment where they could succeed and also more generally introducing the idea of university to students coming from an area with lower progression to HE. In addition, we hoped to improve attainment through the work in school, the essay writing and the feedback they received.

We have worked with the schools who took part since the start of the project, and they were initially targeted because of the high proportion of students from POLAR Quintiles 1 and 2. The schools all belong to the West Norfolk Academies Trust.

## ii. **Execution**

The schools are all provided with learning packs that are suitable for students of all abilities and teachers are able to deliver the material in whichever way seems most appropriate for their students. The aim is to introduce and develop key skills such as close reading, understanding critical writing, structuring a response and improving writing skills. Students can then choose whether to enter the competition by submitting an essay in their own time which was then marked by a PhD student who provided short written feedback on each essay detailing what was good about the essay and what could have been done to make it better.

## iii. **The Festival of Reading and Writing**

This year's event took place on Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July at Robinson College. Students were due to have refreshments on arrival before a welcome from English Faculty Chair, Professor Raphael Lyne which was followed by a lecture from Dr Scott Annett, Senior Tutor at Robinson. After lunch students were toured round Robinson by current students before a prize-giving ceremony conducted by Professor Lyne which also featured a short talk from one of the PhD students who marked the essays who was from Norfolk herself and was also the first in her family to attend university. Students were given certificates and goodie bags and their teachers were given the feedback sheets for each essay to distribute back in school.

Unfortunately, one of the buses did not turn up (despite it having been confirmed on the Friday prior and the driver having a worksheet showing that he had 2 pick-ups to make), by the time the school contacted us there was not enough time to either turn the bus around or to send another one. The team at Robinson were fantastic in immediately setting up a link so that the students stuck at school could watch the event over live stream and not miss the lecture or the prize-giving. There were 3 highly commended essays (one from each school) and an overall winner, as the overall winner came from the missing school the Headteacher and Head of English drove her and the highly commended student down to Cambridge so that they arrived in time for lunch, the tour and the prize giving – demonstrating how seriously they took the competition.

The bus company offered to bring the students back at a later date, so they visited on October 2<sup>nd</sup> when they had a lecture from Professor Drew Milne from the English Faculty, a tour of Robinson

with current students followed by lunch and then Senior Tutor Dr Annett spoke to them briefly to finish off the day.

### 3. Finances

Item	INT Grant (£s)	Faculty of English (£s)
Coaches	1940	
Catering 15/7	4275	
Ambassadors 15/7	70.82	
Catering 2/10	362.67	
Ambassadors 2/10	24	
Prizes		153.50
Certificates		50
Goodie Bags		543.96
Marking of essays		315
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,662.92</b>	<b>1,062.46</b>

Overall Project Cost - £7,725.38

INT Grant - £7,190 – this was given to cover the cost of Robinson’s expenses so there is £527.08 to be returned to the Trust.

### 4. Feedback

Students who submitted essays were all asked to consent to be added to HEAT and to give the information required to add them to the database. Additionally, students who attended the day were asked to complete a questionnaire, the results of which are here:

	Strongly agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly disagree	Strongly disagree
I enjoy studying English	10.8%	51.8%	30.1%	7.2%	0%
English is one of my better subjects	21.7%	31.3%	34.9%	7.2%	4.8%
I am confident I know some of the techniques for analysing language in the texts we study	14.4%	53%	27.7%	4.8%	0%
I enjoy reading outside school (fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels, etc)	21.7%	25.3%	19.3%	20.5%	13.2%
I enjoyed taking part in this year’s competition	19.3%	39.7%	33.7%	6%	1.2%

Taking part in the competition has made me more confident in my ability to analyse a text	12%	42.6%	34.9%	9.6%	1.2%
I want to go to university after school	32.5%	19.3%	32.5%	12%	3.6%
University will help me reach my goals	32.5%	18.1%	39.7%	9.6%	0%
I know more about what studying at university would be like after the trip today	38.6%	47%	13.2%	1.2%	0%
I am more confident about going to university after the trip today	28.9%	37.3%	23%	8.4%	2.4%

Students were also asked if they had any additional comments about the competition or the visit, very few chose to add anything, and most comments were around how they had enjoyed the tour and found it useful. Examples of other comments made:

- More stories to study
- Maybe take us round more places like classrooms
- I enjoyed the tour being done by students so you could ask them about university life
- I found the feedback on my writing useful
- Experience was amazing
- I liked the tour as I got to know what college life is like, same thing goes for the lecture

From the student feedback it would appear that the project was largely successful with 54.6% of students saying they felt more confident in analysing a text after taking part and only 10.8% disagreeing. Both the comments about the tour and the 85.6% of students who agreed that they knew more about what university is like after the trip would indicate that following up the work in class and at home with the trip to Cambridge is worthwhile. The fact that 66.2% of students said they felt more confident about going to university after the day confirms that.

Teachers were asked for general feedback, and all three schools were positive about both the competition and the day in Cambridge, which was to be expected as they have all chosen to continue to be involved since the start of the project in 2018. They have all said they would like to be involved if we are able to run the day again in 2025. Two of the teachers gave fuller feedback:

### **Teacher One**

## Positives

- A fantastic opportunity for students to be involved - the fact that it is free really helped by enabling all students to attend.
- The setting was lovely and worked well for the day - the building felt really 'grown up' for the students and the safe outdoor areas allowed them to feel a bit independent.
- The warm pastries were amazing! \*
- I really enjoyed the lecture (although I think it was quite tricky for the students).
- The tour was great and all staff said their tour guide interacted well with the students and answered their questions really fully.
- It was great that the student speaker before the presentation had attended a state school fairly locally to us - it was very aspirational and she spoke really well.
- I really liked the message about how being interested in things is a skill that we need to hone.
- The students were really positive about the experience and enjoyed the day - I think it definitely gave them some things to think about.

## Things to consider

- The bus mix up was absolutely not your fault but it did make an otherwise lovely day really stressful.
- The food was great but I think the leftovers were because it wasn't perhaps pitched appropriately at teenagers - unfortunately many of them are still very nervous about trying new/different foods.
- As above, with regards to the lecture, I think that it was really interesting and was about a text (Othello) that they had studied. It was heavily focused on secondary criticism, though, and that is a really new (and difficult) concept for students of their age, so I think they struggled with it. I made loads of notes though!

(\* The comment about pastries followed on from a conversation about whether they are necessary or could be a cost that was cut, the schools strongly felt that the students all loved them, they arrive in college see the pastries and drink and assume they are for the grown-ups, when they realise they are for them it really makes them feel special and that we genuinely want them to be there – in lots of ways the goodie bags fulfil the same purpose, as well as giving them a tangible reminder of the day they make them feel valued as we think they are worth giving a gift to.)

## Teacher Two

With regards to the material for the essay writing, I personally would like to see alternative texts available and potentially a change of focus in the essay title. We have had Scrimshaw, Ghillie's Mum and a focus on individual perspective for a few years now, and while the students are coming to this fresh each year, the staff are not. A bit more flexibility would give staff the opportunity to work to their own strengths as well as the strengths of the classes they teach with a fresh approach.

I do think the students got a lot from the stories available- there were certainly students in my class who were able to express their own thoughts and opinions within their essays, and were comfortable enough with the text to develop their ideas. I focused on Scrimshaw with my students but I know others did a bit of comparative work as well which worked well for them.

The competition element did create a buzz within the student body, especially with the day at Robinson College involved for those who submitted the essay to the competition. I had students who were asking if they could get on the trip even though they hadn't submitted essays due to absence, and we actually had a reserve list in the week leading up to the trip. Clearly, we had lots of students who wanted to have the experience of visiting the university and seeing what future education options might look like. The tours were well thought out and allowed students the opportunity to ask questions- the Q&A in a more informal setting seems to work well for year 9s and is something I think you could definitely develop further for future trips. However, last year when I did the same trip to Murray Edwards College, Claire gave information to the students about applications and criteria for grants etc. I think if you could combine this kind of information and the informal Q&A, the students would potentially get more from this.

And finally, the lecture on Shakespeare and Italy was really interesting for me and for the teacher who accompanied me on the trip. Having already studied Othello, there were some bits of information which the students could identify with, but on the whole there wasn't as much they could use or understand compared to the previous lecture I heard on Macbeth (which they do for GCSE). Some of my current year 10s who came on the trip last year have referred back to the lecture on Macbeth multiple times when we studied the text in class, and that information was helpful to the rest of the class as well. If it was possible for a slightly shorter lecture to be delivered on a text our students will study at GCSE, then a short activity for them to complete, I believe this would be more valuable for our students. I would be more than happy to be involved with this if it was a possibility for the future.

I do have the advantage of having my son at home who also went on the trip from one of the other schools. He says that he enjoyed the tour and the food (additional thanks to the catering team for accommodating his dietary requirements). He read Scrimshaw and Ghillie's Mum, but did not really enjoy either story. His teacher did a good job of explaining the essay title on individual perspective so that he was able to explore this through both texts. He thinks that writing stories of their own would have been more interesting, and that the lecture was a bit long, although he did find it interesting.

Thank you so much for the opportunity you have provided our year 9 students with this year. I look forward to working with you in the future.

## 5. For future projects

The first take-away was that no matter how organised you think you are there can always be surprises and so you need to be ready for that - we had not expected one of the buses to leave 30 children behind but the quick reactions of the team at Robinson meant we could salvage something of the day for those students and they then also enjoyed their visit in October. The fact that we had a good relationship with

the teacher involved made it easier to handle. Where we could have pressed harder was with the bus company, we just accepted their offer of running the trip again, but we did incur additional costs in that second day, and we should have got agreement from them to contribute to those as soon as the problem arose. If we found ourselves in a similar position again, we would press for that and would suggest that if others found themselves in similar positions they should too.

Other than that, the day went well, the one thing that could have been improved was targeting the lecture at the correct level for Year 9s which is difficult to judge for academic staff not used to dealing with 13-14yr olds. To improve that more time could have been spent talking with teachers about what would be appropriate and then briefing staff more thoroughly. What did work well was having the PhD student speak at the prize-giving, so for future events and would recommend to others that finding someone who the students find it easy to relate to is worthwhile.

We have developed strong relationships with the schools who take part, which helped us this year when we were quickly and easily able to run a scaled down version of the project. Additionally with those relationships established we now feel able, if we are fortunate enough to be awarded a grant again in 2025, to expand the programme more locally by including Peterborough schools once more and also further afield by working with another college with a different link area. We have learnt things about the administration of the project that will make it easier now to scale up and would recommend this approach to others too – start small, refine your offering and then scale up. Schools have also asked whether we could develop material for Year 10 so that the students who benefitted this year can continue with that which gives us another option to consider.