

# LANGUAGE MATTERS

## A Position Paper



### INTRODUCTION

- 1 The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, and takes a keen interest in the health of these disciplines and their ability to contribute to the well-being of the country. The Academy has for some time been concerned about the state of foreign language learning in the UK at all levels, and has drawn attention to these concerns in various ways, including submissions to Government.
- 2 The Academy commissioned a report from a team of external researchers at RAND Europe in response to concerns that UK-born and -educated researchers lack essential foreign language skills, which limits their ability to engage with research topics requiring advanced knowledge of languages other than English. The Academy is concerned that this may damage the internationally recognised distinction of UK scholarship within the humanities and social sciences and the ability of UK-born researchers to contribute to international projects. Poor language competencies also limit the career opportunities available to researchers. Large sums are at present available on a competitive basis from EU sources for university research groups based in three or more countries. It may become increasingly difficult for UK universities to put forward convincing applications for these funds if language skills are not also demonstrably available. The lack of language skills at secondary, tertiary and research levels will affect the UK's ability to compete effectively in a global market and to promote UK interests in a global context. It will also make UK citizens less likely to be in the running for a range of work opportunities available both at home and overseas.
- 3 This report is part of a wider concern about the language skills deficit in the UK, and its potentially harmful impact on the UK's social, cultural and economic well-being. While it is often difficult to obtain statistical evidence to demonstrate the scale of the problem, the downward trend in language take-up both at school and at university is worrying. Moreover, the UK's performance is poor in comparison with the majority of its EU competitors, most of whom have increased the extent to which their school pupils and university students are required to learn foreign languages.



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## CONTEXT

- 4** *Language learning at school and at university* The number of pupils in England taking a GCSE qualification in a modern language has been on the decline since 2001 when 22% of pupils in England were not taking a language at GCSE. This decline was exacerbated by the Government's decision in 2004 to make language learning optional for pupils aged 14+. By 2008, the proportion of pupils taking no language at GCSE in England had more than doubled, rising to 56%.
- 5** A2-level entries in England for languages have been declining for over ten years, falling by 28% (from 39,554 entries in 1996 to 28,419 in 2007). Entries in French and German fell particularly sharply, declining by 47% (from 22,718 to 12,713) and 44% (from 9,306 to 5,631) respectively in the period from 1996 to 2007, whilst Spanish entries have increased (from a much lower starting point) by 34% (from 4,095 to 5,502) in the same period. As fewer language students at A-level means fewer language students at degree level, it is not surprising that a recent report<sup>1</sup> on 'the intellectual health of modern languages in the UK' has found that a decline in the number taking languages at degree level has resulted in the closure of as many as a third of university language departments in seven years. This in turn has had a damaging effect on the number of school language teachers, which further increases the difficulties that modern language departments in these schools are experiencing.
- 6** It also has a harmful impact on the number of UK-born (and -taught) HE language researchers. Research in modern languages is now concentrated in a small number of units, predominantly in pre-1992 universities, and in the Russell Group in particular.<sup>2</sup> There are now regions in the UK where there is virtually no substantive HE language provision. In addition, the number of researchers in modern languages has fallen. The results of the most recent assessment of research performance by UK universities shows that the number of researchers in languages and area studies has declined in the seven years since the last assessment exercise in 2001: French by 13%; German by 12%; and Italian by 7%. This will reduce the level of funding for research in these areas (French will drop by £3m – a 30% cut, German by £1.6m – a 31% cut, European Studies by £3m – a 30% cut, and Italian by £0.6m – a 26% cut), which in turn will lead to further reductions in the number of researchers working in these areas.<sup>3</sup> While the teaching of modern foreign languages is protected because these disciplines are deemed to be of strategic national importance, research in them is not. As research in these areas has a direct bearing on a number of global challenges (such as security, terrorism, international crime, and improving intercultural interactions and understandings), the UK's ability to respond to these challenges in the future is likely to be severely hampered unless action is taken.

## THE VALUE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

- 7** Respondents to researchers<sup>4</sup> investigating reasons for learning languages mentioned such varied concerns as 'citizenship; communication; economic, social and political dimensions;

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<sup>1</sup> Kelly, M, *Research Review in Modern Languages*, commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), March 2008.

<sup>2</sup> 43% of modern language staff (FTE) were based in Russell Group universities.

<sup>3</sup> A comparison of QR funding allocations for 2008/09 with those for 2009/10.

<sup>4</sup> Gallagher-Brett, Angela, *Seven hundred reasons for studying languages*, UK Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), April 2005.

democracy; diversity; employability; environmental sustainability; equal opportunities; globalisation; identity; intercultural competence; international dimension; key skills; language awareness; mobility; multilingualism; personal and social development of the individual; and values.’ For the purposes of the RAND report, the Academy has chosen to focus on the way in which language knowledge and expertise can underpin high quality teaching and research in universities. In the humanities, for example, fields such as history and philosophy need to draw on scholarship in other languages which is not translated into English, nor is likely to be. In the social sciences, comparative studies and cross-national work in subjects such as politics, sociology and development economics requires knowledge of other languages. And researchers in all disciplines (including the natural sciences) need skills in spoken as well as written languages in order to take up and make the most of opportunities to study and work overseas, or collaborate with overseas partners. With the increasing development in collaborative work, and the large sums of money attached to such work by national and international agencies, 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.

## THE ACADEMY’S RESPONSE TO RAND’S FINDINGS

- 8 RAND was therefore asked to investigate the hypothesis that UK humanities and social science (HSS) research was becoming increasingly insular in outlook (and even in aims), and that this was already having an adverse impact, which could only increase, on the health of the UK’s HSS research base as a whole. RAND gathered a range of evidence, including: (a) a large-scale survey of the heads of 5 and 5\* rated HSS departments; (b) a series of interviews with commentators and stakeholders; (c) quantitative data showing trends in language take-up; (d) a literature review; (e) case studies.
- 9 RAND’s findings suggest that the demand for language skills from non-language-based HSS disciplines is increasing, as more and more high quality UK HSS research is international in outlook, adopts comparative methods, and has non-Anglophone parts of the world as its object and/or context. The languages in greatest demand across the greatest range of subjects and areas of study (other than English) are German, French, Spanish, Italian (and to a lesser extent Russian). However, the supply of UK-born researchers with language skills is declining and HSS departments are increasingly recruiting non-UK-born doctoral and postdoctoral students, project researchers, and academic staff in research areas where language skills are required. The three main reasons cited by RAND for the undersupply are:
- deficits in language teaching and learning at school;
  - the perceived global dominance of English;
  - the failure of many state schools to promote language learning as effectively as do private schools: the numbers taking modern languages at GCSE in the state school sector are on the decline, whereas those in the independent sector remain buoyant. Studies show a direct correlation between socio-economic group and language take-up. Pupils from more privileged backgrounds are much more likely to have a language qualification.

**10** *The impact on the individual researcher* For the individual UK-born and -educated postgraduate researcher, for instance, these deficits and perceptions may impact on:

- choice of PhD topics – there is evidence that postgraduate researchers are shying away from topics requiring language skills;
- use of relevant non-English material;
- participation in international research activities.

In certain HSS fields, UK-born researchers with ambitions for academic careers, and UK-born academics already in post, may find it increasingly difficult to compete with non-UK-born researchers for research posts and research funding, both in UK universities and elsewhere. They may also be less able to participate in international research projects and to take up many of the opportunities that are available to non-UK-born researchers and academics. In a world of research that is global, these serious shortcomings and deficits undermine the Government's objective of positioning the UK as a hub of international research.

**11** *The impact on HSS departments and their host institutions* RAND's findings show that HSS university departments are increasingly addressing this skills shortage by buying-in the skills they need from abroad, rather than by seeking to help UK researchers and academics to 'upskill'. It is not clear that the reliance on 'bought in' talent is in the longer-term interests of UK HSS research, or that research is benefited by being conducted in English as a second language. As RAND comments: 'The risk is that the UK may not have enough home-grown talent and at the same time may be able to rely less on a sufficient inflow of international talent.' Questions have also been raised about the non-linguistic expertise of non-UK-born researchers and academics, who may be less familiar with UK social, historical and cultural contexts that are relevant to research. An over-reliance on imported talent also means that there could be fewer role-models for the next generation of UK researchers and academics.

**12** *The impact on the UK HSS research base* These developments have a potentially harmful impact on the ability of UK HSS research to stay at the international leading edge. The Academy is concerned that certain areas of research may either be neglected or not be done well.

**13** This has been happening at a time when other countries have increased the extent to which secondary school pupils and university students are obliged to study foreign languages. By contrast, while the UK Government is in the process of introducing a programme of, at present voluntary and from 2010 mandatory, language learning at primary level, any beneficial effects will take many years to show through at higher levels. Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly evident that precisely at those higher levels, the UK focus on responding to pupil and student choice has reduced language knowledge in recent years. A long-term decline, far from being arrested, has been accelerated. The consequent deficit endangers national linguistic performance at secondary and tertiary levels, and this is feeding through into HSS research and teaching, where the shortfall of adequately skilled local personnel has necessitated the buying-in of talent from abroad. Buying-in masks the shortfall only in the short run. The RAND report cites warnings from LSE that in the medium and longer term, such dependence is likely to be unsustainable. Already, lack of language skills is rendering the UK less capable of meeting ever-growing international competition at all levels, and is highly

likely to make UK citizens less capable of seeking work opportunities abroad to compensate for shrinking employment prospects at home. For example, for every four EU citizens working in the UK, there is only one UK citizen working in continental Europe. UK universities may have increasing difficulty in incorporating an intercultural and global dimension in their teaching and research when a significant proportion of their UK-born students and researchers lack knowledge of other languages.

- 14 Research entails, by definition, a process of thinking ‘outside the box’. That is to say, research advances not just by uncovering new material but also by creating new ways of thinking about, understanding, and analysing the material in question. One of the best ways of freeing up and quickening the thinking process is by engaging with traditions of thought outside one’s own – by confronting those other (national, discursive) traditions in their own languages. Now, more than ever, research is a global enterprise. It has been observed that if ‘the research base’ of UK younger educated researchers in the humanities and social sciences is increasingly monoglot in character, it runs the risk of being marginalized, and will end up, as it were, world-famous only in England.

## THE BRITISH ACADEMY’S RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15 These conclusions lead us to recommendations which address the questions below:
- 1 What can the HE sector itself do to encourage more pupils at secondary school to take up language learning?
  - 2 What can individual university HSS departments or faculties do to ensure that their students improve or acquire the languages skills needed for the highest-quality HSS research at postgraduate level?
  - 3 How can we build language capacity in the HSS research base?
  - 4 What should be the next steps?

### **Incentives to increase language take-up both at school and at university**

Universities as a whole should play a greater role in incentivising pupils to study languages; they are well placed to send a powerful message to schools, pupils and their parents about the value of language learning. A language requirement (or equivalent) should be a requisite for university entrance, or at least for completion of degree study. The Academy commends the decision taken by UCL that by 2012 all its applicants (regardless of discipline) should either have a GCSE qualification (or equivalent) in a modern foreign language, or should undertake a language qualification while studying for a non-language degree. We believe that other universities should follow this example. It would encourage those pupils who intend to go to university, but would otherwise have been deterred from language study, to take up language learning. And it sends a powerful message to schools about the importance universities place on language learning. As the final report of the Dearing Language Review commented: ‘Several head teachers have observed that if such a view was more widespread it would have a significant impact on the take-up of languages post-14.’ This initiative would also have most impact on the state-maintained sector, where GCSE entries are low in comparison with the independent sector.

**R1 There should be a language requirement (or proven levels of competence) for university entry, or universities should ensure that students at least leave with a language qualification.**

*For universities and their representative bodies (i.e. UUK, Russell Group, 1994 Group, Million +)*

As the decline in language learning (both at school and at university) reflects in part the past difficulties many schools have faced in recruiting language teachers, more should be done to ensure that the supply of language teachers is sufficient. A number of bodies have a role to play here. The Academy is concerned that university language departments may not have done enough in the past to promote teaching as a possible career for their students. It believes that language departments should explore ways in which they can encourage their graduates to consider language teaching as a career.

**R2 Universities should look at ways in which they can encourage their graduates to consider language teaching as a career.**

*For universities and their representative bodies (i.e. UUK, Russell Group, 1994 Group, Million+)*

While efforts have been made to promote language learning to school pupils, more needs to be done to address the evident misconception about the unimportance of language learning ('English is the global language nowadays'; 'Everyone speaks English nowadays', are commonly held views among the young, and even among undergraduates). For example, pupils intending to study at university should be made aware of the way in which a language can enhance both their school and university studies. Pupils should also know that language graduates are highly employable and command salaries that are second only to those of graduates in law and business.

**R3 Review the promotional material and messages targeted at teachers, school pupils and their parents to ensure that they capture all the benefits of language learning.**

*For the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and CILT, the National Centre for Languages, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies, and to the HEFCE Routes into Languages Programme.*

**Capacity Building Stage – I**

The decline in language learning may be negatively affecting the study of many university HSS subjects, including history, literature, and many aspects of social and economic inquiry. It is clearly in the interests of individual university HSS departments to ensure that (where appropriate) they have measures in place to address this problem.

**R4 Individual HSS university departments should (if appropriate to the degree programme) make provision for language learning for their students.**

*For individual HSS university departments of faculties*

## Capacity Building Stage – II

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. These outcomes will be possible only if the present trend towards reduced language knowledge is briskly reversed, but the requisite improvements will take many years to show up in students at research level. In the short term, remedial measures are urgently required, in the form of intensive language courses for MA and doctoral students. Universities should review and, if necessary, enhance their language training provision for postgraduate students, and should also develop a policy (and accompanying statements in their postgraduate literature) about languages for research. They should at the same time encourage staff to undertake courses to acquire, improve or extend their linguistic skills. Universities should impress on their staff the very great utility of such skills in international research collaboration in an international context.

- R5 Universities should ensure that they provide language training to meet the needs of their researchers. In some cases, it will be necessary for universities to work together to pool their language provision, and to consider secondments and other forms of collaboration.**

*For universities and their representative bodies (i.e. UUK, Russell Group, 1994 Group, Million+)*

Similarly, major HSS funders of postgraduate research will want to ensure that their funded postgraduate researchers have the skills that they will need throughout their careers to conduct research to the highest international standards. There may also be scope to develop the support for improving language skills in some of the postdoctoral funding schemes provided by the major HSS funders.

- R6 The AHRC and the ESRC should review their training guidelines and their financial support for intensive language courses for their funded postgraduates, with a view to encouraging the development of language training programmes specifically geared to the needs of postgraduate researchers.**

*For AHRC and ESRC*

- R7 The British Academy should make provision for its postdoctoral fellows to enhance their language skills. It should also consider developing a programme, in partnership with sister academies overseas, of secondments for Academy funded postdoctoral fellows.**

*For the British Academy*

- R8 The British Academy should explore the possibility of incorporating support for language capacity building in its funding schemes.**

*For the British Academy*

- R9 University provision for language training should be a factor taken into account, alongside other environment factors such as library facilities, when assessing the suitability of institutions to host AHRC and ESRC postgraduate grant holders.**

*For AHRC and ESRC*

## NEXT STEPS

While the Academy welcomes the action that is being undertaken in response to the decline in the take-up of languages at GCSE and beyond, it considers that more needs to be done, and very urgently. Many of the key initiatives (such as making languages mandatory in primary schools from 2010) will take several years for their impact to be felt. In the meantime, a whole generation risks being 'lost to languages'. This will have a major adverse effect on the ability of the UK (and its citizens) to respond to many of the major challenges it faces today. Any catch-up programme is likely to be both costly and long-term in duration. The difficulty of repairing the damage should not be underestimated.

There is an urgent need for a joined-up approach on the part of Government Departments. The Academy calls on the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to develop a more coherent and co-ordinated approach to the problem. In saying this, the Academy is aware that it repeats an argument made very forcefully by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry in its report published in 2000: 'There is an urgent need for a national strategy to plan the range of languages taught in higher education, to manage the integration of languages into all subject areas and to maintain a sufficient supply of language specialists.' We recommend that the Nuffield Report be implemented with the utmost speed.

- R10 DIUS and DCSF should review language teaching and learning across all sectors to ensure a coherent system in which language learning begun at primary school has a natural progression for every student through HE and life-long language learning. The review should consider the syllabus, teaching methods and teacher supply as well as other ways of promoting language learning, such as careers advice.**

*For DIUS (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) and DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families)*