

Inquiry into the Future of Higher Education: Views of the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML)

UCML is the overarching national organisation which represents the interests of modern languages, linguistics and area studies in higher education throughout the United Kingdom. It counts among its members virtually all University Departments and professional associations concerned with the study of Modern Languages. This submission comes from the Chair on behalf of UCML.

Summary

- Specialist language graduates and graduates in other disciplines offering language skills make a major contribution to the UK economy in a globalising world.
- To address the shortage of graduates with the language and intercultural skills required by the economy, the UK requires an expansion of numbers on language degrees and a target that all UK graduates should have competence in English and a second language.
- Despite the success of cross-sector initiatives to promote language study, all modern languages continue to be both Strategically Important and Vulnerable, and to require additional targeted investment.
- Initiatives promoting language study need to be maintained.
- The international experience of work and study abroad, a unique feature of language degrees, also brings proven benefits to all graduates and to the UK economy. Student mobility is already very low among UK undergraduates, and will be particularly threatened as increased fees and higher debt deter students from four-year programmes: work and study abroad programmes require special consideration and funding.
- The Higher Education Language group within BIS performs a uniquely valuable role and should continue.
- The proposal to make HE free at the point of entry for part-time as well as full-time students should increase recruitment to language programmes.
- Languages are equally vital for UK university research across the Humanities and Social Sciences, and thus indirectly to attract international students to the UK.
- Languages are in danger of becoming the preserve of a social, economic and intellectual elite: measures to widen participation in languages are essential.

1. In a globalising world, the UK needs its universities to provide graduates who are competent in foreign languages. The strategic importance of all foreign languages is amply demonstrated. It extends beyond linguistic skills themselves to embrace cultural insight and intercultural skills, alongside the full range of generic graduate skills.

‘As world economies become increasingly connected, the international skills needed to operate on a global scale have become increasingly important. Globally oriented firms seek internationally-competent workers who speak foreign languages and have the intercultural skills needed to successfully interact with international partners. Governments as well as individuals are looking to higher education to broaden students’ horizons and help them to better understand the world’s languages, cultures and business methods’ (OECD 2010).

‘Language skills are [...]important in an increasingly globalised workplace. Students should be striving to develop these skills which, alongside their academic qualifications, are not an optional extra. [...] Language skills and an ability to work in a multi-cultural environment are also valuable in an increasingly globalised workplace. Foreign language proficiency adds significantly to a candidate’s portfolio of skills, not just in terms of conversational ability, but also general cultural awareness and sensitivity’ (CBI 2009).

The British Academy position statement *Languages matter more and more* (February 2011) further emphasises the need for language graduates. Statements from Government Ministers, HEFCE and the House of Lords among others have also recognised the crucial importance of university language graduates for the British economy, and that this importance extends to all languages and to in-depth study and knowledge of the countries and cultures in which the language is used.

2. UK graduates seeking international careers are handicapped by a lack of foreign language skills. The under-supply of UK graduates who are native English speakers but have high proficiency in one or more foreign languages has recently been recognised, for example, by the FCO (event hosted 18 October 2010) and by the European Commission’s EU Careers Month http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/press/frontpage/2011/1119_en.htm. UK citizens make up 12% of the EU population but only 6% of EU civil servants and just 1.5% of applicants for posts in 2010.
3. Data on graduate employment consistently underline that language graduates pursue an exceptionally wide range of professional careers, confirming research evidence that a

language degree develops an outstanding portfolio of personal and employment-related skills, over and above the target language skills.

4. UCML suggests that measures to be considered in order to increase the number of language graduates might include
 - Funding of Additional Student Numbers in languages
 - A competitive national bursary scheme for language study
 - Inclusion of questions in the National Student Survey related to the language and international experience on offer in the university
5. UCML suggests that the UK graduate workforce as a whole would be strengthened if universities were given the target that all UK graduates should have competence in English and a second language.
6. The Browne report makes one specific reference (p.47, §6) to modern languages, arguing for 'additional and targeted investment by the public in [...] strategically important language courses'. HEFCE recognises all Modern Foreign Languages, together with Area Studies and Related Minority Languages as Strategically Important and Vulnerable subjects (SIVs). UCML believes it is essential that the designation should continue, and that the necessary investment in targeted support for tuition fees should be made, because languages, despite their demonstrated strategic importance, continue to be vulnerable.
 - The CBI (2009) expressed its concern 'about the quantity and quality of graduates with STEM degrees, and other valued skills such as competency in foreign languages'.
 - The number of degree programmes offered in the six principal languages have fallen since 2003 from 503 to 271, a fall of 46%.
 - The closure of courses and of whole language departments across the UK has not slowed.
 - Recruitment to specialist language degrees peaked in the UK in 1992; there followed more than a decade of steep decline. The decline has slowed in recent years: between 2002/3 and 2009/10 the total fall was 2.6%, including a 1.2% drop in first degrees and 13.8% decline in other undergraduate degrees
 - However, probably as a consequence of special cross-sector measures undertaken to promote the value of studying languages beyond GCSE and into university, including *Routes into Languages*, student numbers on first degrees in languages have, since 2004, shown a consistent but slight and as yet fragile recovery, averaging just 1.1% a year.

- The collapse of language study at Key Stage 4 continues to reduce the numbers of potential language undergraduates. The proportion of state schools with 50% or more pupils studying a language at KS4 fell by one-third, from 48% to 36%, between 2005 and 2010; the proportion taking a language GCSE dropped from 71% in 1997 to just 43% in 2010. Any benefits to languages from the introduction of the English Baccalaureate will take at least five years to feed into HE recruitment.
- At AS level, despite an increase in Spanish, overall language entries are down 9.3% since 2007. At A level, as in first degrees, a steep decline from the 1990s was halted around 2004 and since then recovered by 10.1%. Nonetheless, the overall drop since 1996 is 24.6%, over a period when overall A-level entries across all subjects has soared by 25%. French, for example, represented 3.66% of entries in 1996, but just 1.57% in 2010.

Overall, the supply of qualified applicants from secondary is very uncertain, and, despite some possible green shoots in recruitment to first degree HE languages, the situation remains critical, and continued protection and promotion essential. UCML, and the HE languages sector more broadly, are proactive in promoting HE language study and its importance for the UK economy. A number of issues raised by Professor Michael Worton's 2009 HEFCE report into Modern Languages in Higher Education have been taken forward in various contexts. UCML has led one project involving a range of associations and stakeholders: *Shaping the Future of Languages in Higher Education*, funded by HEFCE, will in April 2011 produce a toolkit for Universities and other stakeholders. UCML has played a leading role in both *Routes into Languages* and *Links into Languages* to promote language study. UCML is also working with other agencies to launch the *Speak to the Future* campaign, focusing on languages in society and at all levels of education.

The apparent success of cross-sector outreach programmes in slowing the decline in language study, at least in some areas, underlines the importance of maintaining such programmes. It is therefore essential both that all languages continue to have SIV status, and that initiatives promoting language study are maintained.

7. Work and study abroad, often called the year abroad, are a distinguishing feature of language degrees, and a highly desirable element of all UK degree programmes. David Willetts said in 2010: 'Businesses say there aren't enough students with experience of languages, different cultures and the wider world. British companies want to export abroad but one of the problems they raise with us is that British students don't have foreign languages and an experience of living in another country. 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’.

Too few UK graduates currently undertake work and study abroad. The following table shows how, for example, the number of participants in the EU's ERASMUS student exchange scheme continue to expand, while UK participation, with the exception of 05/06-07/08 when existing work placements were incorporated into the ERASMUS scheme, has consistently fallen.

	00/01- 01/0 2	01/02- 02/0 3	02/03- 03/0 4	03/04- 04/0 5	04/05- 05/0 6	05/06- 06/0 7	06/07- 07/0 8	07/08- 08/ 09
Total	+4.52%	+6.79%	+8.61%	+6.23%	+7.21%	+3.18%	+2.12%	+3.38%
UK	-6.06%	-6.16%	-5.25%	-4.30%	-1.15%	+1.46%	+3.97%	-1.25%

Across the ERASMUS programme, non-specialist language students represent 85% of participants. Only in the UK do specialists in other disciplines make up only 60% of ERASMUS participants: such is the lack of language skills among UK students generally, and their lack of recognition of the benefits of work and study abroad.

There is robust evidence that work and study abroad deliver not just improved language skills, but enhanced academic knowledge, cultural insights, intercultural and personal skills. Work and study abroad also enhance employability: skills gained abroad are a factor in landing first and subsequent jobs for over 70% of language graduates, a significant factor for over 30%, and the determining factor for about 10%. Skills gained during work and study abroad come in useful at work for nine out of ten language graduates. UCML is working to assemble this evidence into a single dossier.

In the new tuition fee regime, it is feared that four-year courses will be less attractive because students will accumulate greater debt, both for fees and for other costs. This is a major threat both to specialist language degrees and to the participation of other students in work and study abroad. UCML wants the Government to protect and promote the benefits brought to the UK economy through graduates who have undertaken work and study abroad. Specifically, UCML wants the Government to consider

- Continuation of the fee waiver funded by HEFCE beyond 2011-12
- Extension of the fee waiver beyond Europe and assistantships to embrace all destinations, notably China, India, the Middle East, Russia, Africa and Latin America

- An increase in the proportion of fees covered for students abroad by the fee waiver, so that fees during stays abroad do not rise as fast as general tuition fees
- A freeze on interest on student loans during work and study abroad.

Additionally, UCML is encouraging HEIs to continue to charge their own students reduced fees to encourage participation in work and study abroad programmes.

8. One positive outcome of the Worton Report was the establishment of the Higher Education Languages Group within BIS, bringing together major stakeholders such as HEFCE, DfE, the National Centre for Languages, the Subject Centre for Languages Linguistics and Area Studies and the British Council, as well as UCML. This unique link between Government and expert stakeholders brings substantial benefits to all sides, and must continue.
9. Browne's Principle Six recognises the importance of part-time study in upskilling the UK workforce. This applies fully to modern language studies. In addition to the 10,000 students a year studying languages at the Open University, and the consortium *Netzwerk Deutsch* linking the OU with six other HEIs, many HEIs offer part-time provision. UCML therefore welcomes the proposal to make HE free at the point of entry for all students, regardless of the mode of study, and the proposal that entitlement should begin at one-quarter of full-time equivalent study.
10. The British Academy, in its two *Language matters* reports (2009, 2011) stresses the need to maintain advanced language skills across the whole curriculum, if the UK is to maintain its international pre-eminence in Arts and Humanities research. A shortfall in graduate language skills would jeopardise the UK's reputation for research in social, economic, historical, literary and other domains, which in turn is vital to recruiting international students and to the billions of pounds which they bring to the UK. In this context, UCML welcomes the nearly £5m of new British Academy funding from BIS to support languages and quantitative approaches in the humanities and social sciences.
11. UCML is concerned that language study is increasingly the preserve of a socio-economic elite at secondary school, in post-compulsory education and at university, and would like the Government to explore the possibility that policies on widening access might explicitly address this issue.
 - 41% of state school pupils take a language GCSE, compared with 81% in independent schools and 91% in selective schools
 - Robust annual surveys, most recently *Language Trends 2010* (http://www.cilt.org.uk/research_and_statistics.aspx), confirm very clear geographical and

socio-economic discrepancies in provision of language study. Data on Key Stage 3 timetabling and Key Stage 4 take-up show how pupils in the North of England, in less privileged areas, and in lower performing schools have less access to foreign languages than in wealthier areas, in selective schools and in independent schools.

- Independent schools represent about 7% of England's secondary school pupils, but at A level they represent 29.7%, 27.2% and 34.2% respectively of entries in French, German and Spanish, and 42.9%, 42.5% and 48.5% of top A level grades.
- Of all mainstream university disciplines, Modern Languages has the highest proportion of students from independent schools; about 40% of applications and admissions are from the highest socio-economic group.
- Language degrees are increasingly concentrated within the Russell Group of universities, leading to uneven geographical availability of (non-distance-taught) provision in some languages.
- Lower socio-economic groups are more debt-aware, so the new fee regime risks accentuating the existing elitism.

Conclusion

The University Council of Modern Languages looks forward to continuing engagement with Government policy in shaping Higher Education to provide the graduates with the linguistic, intercultural and generic graduate skills which the UK economy requires.