

My summer drafting the manuscript for *Classics and Public Policy: perspectives from the UK* with Professor Arlene Holmes-Henderson

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September 2025

An unusual report for an unusual project

The research project that I undertook this summer as part of the Laidlaw Leadership and Research programme was highly unconventional. As a result, this research report will also be highly unconventional. I will still outline the objectives of the project as well as the methodology followed, as you would expect in a typical research report.

However, instead of analysing data and drawing conclusions from this for the purpose of answering the proposed research question, I am going to summarise my personal experience of the project focusing on skills developed and lessons learned being a research assistant to the editor of a new book, *Classics and Public Policy: perspectives from the UK (CaPP)*.

The research objective, the research question, the research and the catch

Creating the first draft of the book was, itself, the objective of the research project that I, under the supervision of Professor Arlene-Holmes Henderson, undertook over the summer. Moreover, as mentioned in my research project outline,¹ the research question behind this objective was two-fold: how does Classics research influence public policy, and how do former classicists perceive their study of Classics in relation to their work as policy professionals? The so-called 'research', therefore, that I undertook was the gathering of perspectives of Classics academics and former classicists turned policy professionals in the form of individually authored chapters, which would later be synthesised into the manuscript of the book. I also advised on the order of the chapters, and the content of the introduction. However, here is the catch. As much as I would like to share the plethora of insightful, and sometimes surprising, views of the contributors to *CaPP*, which I spent the summer collating, this is impossible due to the copyright laws around an unpublished book.²

The silver lining

Even though this research report is unable to report on the research which it pertains to, it is this very procedure, among many others relating to editing and publishing a book, and, more specifically, my encounters with them, that will provide fruitful content for discussion and analysis in the following pages.

Starting out

Going into this project, I was briefed that my main role would be editing the 2000-3000 word chapters of approximately 20 contributors to *CaPP* and this was a significant part of my role (more on this later). However, before I could even begin to think about editing the chapters, I had to make sure that I received them first.

Prof. Arlene notified me very early on that many of the contributors to the book, both academics and policy professionals, were very busy people and therefore might require some gentle chasing and/or assistance with the writing of their chapter. This presented a multi-faceted problem, created by the coinciding of conflicting factors, which had the potential to jeopardise the successful delivery of a manuscript to Routledge at the end of the summer.

For Prof. Arlene and I, the completion of the manuscript, with all chapters, was of primary importance. Thus, for us, sticking to our own deadlines of first drafts, second drafts and final chapters, was paramount. However, it was also necessary to consider that, by agreeing to take time out of their busy schedules to contribute to the book, the contributors were showing us a significant kindness. In this way, I, the primary contact for the contributors, found the need to mediate the sense of urgency created by time constraints with a strong sense of diplomacy when crafting emails to the chapter authors.

In May, Prof. Arlene had contacted all the would-be contributors, who had previously agreed to write a chapter for the book, with the good news that Routledge had issued a contract for *CaPP*. In her email, she had stipulated a deadline early in July for the first drafts of the contributors' chapters.

When I began work on the project in the last week of June only around 50% of the contributors had replied to Prof. Arlene's email confirming their intention to submit a chapter by the deadline. However, none of these had yet sent over their contribution with less than two weeks before the first drafts were due!

Guided by Prof. Arlene, my first act of my summer research project was to send personalised emails to each contributor reminding them of their commitment to contribute and of the looming deadline. In each of these emails, I offered the opportunity to talk to me virtually, either via Microsoft Teams or phone call. I stated that this could be an advisory call to clarify any uncertainties about the aim and content of their chapters so that they might then confidently proceed with writing it themselves. I also gave a second option, as per Prof. Arlene's suggestion, that, if they so wished, I could conduct an interview-like discussion with the individual to draw out their

perspectives on the relevant subject at hand so that I might later write up these notes into a draft chapter which I would send back to them for revision and/or approval.

The learning curve: success and slip-ups

As predicted, these gentle ‘chaser’ emails were received with a plethora of positive responses. Many contributors were thankful for the reminder and confirmed that they would be happy to get writing on their own. A handful of others expressed interest on jumping on a call with me. In this way, I learned a valuable lesson about the importance of diplomacy in the sphere of professional communication. By showing my willingness to give my own time to assist with writing the chapters I elicited enthusiasm from the contributors themselves; I cultivated a do-das relationship, as it were.

However, it wasn’t all plain sailing. Even a week after I sent the emails, I was missing responses from around 25% of the contributors. This didn’t bode well given that the July deadline was a week away.

Furthermore, on my part, I made an error in addressing one of the contributors by using their title incorrectly (he is a ‘Sir’ and I called him ‘Sir *surname*’ instead of ‘Sir *first name*’). Although an honest mistake, to which the contributor politely notified me, I was worried that this could negatively affect their perception of me and therefore undermine the positive relationship that I was trying to establish. I am happy to say that things did not at all turn out that way. In fact, the contributor was one of the quickest and most attentive of all during the proceeding editing process. Moreover, the mistake, which was a product of haste and a lack of proof-reading, had shown the importance of being scrupulous when it came to attention to detail (a skill which is imperative in editing) as well as providing clarity on how to use a certain title (information I applied during future communications).

In any case, the variety of responses (including requests for a call with me or confirmation that the individual was ‘on it’) or a lack thereof, combined with the pressing need to have the contributors names correctly recorded, necessitated the creation of an Excel spreadsheet. This would provide an editable and accountable location where the names and contact details of contributors could be correctly recorded along with information regarding the status of their chapter. In this way, the progression of the project could be tracked and, for instance, it would be possible to see from whom we were lacking communication and thereby whom we needed to chase again in order to keep to the deadlines as much as possible.

Once again, an important point has been raised here. Although I held many calls with contributors, writing up one or two chapters myself then sending them back, responded to many email queries with suggestions about half-finished chapters and chased others

up, it was clear that not all the chapters that were due would be sent by the July deadline. We had received some of the first drafts of those chapters which had been independently written (i.e. without any of my assistance) however there were many which were outstanding. After a Teams call with Prof. Arlene, we made a plan of action to extend the deadline by a week for those contributors who had not yet shared their first drafts with us. The lesson that I learned here was that project-management, especially for projects which involve external parties, requires flexibility. Notifying the outstanding contributors of an extension in the deadline a few days prior also interconnected with the concept of diplomacy; while we were giving an extension to the deadline and re-emphasising that I would be happy to offer assistance in creating a rough draft of the chapter, Prof. Arlene also instructed me to place the deadline in bold and to mention the fact that we had already received a number of chapters so as to place very gentle suggestive pressure on the individual receiving the chaser email.

Undergrad turned assistant editor: interpreting publisher guidelines

While waiting for the remaining chapters to be sent in, I set about editing those which I had already saved to a 'First Drafts' sub-folder in Outlook. Prof. Arlene had requested that I take the first pass at every chapter, re-formatting it per Routledge's guidelines, before she went through with a fine-tooth comb and made any revisions or left any comments for the contributor to act on.

At this stage of the project, I embarked on the part of the process that I was most intrigued and daunted by when I signed up to help Prof. Arlene put together *Capp*: editing chapters of an actual book.

Having spent a year at university I was experienced in abiding by stipulations regarding font size, word count, double-spacing and referencing when writing my own essays for my course, which all nonetheless applied to editing a manuscript. I was also well-versed in checking for spelling and grammar errors in extended pieces of my own writing, which, although tedious, is crucial to creating a piece of respectable academic work.

However, having read the 20+ page document from Routledge entitled 'Manuscript Preparation Guide', I can't say that I didn't feel a little apprehensive about the editing task ahead. Off the top of my head, I can recall the following specifications that every chapter in our manuscript had to adhere to: the font used must be a Unicode font (e.g. Times New Roman); all references must be endnotes not footnotes and these notes must be included within the overall word count of the chapter; photographs must be captioned correctly and be of a certain resolution (at least 300 dpi); all headings and subheadings must be denoted in a standardised way across the book (i.e. being either bold, underlined, italicised or a combination of the three but there can be no more than

three different levels); chapters containing special characters (in the case of our book those containing letters of the Greek alphabet) must be included twice, with the second being a PDF which will act as a fixed reference for the typesetter; there must be agreed 'forms' of words and phrases that are consistent throughout the book (for instance we decided on A Level rather than A-level and twentieth-century rather than 20th century); abstracts must be between 100 and 200 words; all chapters must be submitted as separate documents with pages numbered from 1 and each with their own bibliography at the end of the chapter.

Re-formatting every chapter so that it fit these specifications was time-consuming and nit-picky work. But with every one that I completed I became more and more efficient. I can certainly say that I have come away from the project with a more discerning eye when it comes to proof-reading, which will certainly prove beneficial in my future university studies and beyond.

As well as re-formatting chapters, I supplemented any missing elements such as abstracts or references. In having to stick to the wordcount prescribed by Routledge for abstracts, and indeed those chapters which I created rough drafts for, I learned how to write in an informative, engaging yet concise manner (something I have previously struggled with). Moreover, I got some great practice finding a variety of obscure or hard-to-access references. For instance: a quote which had only a name to accompany it, which was written more than 200 years ago; a line from an 80s TV programme; a 2006 article from an academic journal which only digitised issues from 2015.³ Spending lots of time putting together other people's unusual references, has definitely meant that I have become much more comfortable with and efficient at editing, which is great for someone going into their second year of a humanities degree.

The back and forth

The end of July marked the return of reviewed versions of the chapters to the contributors by myself and Prof. Arlene. This set in motion a sequence of emails back and forth between each contributor and us with new comments, edits, and iterations of their chapters which I charted, all the time, on the Excel spreadsheet. It was often the case that before or after new drafts were sent back to contributors Prof. Arlene had left me tweaks to make whether that be inserting a sub-heading, adding to a reference or cross-referencing the agreed form of a word with the other chapters to ensure consistency.

Also, among the influx of second, third and even fourth drafts, I also had to keep requesting other things from certain contributors such as their postal addresses (so Routledge could send them a copy of the book after publication) and biographies. Given the constant exchange of tweaks to each chapter, and of course the busy schedules of

the contributors, sometimes this required patience. Even after two or three times of asking, if there were multiple requests on the email for the contributor to act upon, I could see how it was easy for such details to be missed or even simply forgotten. Therefore, I employed the same professional diplomatic form of communication to chase them up and this was often met with an appreciation of the reminder.

To keep me organised with all the various stages of progress that each chapter was at, as well as keeping Prof. Arlene notified as I shared this document with her, the Excel spreadsheet proved invaluable. So too did the skill of prioritisation because it was no good working on one chapter and corresponding attentively with its contributor until it was manuscript ready, if another chapter was still on its first draft and we hadn't heard from the contributor in weeks. The barrage of emails was overwhelming at times but, by asking Prof. Arlene for guidance or to respond to some contributors when I didn't know quite how to, I managed to keep on top of everything.⁴

Closing off this chapter: the end of my summer research project

I am pleased to say that when I officially finished helping Prof. Arlene with project the manuscript was all but ready to be submitted. As previously mentioned, I am unable to conclude by sharing the details of the 'research' that I conducted in the form of the divulging the perspectives of the esteemed Classics academics and high-profile policy officials on the relationship between Classics and public policy. Therefore, I will finish off this research report by summarising how I think I've developed as both a student and a person during this project.

In terms of academic skills I feel that I have significantly improved my ability to draft extended pieces of writing. This sounds very basic but in the past, I have always found myself agonising over word choice, phraseology and expression in essays. However, having to swiftly put together rough drafts of chapters, which I knew the contributor would spend significant time revising to their own taste, allowed me to knock out a 2000+ word chapter in a very short amount of time. I think this is something that will prove very beneficial when writing essays for my degree in the future.

Also, as I have mentioned previously, I think a key skill that I developed during my time working on this project is editing; after reading drafts upon drafts of 2000 word chapters and having to analyse them through the lens of the publisher's guidelines, I have trained my eye to be vigilant to the most minute details of a text. This will come in very handy when having to proof-read my own writing.

Regarding my professional development I think the ability to communicate professionally is the most valuable skill that I have developed by working on this project. I have learned: the correct way to use titles in the address of an email; how to be

diplomatic when asking something of someone in an email; what tone to use and how to advise someone on a phone call without just telling them what you think they should write or how you would do it.

I have also significantly developed my project management skills. While I was proficient in organisation, dedication and time-management before, I developed a whole new range of skills vital to project-management when this involves external parties. For instance, I definitely learnt the importance of flexibility in terms of deadlines (i.e. if things were progressing too slowly I could adjust my expectations and plans accordingly). However, I also learned that prioritisation was key: at times when things were very busy and drafts were flooding in left-right-and-centre, I dealt with the chapters in need of most attention, or most behind in terms of draft number, first and then worked my way through the rest from there.

The last professional skill that I developed was my awareness and implementation of data protection safeguards. At first, I was quite intimidated by the fact that I would be responsible for some personal and sensitive information about some high-profile individual, such as their email and postal addresses. However, I undertook the necessary precautions to keep this data protected, never letting anyone see or have access to it beyond myself and Prof. Arlene.

Finally, I would like to talk about my personal development throughout this project.

I always knew I loved Classics and, even though I chose to study it purely for my passion for the subject, I also thought that it would be respected by my future would-be employers when I joined the job market. But, by listening to and reading the perspectives of classicists, or former classicists, on how the subject has impacted their career it has become abundantly clear to me that it is not only brave to study Classics in this post-AI world, but also extremely useful and important. Lots of the contributors talked about the transferability of skills, which are honed in a Classics degree, to their professional career. These primarily included skills such as critical thinking, analysis, triangulation of evidence from various sources, balanced judgement and argumentation. The value of such skills is inherent in a world where the use of AI appears to be replacing independent thinking and the proliferation of fake news and disinformation threatens to remove our hold on reality. In this way, the project made me feel even more confident in the value of my degree choice.

Moreover, as a result of completing this project, I have seen my confidence in myself grow as well. In the early stages of the project, I felt nervous about even contacting the contributors, especially those who were extremely high profile individuals (including knighted diplomats, former cabinet ministers and even the Head of UNESCO Policy). However, I had the most pleasant experience interacting with these people. All of the contributors were consistently very keen to get my advice and always grateful for my

comments and suggestions about their chapters. This meant that within two weeks, I went from a first year undergraduate feeling a great deal of imposter syndrome at emailing people as the assistant on a book project, to someone who was the primary contact for a score of contributors and was more than happy being consulted via email, phone call or Microsoft Teams.

In all these ways, I have found the summer research project exceedingly valuable and I am so grateful that I had this incredible opportunity to be involved in the editing process of a (soon-to-be) published book.⁵

¹ Young, E. (2025). *Research project outline: investigating the relationship between Classics and public policy*. [online] Laidlaw Scholars Network. Available at <https://laidlaw scholars.network/posts/research-project-outline-investigating-the-relationship-between-classics-and-public-policy>

² The rights lie with the book's publisher, Routledge

³ This required contacting and involving a chain of academics from different organisations to source the hardcopy!

⁴ I cannot overstate my appreciation for Prof. Arlene's hyper-vigilance to my emails and, seemingly constant, availability to answer my questions on a Microsoft Teams call.

⁵ Projected publication date: early 2026