

IN MY OPINION *Fi Glover*



The Radio 4 journalist airs her views

The phrase ‘when one door closes, another one opens’, has stood the test of time. It appeals to a sense of eternal optimism, which is needed in buckets right now. It’s a phrase that celebrates progress and encourages you not to always hark back to a better time.

And I needed it this week, when two stories conflated to addle my brain. The first was the closure of several humanities degrees at the University of Roehampton. If you hoped to study English literature or delve into classical studies there, you’re going to have to take your hope elsewhere. Roehampton is closing the courses and it’s not the only university doing so – Sheffield Hallam and Cumbria have lost English lit courses too. It’s part of a trend away from social sciences and humanities degrees, partly because their ‘employability’ rating can be lower than something more vocational.

As a former humanities student, I don’t know where to start with that argument. But one thing you do learn on a social science or humanities course is how to critique an argument. My top line would be that these are not courses irrelevant to life. What we see around us – hubris, greed, lust for power, misogyny – is there in the works of great

‘Understanding the force of modern creativity that is Harry Styles is no different to understanding *Hamlet*’

minds. Is there anything more vocational than trying to understand our world? I found it depressing – a door slammed on what I always thought was a valuable part of life. But then, *what light through yonder window breaks?* (Shakespeare – but you knew that).

Then there’s the announcement of a new course, Harry Styles and the Cult of Celebrity: Identity, the Internet and European Pop Culture, at Texas State University. This degree will look at ‘questions of gender, sexuality, race, class, globalism, media, fashion, fan culture, internet culture and consumerism’. Led by associate professor of digital history Louie Dean Valencia, it will admit 20 students, who I suspect will leave with a humanities degree and huge employability.

I hope some UK universities follow suit, because understanding the glorious force of modern creativity that is Harry Styles, and the world he operates in, is no different to understanding *Hamlet* and the world he operated in. It’s the same world, just turning in a different time.

“Always desire to learn something useful,” as Sophocles said. I learnt that on my classics and philosophy degree course, University of Kent, 1990.

Fortunately...with Fi and Jane and The Listening Project are on BBC Sounds @fifiglover



Bringing nature to the classroom

A new natural history GCSE will be on the curriculum from 2025 to inspire the younger generation – Anna Shepard meets Mary Colwell, who led the campaign for it to be introduced

Earlier this year, the Department for Education approved plans to introduce a new GCSE in natural history, as part of its flagship sustainability and climate change strategy. In September 2025, the first cohort of students will be able to opt for it, to gain a deeper knowledge of the natural world, as well as learn about climate change and sustainability.

At a time when our relationship with the environment has become more strained, it seems like an obvious step forward, giving young people better tools to understand our planet. But reaching this point has taken more than a decade of relentless campaigning, led by Mary Colwell, a TV producer and writer with a passion for

FIRST CLASS IDEA
Naturalist and TV presenter Chris Packham supports the new GCSE



conservation, who came up with the idea.

In 2011, Mary became increasingly concerned about the lack of opportunities for young people to learn about the living world. “I had young children. It felt like this huge dereliction of duty on the part of our generation that we were not passing on that easy conversation with nature that most of us had grown up with,” she says.

Around this time, studies were emerging showing that children were at risk of ‘nature deficit disorder’, with one finding that one in nine children had not visited a forest, park or beach for more than a year.

American writer Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods* had predicted that children would suffer physically and



NATURE UNLOCKED Mary Colwell (above left), who campaigned to create a GCSE that helps pupils get outdoors to connect with the natural world

mentally if they were deprived of a connection to nature. “I remember a report in *BBC Wildlife* magazine which suggested that many children couldn’t tell the difference between a bumblebee and a wasp, or recognise an oak tree leaf, or a bluebell,” says Mary, who worked for the BBC’s Natural History unit before becoming a freelance writer and producer.

Worried about this widening gap in understanding, Mary was surprised there was nothing addressing it on our national curriculum. She decided the best way to fix it was by introducing a natural history GCSE, available to all secondary school pupils. “We need future decision-makers who understand how everything works and you only get that through studying it, and getting outside, watching nature in action and recording the data,” she says.

At this point, Mary had no idea what a slog it would turn out to be to get her plan approved by the Department for Education.

If she’d known about the uphill struggle ahead, would it have put her off? “No, but I did go into the whole thing with misplaced optimism – I had no idea how demanding and time-consuming it would be to get it through government.”

Having sent a two-sided flyer to everyone she knew, explaining why a natural history GCSE was needed and what it should look like, environmentalist Tony Juniper then

‘Imagine all kinds of pupils, heads down, learning about wildlife... my kind of lesson’

wrote an article in *The Guardian* supporting the idea, which led to Mary’s campaign becoming more widely known.

A petition to the government followed, which gained enough signatures to merit an official response (you need at least 10,000), but it was still no. “It was only when Caroline Lucas, then leader of the Green Party, got involved in 2018 that we got the political wheels moving,” says Mary. “She got us in front of Michael Gove, whose support led us to the OCR exam board, which gave its support.”

The timing felt right and the campaign began to draw support from naturalist and TV presenter Chris Packham and Eden Project cofounder Sir Tim Smit. Doug Gurr, director of the Natural History Museum, also agreed to help shape the syllabus.

Mary was adamant that the subject should not be folded into biology – which is about life processes. Instead, the syllabus should involve getting to grips with what nature actually is, by observing and recording how different organisms behave.

“My son is studying biological science at

Imperial College. He can tell you a lot about photosynthesis and how trees work, but he still can’t name the trees he’s studying, and that’s what needs to change,” she says.

Unlike other GCSEs, there will be a considerable amount of outdoor learning as much of the syllabus will be field-based, involving sustained fieldwork, including a project to be carried out in a local patch of wilderness.

Crucially, the course will be available to everyone, something *Weekend* columnist Chris Packham has flagged as vital. In an interview with *The Times* he said: “As things stand, the vast majority of young people who turn up in nature reserve car parks arrive in SUVs or shiny 4x4s. They are white and middle class. Imagine all kinds of pupils, heads down, learning about wildlife... my kind of lesson.”

There has already been concern that the option may be embraced by pupils who already have an existing relationship with the natural world, but Mary believes its appeal will be wider. “My instinct is that all kids find nature interesting, whether or not they’ve already encountered it. I think it’s a myth to say it will only appeal to the middle classes,” she says. “The whole point is to bring everyone into this – it’s a national and inclusive solution to the lack of environmental education.”

Mary argues that a connection to nature is innate to all of us, but many of us either ignore it, or don’t have a chance to develop it. “For many kids in inner-city areas, this GCSE may be the only opportunity they have had to learn about nature,” she says.

“I don’t have a crystal ball. I can’t tell for sure who will take it up, but I do know that we’re in a bad situation with the natural world. We have to do everything we can to improve it, so let’s try.”



7 QUESTIONS WITH...

JOE MCFADDEN

The actor and Strictly champion on boozy spag bol and dancing in heels

1 Where do you call home? That’s difficult. I’ve lived in London for more than half my life, but I still consider myself Scottish.

2 You played registrar Raf in *Holby City*. Could you handle a real medical emergency? I was once on a plane and they asked if there was a doctor on board – I almost put my hand up! Luckily, a nurse came forward. I can do the recovery position and basic CPR, but you wouldn’t want me trying to bring you back.

3 After winning *Strictly* in 2017, did you keeeeeeep dancing? Yes! I did the *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* tour – dancing in heels was a whole other thing. And it’s nice to be able to break out the moves on the dancefloor at 2am now and again.

4 Can you cook? I’m not brilliant, but the few things I do, I do really well. People come round and go: “You’re such a good cook!” and I’m like: “I can do four dishes.” You won’t be seeing me on *MasterChef* anytime soon.

5 Your most show-offy dish? A spag bol that has a whole bottle of wine in it. It takes about four hours to cook, but it tastes amazing.

6 Tell us about your character in *The Mirror Crack’d*. Jason Rudd is a charming American film director, who moves to St Mary Mead with his film star wife. Then there’s a murder and, as is the way with Agatha Christie, everyone looks slightly dodgy.

7 What’s the coolest thing in your house? A massive portrait of myself by Oliver Winconek. At the time I thought: “Is it conceited?” But I love his work so much, and I love the idea of it being around long after I’m gone.

The Mirror Crack’d tours the UK from 8 September; originaltheatre.com. Interview: Emma Higginbotham