

# Language matters more and more

## INTRODUCTION

1. The British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, is increasingly concerned about the state of foreign language learning in the UK at all levels from primary school to university research. In 2010, 57% of pupils were taking no language at GCSE.<sup>1</sup> While the total number of A-level candidates for all subjects has risen by 24% since 1996, the number of candidates for languages in the same period has fallen by 25%.<sup>2</sup> The declining numbers of school pupils studying languages have inevitably reduced the numbers studying languages at university. As a consequence, there have been a number of closures of university language departments, with language degree provision now mainly located in pre-1992 universities, and in the Russell Group universities in particular.<sup>3</sup> It had been hoped that future take-up of language studies at GCSE and beyond would gradually improve, as more primary schools responded to the recommendation to make languages a statutory requirement in the primary curriculum from September 2011. While there is evidence of growing provision of languages at primary school level, there are concerns that much of the momentum that has been established will be lost. Provision may well decline in response to the government's decision in June 2010 to withdraw languages as a statutory requirement in the new primary curriculum.<sup>4</sup>
2. This statement comes at a time of dramatic change in the funding for higher education teaching. From 2012 onwards, funding will be largely driven by student preferences. As the Browne report said: "Their choices will shape the landscape of higher education." While universities will be able under the new system to expand programmes in response to student demand, they may also find it necessary to close or reduce programmes where numbers

---

1 GCSE languages by key stage 4 pupils, 1994–2010, CILT, the National Centre for Languages, October 2010.

2 Language A-level and AS exam figures; all schools, England up to 2010, CILT, the National Centre for Languages, October 2010.

3 For further information and findings see: *Review of modern foreign language provision in higher education in England* by Professor Michael Worton, HEFCE (October 2009).

4 See announcement from Department of Education on 7 June 2010 <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0061172/changes-to-qualifications-and-curriculum-igcses-get-go-ahead-rose-review-scrapped>

are low. Given that language degrees are already vulnerable, the British Academy is concerned about the consequences of reduced student demand for language learning. Demand will remain low in the short-term because it will take time to arrest the decline in language learning at school. Demand may also be depressed by student concerns that the length of language programmes, which are typically four-year courses, will increase their level of debt and the amount of their graduate contributions.

3. In this context, the British Academy is concerned that the individual decisions taken by vice-chancellors as they respond to the new funding system and refocus institutional priorities may unintentionally lead to the large-scale closure of language departments, or to a situation where language learning becomes even more concentrated in certain universities or parts of the country. This will not only have a harmful impact on the vulnerable condition of university language learning, but will also have wider detrimental impacts on UK social, cultural and economic well-being.
4. The British Academy has repeatedly drawn attention to these concerns about the future outlook for language-based courses, and also the importance of language as a ‘core competence’ for UK citizens. The Academy’s Position Paper of 2009, *Language Matters*, pointed to the way in which the lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels would affect the UK’s ability to compete effectively in a global market, and would also make UK citizens less able to compete for a range of job opportunities both at home and overseas. We therefore endorse the recommendations of last year’s ‘Worton report’, which examined the health and condition of university modern languages programmes, with findings similar to ours.<sup>5</sup>
5. The Browne report’s recognition of the need to fund ‘strategically important language courses’ has helped to draw attention to the importance of language learning. So, too, have the Education White Paper and the recent call from Baroness Coussins, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Modern Languages, for a national languages recovery programme. The timing of the Browne Review of university funding and the review of the national curriculum would (as Baroness Coussins noted) make a recovery programme for languages particularly timely.
6. Although the language skills deficit is evident at all levels from primary right through to postgraduate research, and needs to be tackled at all these levels, this short statement focuses on the need for action by higher education institutions. The British Academy believes that universities are well placed to contribute to this national recovery programme. In our view, university vice-chancellors are in a position to take action to encourage language

---

<sup>5</sup> *Review of modern foreign language provision in higher education in England* by Professor Michael Worton, HEFCE (October 2009).

learning both at school and at university, and should strive to ensure that universities fulfil their obligations not only in the long term interests of their students but also with an eye to the nation's needs.

## CONTEXT

7. While the downward trend in language take-up at the university level is worrying, so too is the evidence on the changing socio-economic profile of school pupils and undergraduates studying languages. Language learning in the state school sector is on the decline, but remains buoyant in the independent sector: only 41% of pupils from state schools take a language GCSE, compared to 81% from independent schools, and 91% from selective schools. So it is hardly surprising that around 40% of applicants and accepted applicants for language degrees come from the highest social economic group – compared to just below 30% for all subjects. It is a concern that increasingly only those educated in independent schools are likely to have language skills, which later in life will give them access to opportunities that may well not be available to pupils in the state sector.
8. The Government has recognised that this downward trend is a serious problem, as demonstrated by recent announcements made by two government departments – the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the Department of Education (DoE). The British Academy is delighted that BIS has recently announced that there will be increased government support for the Academy's work, with almost £5m of new funding from 2011/12 to 2014/15 for a new programme designed to strengthen support in languages and in the use of rigorous, especially quantitative, methods across the social sciences and humanities. The British Academy will deliver a programme, including fellowships, partnerships, workshops and conferences, which will help strengthen these vital skills, which are necessary to maintain the UK's competitiveness.
9. Similarly, Michael Gove, MP, Secretary of State for Education, has drawn attention to the importance of language learning and his concerns that its decline threatens to breed insularity. We welcome the focus in the White Paper for Education on the status of languages within the national curriculum, as well as the plans to introduce an English baccalaureate for school pupils obtaining GCSE qualifications in five 'traditional' subjects, to include one humanities subject and one language.<sup>6</sup>
10. In addition, the Academy is pleased to note that CILT (the National Centre for Languages) will in 2011 launch a 5-year campaign 'Speak to the Future' to promote modern language study. This campaign will have five objectives:

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Importance of Teaching – the Schools' White Paper 2010*, Department of Education, November 2010.

primary experience; basic working knowledge in at least one language in addition to mother tongue at secondary school level; accredited language competence for every graduate; more graduates to become specialist linguists; and support for community languages.

11. The British Academy also welcomes the Browne Review's recognition that language learning should be treated as a strategic priority subject in need of public investment in order to 'deliver significant social returns' and provide skills and knowledge currently or predicted to be in shortage.<sup>7</sup> However, in implementing Browne's recommendation it is essential that the expression 'language courses' is not understood in the narrow sense of courses which simply aim to provide a fluent command of the language in question, important though that certainly is. Rather, if they are to yield a cadre of trained and knowledgeable people who are able to understand and engage effectively with the local professional and business communities, such courses must include the study of the culture, politics, history and religion of the countries and regions in which those languages are used. In this connection, the recent language-based area studies initiative funded jointly by HEFCE, ESRC and AHRC was exemplary. Activities of this kind should continue to attract targeted funding both at undergraduate and at postgraduate level.

## THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

12. Language learning has significant benefits for the development of the abilities of individuals. In addition, the value of education and skills, including languages, becomes all the more important in turbulent times. The necessity for UK students to compete within a global economy requires us to exploit to the full the advantages that lie at the heart of a robust HE system. We can no longer assume that English is the global language par excellence – 75% of the world's population do not speak English. For example, it has been estimated that within 20 years most pages on the internet will be in Chinese. And the proportion of internet usage conducted in English is already on the decline, falling from 51 per cent to 29 per cent between 2000 and 2009. Recent years have seen a sharp rise in both the publication and citation rates of scientific papers authored by Asian researchers.<sup>8</sup> If the global centre of gravity for scientific research shifts eastwards, there is no guarantee that English will be the preferred language.
13. The national need for language skills can be articulated along a number of dimensions, which we outline in brief below. We welcome the work in progress by the University Council for Modern Languages (UCML), with support from HEFCE, to demonstrate the value of language study

---

<sup>7</sup> *Securing a sustainable future for higher education*, p.47

<sup>8</sup> *Global Resesearch Report*, Thomson Reuters, November 2010

and produce a series of compelling case studies. The national need for language skills falls under a variety of heads:

- *Languages for competitiveness, trade and emerging markets:* the UK's social and economic future relies on our ability to compete on the international stage. It is not coincidental that within months of entering office the coalition government has organised very large and high profile teams led by the Prime Minister to visit India and China. Within the European context too, our neighbours are important trading partners yet we are rapidly becoming a nation of monolinguals. With an increasing number of companies having international dealings, mobility and language skills are being viewed as vital by employers. The proficiency that graduates with language and international experience bring goes beyond just the acquisition of a single language, demonstrating in addition initiative, motivation, independence and an ability to engage with those who have different backgrounds and experience.
- *Languages, UK multilingualism and multiculturalism:* yet the importance of language learning is not just about prospering in a competitive job market. Those with language skills and international experience, in whatever field or discipline, can demonstrate a level of intercultural understanding and sensitivity which holds immeasurable value for the individual and society at large. Understanding the languages, cultures and societies of others, as well as the way in which languages interact with each other and with English, is important means of improving intercultural interactions and enhancing social well-being at home as well as overseas. In an increasingly multilingual and multicultural United Kingdom such understanding will bring its reward both at home and abroad.
- *Languages as vehicles of new modes of thought:* language study is intellectually and culturally beneficial in its own right, beyond the straightforwardly utilitarian and economic. Learning a foreign language has the effect of denaturalising the native language and culture, of showing that there are other ways that sentences and ideas can be formulated. Reading, more slowly, writing in foreign languages enables a different kind of thinking from that which goes on when students read in their own language.
- *Languages as objects of study and research:* languages are an important area of study and research in their own right. The fruits of this research can lead to new understanding of human cognition and culture, can help develop new products for the multi-lingual communications industry and have a direct bearing on a number of national and global challenges, such as security, terrorism, and international crime.
- *Languages as vehicles of scientific communication:* a lack of foreign language skills will limit the engagement of UK born and educated researchers with international projects requiring knowledge of languages other than English. Given the increased competition and limited availability of research funding, UK researchers without language skills may find it increasingly difficult to compete with their counterparts from overseas. As 90% of the world's research is undertaken outside the UK, it is critical that UK researchers are in a position to collaborate with the very best researchers from overseas. As the Academy's report, Language

Matters, said: “[the] lack of language skills inflicts a real handicap on scholars in many parts of the British university system, and therefore weakens the competitive capacity of the system itself.”

14. In short, the interests both of the country and its citizens make it vital that universities take a leading role in addressing the growing mismatch between supply and demand.

## THE ACADEMY’S RECOMMENDATIONS – WHAT BRITISH UNIVERSITIES CAN DO

15. The ‘Worton report’ drew attention to the way in which languages have more than one role within the context of a university: an important graduate skill of relevance to all disciplines; and a discipline that makes valuable contributions to global and national challenges, thereby strengthening a university’s standing and reputation. Based on this assessment of the value of languages, the Academy recommends that universities:
- 1) **adopt – in line with the recommendations of Sir Drummond Bone’s report on the internationalisation of higher education – a wider definition of ‘internationalisation’, rather than focus simply on the recruitment of overseas students.** The Bone report, *Internationalisation of HE: a ten-year view*, argued that UK universities should develop long-term collaborative partnerships “either with traditional universities or with new multi-national providers”. He also argued that: “Schools need to make it clear to students that they should consider the international opportunities offered by universities as part of their reasons for choice. Language provision must be available and must be part of a normal core curriculum.”
  - 2) **ensure that their senior management and governance structures place this broader understanding of internationalisation and language learning at the heart of their missions and strategies.** Language learning should be central to the missions and internationalisation agendas of universities. Indeed, it is difficult to see how universities can have effective internationalisation strategies if significant numbers of their staff and students do not have language skills. In view of the importance of languages to intercultural understanding, social inclusion, and the employability of graduates, the management and governing bodies of universities should ensure that language learning is a key element of their strategies.
  - 3) **take full account of, and respond to, the growing internationalisation of the graduate jobs market.** The 2010 CBI Education and Skills Survey (Ready to grow: business priorities for education and skills) drew attention to the importance of language skills in a globalised economy. “The combination of an increasingly global economy and heightened cultural sensitivities means new demands on many people at work. The education system has a major part to play in preparing young people for work, and teach foreign languages can help.

But over two thirds of employers (71%) are not satisfied with the foreign language skills of young people and over half (55%) perceive shortfalls in their international cultural awareness.”

- 4) **ensure they provide language training to meet the needs of their researchers.** As *Language Matters* said: “It is clearly in the interests of UK universities to ensure that their UK-born researchers can continue to develop effective internationalisation strategies and compete effectively with their overseas counterparts...In the short-term, remedial measures are urgently required, in the form of intensive language courses for MA and doctoral students...[Universities] should at the same time encourage staff to undertake courses to acquire, improve or extend their linguistic skills.”
- 5) **encourage and enable their students to take time out of their studies to work or study abroad.** As David Willetts, MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science said recently: “One of my aims is to try and encourage our undergraduates and postgraduates to study abroad and the best way to do that is to ensure it counts towards a British degree. There has to be time overseas doing a programme which a British university recognises and validates. It would enrich the outlook of British students and make them more employable.”<sup>9</sup>
- 6) **make provision for their students to study a language while studying a non-language degree.** This view is shared by others, including David Lammy, MP, who said in 2009 when Minister for Higher Education that: “more could be done to include languages in the curriculum so that students would study a language alongside their main subject, with all HE students learning a language or experiencing at least a short period of time studying or working abroad as part of their course. There are many examples of good practice in this area. Like Rose Bruford College, which sends 25 per cent of its students abroad for a short period. We would like to see more universities offering such opportunities.” To achieve this, it will clearly be important that university language departments and non-language based departments heighten and extend existing collaborations.
- 7) **work collaboratively to sustain languages at a time of considerable fiscal constraints.** For example, it may be necessary for universities to pool their language provision, and to consider secondments and other forms of collaboration.

16. In conclusion, we firmly believe that the study of languages is fundamental to the prosperity, well-being, security and competitiveness of the UK, and we therefore urge universities to place languages at the heart of their missions. To do otherwise is to risk a parochiality which is at odds with the notion of a university.

January 2011

---

<sup>9</sup> As reported in *The Telegraph* on 1 August 2010.





BRITISH  
ACADEMY

---

P O L I C Y  
C E N T R E

---

## BRITISH ACADEMY POLICY PUBLICATIONS

*Stress at Work*, a British Academy Report, October 2010

*Happy Families? History and Family Policy*, a British Academy Report, October 2010

*Drawing Electoral Boundaries*, a British Academy Report, September 2010

*Choosing an Electoral System*, a British Academy Report, March 2010

*Social Science and Family Policies*, a British Academy Report, February 2010

*Language Matters*, a Position Paper by the British Academy, June 2009

*Punching Our Weight: the humanities and social sciences in public policy making*, a British Academy Report, September 2008

*Joint Guidelines on Copyright and Academic Research – Guidelines for researchers and publishers in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, published jointly by the British Academy and Publishers Association, April 2008

*Peer Review: the challenges for the humanities and social sciences*, a British Academy Report, September 2007

*Copyright and Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, a British Academy Report, September 2006

The British Academy, established by Royal Charter in 1902, champions and supports the humanities and social sciences. It aims to inspire, recognise and support excellence and high achievement across the UK and internationally. The British Academy is a Fellowship of over 900 UK scholars and social scientists elected for their distinction in research. The Academy's work on policy is supported by its Policy Centre, which draws on funding from ESRC and AHRC. The Policy Centre oversees a programme of activity engaging the expertise within the humanities and social sciences to shed light on policy issues. All outputs from the British Academy Policy Centre go through a rigorous peer review process to ensure that they are of the highest quality. Views expressed in reports are not necessarily shared by each individual Fellow.

## SPONSORED BY



10–11 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AH  
Telephone: +44 (0)207 969 5200  
Fax: +44 (0)207 969 5300

Registered Charity: Number 233176