

A Languages Crisis?

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About the author

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Key Terms

In the text, **'languages'** are defined as including worldwide ancient, modern, verbal and signed languages. As an academic discipline, **'Languages'** (capitalised) are encompassed within the Humanities and comprise various subjects involving the study of a language or languages beyond the student's mother tongue. **'Modern Foreign Languages'** are defined as those currently in use and not native in origin to the nation in question (for instance, Welsh is not a 'foreign language' to the UK). **'Heritage languages'** are defined as those spoken by a minority community, often learned at home or in Saturday schools.

Foreword

By Nick Hillman, Director of HEPI

This report is different in two ways.

First, it looks at one disciplinary area alone: Languages, both ancient and modern. HEPI generally avoids looking at one area in isolation, both because we believe all academic disciplines are of equal merit and because we think the future is likely to be, at least in part, interdisciplinary. We have temporarily changed tack because the decline in Languages is so great and because there is so much uncertainty about the UK's future place in the world.

Secondly, this report is written by a current undergraduate student. We have not lowered our quality bar in any way. In fact, this paper benefits a huge amount from the author's vantage point as a current student of Classics. Our past output by undergraduates, including *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health* (2016) by Poppy Brown and the award-winning *How much is too much? Cross-subsidies from teaching to research in British Universities* (2017) by Vicky Olive, have – rightly – had as much influence as anything we have ever produced.

As the new Government beds in, we hope Ministers will look at, listen to and learn from Megan's affordable, practical and impactful policy recommendations. If they do, it could help lay the foundations for the UK to understand much better our European neighbours as well as other countries further away.

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Executive Summary

- The UK continues to lag behind other European countries at language learning: 32 per cent of 16-to-30-year olds in the UK feel confident reading and writing in another language, compared to the rest of the EU's 89 per cent average.
- The UK's position as an academic and scientific world leader is also at risk, with a decreasing proportion of international research published in English.
- The Brexit debate has renewed the urgency of these issues. The UK should recognise that now is a pivotal time for re-evaluating policy and attitudes regarding language learning and existing multilingualism. Brexit also poses significant practical challenges for Languages in higher education, including staffing, research links and study abroad schemes.
- Higher education is experiencing declines in the uptake of traditional Languages. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17, student numbers for French declined 45 per cent. German declined by 43 per cent and Italian by 63 per cent. Languages provision, particularly for heritage languages, is vulnerable to departmental closures and downsizing.
- Additional language learning, such as facilitating students on all courses taking language modules to count towards course credits and / or as an extracurricular activity, is a key area that UK higher education should protect and expand.
- Following the removal of the compulsory additional language GCSE requirement in 2004, the problems start in schools, both for Languages as an academic specialism

and as a core competence. This is compounded by negative perceptions of Languages GCSEs and A-Levels, and the lack of alternative qualifications. Demographic inequalities also set in at school level.

Key recommendations

- GCSE and A-Level courses should be more varied and appealing, featuring coursework as well as examination assessment.
- Learning an ancient or modern foreign language should be made compulsory up to Key Stage 4 (KS4), with accreditation (either a GCSE / National, or alternative vocational or community language qualification) encouraged but optional.
- Policymakers should introduce measures to increase teaching staff numbers, such as conditional financial incentives, and including all language teachers on the Shortage Occupations List.
- Where tuition fees exist, they should be supplemented with additional government funding to safeguard provision of minority languages, and facilitate free additional language learning for any students and staff members.

1. Introduction

The assertion that there is a 'languages crisis' in the UK is not new, but the warnings have received considerable media attention in recent years. Indeed, crisis narratives have become an over-stated norm throughout the Arts and Humanities. Though these subjects benefitted from the largest increase in funding following the tuition fee increase in 2012, removal of government teaching grants for classroom-based subjects in this funding plan also made the viability of many Humanities subjects dependent on stable student numbers.¹ A market-driven university model has also contributed to a utilitarian rhetoric regarding education policy. While David Cameron's Governments placed emphasis on the national economic need for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) and Education Secretary Nicky Morgan promoted STEM disciplines as the best option for opening future opportunities for the next generation, other subjects were left open to allegations of being easy, irrelevant, unemployable or elitist.²

The trend towards overlooking subjects which teach us to analyse the human condition and empathise with others is dangerous. Continuing to polarise Humanities and Sciences reflects an outdated mindset which underestimates the value of interdisciplinary thinking.³ It is surely detrimental also to STEM fields if they are emphasised in isolation from other subjects, when they could be enriched by Languages and Humanities in developing fresh outlooks, analysing emotional responses and collaborating productively worldwide. Sixty years on from C.P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*, the intellectual division has, if anything, continued to worsen in UK schools and higher education.⁴

Crisis Narratives

Yet while image problems and allegations of decline in the Arts and Humanities are longstanding, is the widespread language of shock and crisis really warranted? 'Crisis', a Greek word for a decisive, climactic moment of adversity, often the turning-point in a disease's progression, is perhaps an ill-suited buzzword for a larger and more gradual picture. Professor Peter Mandler says that it is too singular a label: 'There is no period to which one can point and say "*There is the crisis of the humanities!*"'⁵ The overuse of 'crisis' prompts dismissal and undermines credibility.

Though the UK's chronic monolingualism is no sudden plummet, there is arguably a stronger case to be made for the 'crisis' in Languages to be treated with greater urgency. Crisis narratives have been a part of language learning since the introduction of French and German into the curriculum in the 19th century, from teaching methods to social exclusivity. Education reforms in the 1960s then implemented a skills-based approach to languages across reading, writing, speaking and listening.⁶ Though providing an accessible metric of progress to different abilities, this shift developed a perception problem which persists: languages are viewed as vocational skills, useful for only a small minority in later careers, rather than an academic exercise in themselves.

Languages are taught sporadically at primary level in England; learning beyond age 14 is optional; and university Languages departments and centres are vulnerable to cuts and closures. This is symptomatic of a critical undervaluing of both language skills and the academic study of Languages as a tool for understanding culture and literature.

Republic of Ireland

Ireland, also predominately Anglophone and geographically close to the UK, is a particularly concerning comparison. An EU Commission survey found 75 per cent of young people in Ireland were confident reading and writing in at least two languages: 37 per cent could read and write in two and 34 per cent in three.⁷ English and Irish are taught from primary level up to leaving high school, with a foreign language (often French) compulsory in many types of school.

Around 87 per cent of pupils take a foreign language in addition to English and Irish for the Junior Certificate (age-equivalent to GCSE) and 70 per cent for the Leaving Certificate (age-equivalent to A-Level).⁸ Seven languages can be examined at Higher or Ordinary level for Leaver's Certificate, with other non-curricular heritage languages also offered. The breadth of the Leaver's Certificate curriculum – students take at least five and typically seven subjects – contributes to high uptake, as do university entrance requirements. The four National University of Ireland institutions stipulate a Leaving Certificate third language for most degrees; not taking a language to this level can severely restrict higher education options.⁹

Should a language qualification be compulsory for university entry?

In the UK, foreign language qualifications are typically only required, if at all, for Languages courses. When matriculation requirements dropped Latin, most universities did not substitute another language, and Cambridge dropped its Modern Foreign Language GCSE requirement in 2008.

However, University College London (UCL), in response to falling secondary school language qualification entries, instated a compulsory Modern Foreign Language GCSE requirement for all courses from 2012, to promote language skills as invaluable and foster 'global citizenship'. If successful candidates lack a Modern Foreign Language GCSE or equivalent, they must attend a Summer School before starting or enrol in a 15-credit Modern Foreign Language module.

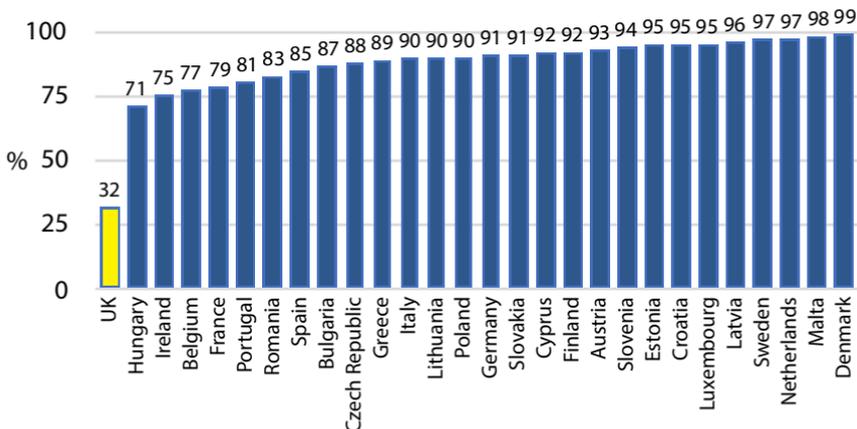
However, making a language qualification compulsory in universities is arguably not where reform should focus in tackling root causes. Certainly, implementing this measure on a large scale would make schools prioritise Languages GCSEs for all higher-achieving pupils and encourage accreditation of heritage learners. However, although overall higher education entries are rising, a compulsory Modern Foreign Language requirement would surely increase divides between pupils told to aspire to university and those who are not. Those who did not achieve a language GCSE, because they were not encouraged to or were uninterested at the time, would be at a disadvantage, or have to take on extra work during further study. It would make more sense for some form of Key Stage 4 language-learning – with a range of accessible qualifications available – to be compulsory in all schools (Chapter 3). This would mean people of all education levels in future generations, not only graduates, attain some level of linguistic and intercultural awareness.

Sources: University College London, *UCL Academic Manual 2019-2020*, Chapter 4, Section 9.7; James Meikle, 'University students face language requirement', *Guardian*, 13 December 2006; Debbie Andalo, 'Cambridge drops language entry requirement', *Guardian*, 14 March 2008

Brexit

The decline in Languages predates Brexit, but existing language deficiencies could be exacerbated by an exodus of EU citizens.¹⁰ The British Council's 2019 *Language Trends* survey found the EU vote had a divisive effect on attitudes to school language learning: 45 per cent of English state schools report the implications of Brexit as a 'major challenge' to providing high-quality Languages teaching, due to staffing concerns and student motivation.¹¹

Ability of EU 15-30-year olds to read and write in two or more languages (per cent)



Source: European Commission survey on the European Education Area, April 2018

We cannot afford to overlook the linguistic and intercultural aptitude developed by Languages during this crucial period of renegotiating our connections with EU countries, which currently take about 44 per cent of UK exports, as well as forging other global links outside the EU.¹² The UK's Anglophone dependence, in embarrassing contrast to the rest of the EU's linguistic competences, will do us no favours; just 32 per cent

of young people in the UK feel confident reading and writing another language, compared to the rest of the EU's 89 per cent average.¹³ The post-Brexit climate has meant the issues of multilingualism and multiculturalism are now politically contentious.¹⁴ To speak another language is to be associated with an internationalist mindset, and the defence of language learning is charged with wider social issues beyond the scope of education policy.

2. Why do we need languages?

What would be lost if the world were monolingual? The Biblical tale of Babel describes humanity, united by common language, building a tower to reach heaven. God punishes the people by confusing their language so they no longer understand each other. The myth presents linguistic diversity as a curse designed to keep humans in their place – an inevitable impediment in international relations. If we deem the ‘babble’ of 7,111 languages a global problem, then language learning becomes merely a remedy for a transactional obstacle, which could be simplified or even replaced by Esperanto or translation technology developments.¹⁵

Languages, however, do not exist in a vacuum, but are entwined with the cultures, traditions and histories of those who speak or spoke them. To learn a language, ancient or modern, is to engage with realities of communication and heritage in a broader sense and to develop an empathetic interest in other societies. Professor Neil Kenny and Harriet Barnes at the British Academy urge that we cannot remain indifferent to this enrichment:

*Google Translate doesn't give you a window into other worlds, broaden your mental horizons, make you more likely to be curious and respectful when encountering other cultures and communities. Nothing beats language learning when it comes to producing a mindset of cultural agility.*¹⁶

Knowledge of other languages is also the key to understanding one's mother tongue. Studying foreign languages provides

a more appealing and directly useful way of learning to recognise linguistic features and structures, which can be subconsciously compared and contrasted to those of English.

Understanding only one language means its grammatical distinctions, idioms and resultant thought patterns are taken for granted.¹⁷ Learning additional languages facilitates access to multiple cultures and worldviews, which are important for approaching unfamiliar challenges and lateral thinking. A national lack of linguistic awareness is hence more serious than grammatical and lexical shortcomings; it risks cultural apathy, insularity and even intolerance.

Individual returns

- 1. Cultural literacy:** In exploring a foreign language, the individual can assimilate knowledge of different cultural attitudes, both in the subtleties and differences of the language itself, and in the literature, media and communities they may encounter through its usage.¹⁸ This 'mindset of cultural agility' ensures deeper understanding of collaborators, competitors or peers, important in both daily life and international trade.¹⁹
- 2. Empathy and interpersonal connections:** In an age when four-in-ten people believe multiculturalism has undermined British culture, we need to improve awareness and appreciation of languages, particularly Slavic and non-European, if we are to improve social cohesion.²⁰ Reducing ignorance and misconceptions about foreign languages could develop a less hostile and more symbiotic attitude towards multi-ethnic integration in the UK.²¹ The assets of language

learning in bridging social divides are also true of sign languages. Greater knowledge among the general public of sign languages can improve accessibility in social interactions and workplaces for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Even if not used regularly, learning a sign language is, like other languages, a valuable exercise which develops empathy towards deaf communities and their cultures.²²

- 3. Personal enrichment:** Language learning tends to be motivated by a highly personal interest, either a desire to connect with one's own native heritage or curiosity about another culture. Individualised choice is important – what may start out as an interest in learning Korean vocabulary to listen to pop music, for instance, could lead to a lifelong appreciation of another language and society.
- 4. Preserving heritage:** Out of all the languages alive today, a fifth are deemed endangered, often with fewer than a thousand speakers.²³ Determining a language's value solely by speaker numbers risks missed opportunities to engage with history, and to discover more unusual examples of linguistics and community values. Efforts to promote Cornish and Scottish Gaelic, for instance, reveal possibilities of reconnecting with the UK's linguistic heritage. Ancient languages are a powerful tool for accessing historical cultures and experiencing influential literature in its original language. The relationship between ancient and modern languages is also stimulating – grammatical and etymological roots in Latin and Greek, for instance,

offer new perspectives on the workings of English and Romance languages.

- 5. Mental value:** Though the relationship between languages and other skills is complex, psychological studies identify positive effects of language learning on cognitive flexibility and analytical thinking. Languages are associated with creativity, innovative problem-solving and self-discipline, skills transferable to other fields. A British Academy review of studies of language learning concluded positive effects across 'general academic performances, English language learning, Literacy, and Mathematics and Science'.²⁴

- 6. Brain health:** As well as supporting wellbeing through communication opportunities, research suggests multilingualism can improve long-term health by physically modifying the brain's structure. By increasing the brain's cognitive reserve and exercising the memory, bilingualism was found to slow dementia onset in later life.²⁵ Even short-term language learning at any age and without reaching fluency has cognitive benefits. A 2014 study in which retirees took a week-long intensive Gaelic course noted 'significant improvement' in cognitive function compared to other active people their age.²⁶ Since dementia affects one-in-six people over the age of 80, neuroscientists advocate school and university language learning with a view to later health.²⁷

Strategic reasons

The national economic value of learning particular languages is well-documented. Cardiff Business School's research in 2014 noted that, despite the prevalence of English as a language for international business and trade, the UK is paying a high price for language ignorance. The report estimated these losses at £48 billion annually, equivalent to 3.5 per cent of GDP, with poor language skills acting like a 'tax on growth' for small to medium-sized non-exporters. Conversely, firms able to communicate in the languages of potential trade partners were attuned to the challenges and opportunities of non-Anglophone markets, and likely to have more export experience and overseas bases.

In particular, language barriers are shown to hinder the UK's participation in the potential trade growth of fast-emerging economies like BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, China], as well as to developed countries like France, Germany and Japan.²⁸

In 2013, the London Chamber of Commerce also recorded that, out of 70 per cent of potential exporters concerned about workforce skills when making export decisions, 74 per cent cited language skills in particular.²⁹

Languages are vital in national security and diplomacy. A British Academy report, *Lost for Words*, expressed concern about our underestimation of language skills, and their resultant decline, on future governmental capacity for operating 'in the fast-changing language of global engagement'. It concluded that, while employer investment in language provision is positive, the problem needs to be tackled in schools and higher

education, and the diverse knowledge of heritage speakers better harnessed: 'there has been a marked decline in provision of many of the languages which have strategic importance for defence and diplomacy'.³⁰

In 2017, the British Council ranked the ten currently most important 'languages for the future' for the UK, based on ten metrics. Other high-scoring languages include Polish, Malay, Turkish and Hindi.³¹

Rank	Language
1	Spanish
2	Mandarin
3	French
4	Arabic
5	German
6	Italian
7	Dutch
8	Portuguese
9	Japanese
10	Russian

Yet despite dissatisfaction with school-leavers' Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) skills, reliance on English as a *lingua franca* remains. An information-based failure to appreciate the advantages of languages in various contexts is preventing skills shortages from leading to increased demand for linguists in the workforce.

Case study: The British Military

A lack of language skills among recruits, resulting from declines in school and university learning, became a concern for the British Army after shortcomings in Iraq and Afghanistan. Feedback from commanders noted the UK may well have fared better in these conflicts had the military been better equipped with local languages. One senior officer stated: 'Many of our forebears would have been embarrassed to see how little knowledge we arrived with ... when they served in those regions, they spoke the languages and knew the people.'

The military is taking measures to ensure senior ranks are acquiring this proficiency. Financial incentives are offered to Army personnel for registering language skills. This allows the military to know about and capitalise on hidden expertise, encouraging accreditation of heritage languages and motivating those serving to improve existing skills. Language skills are also essential for career progression. As of 2018, officers cannot be promoted to command a sub-unit without demonstrating basic speaking and listening competence in a foreign language. Language training is provided by the Defence Centre for Languages and Culture, which opened in 2014. The Ministry of Defence has also been able to source speakers of particular dialects in critical counter-terrorism efforts.

Sources: Ben Farmer, 'Learn foreign languages or miss out on promotion, Army officers told', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 September 2014; Wendy Ayres-Bennett, 'How the British military became a champion for language learning', *The Conversation*, 6 June 2016

Languages research pertains to international challenges, from recognising minority dialects and ethnic groups to tackling issues of terrorism and security.³² However, linguistic competence is crucial across all research disciplines. Language deficiencies are holding the UK back in STEM in particular. Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish are now common publication languages as well as English.

Language barriers can hinder knowledge flow to those with limited English and to monolingual Anglophones. For instance, significant research in 2004 regarding the H5N1 flu outbreak and its cross-spread to pigs was only available in Chinese-language journals, and it took months before findings were disseminated to non-Sinophones.³³ In 2018, China overtook the USA in total science publications; India's output is also rising.³⁴ In rapid turnover fields like STEM, time is of the essence, and effective translations often require technical subject knowledge. Enabling Sciences as well as Humanities students to develop accredited language skills alongside their degrees would therefore be a forward-looking step.

3. Problems in the pipeline

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the scrapping of the compulsory foreign language GCSE in 2004 has had a detrimental effect on national uptake levels. This measure failed to anticipate the vast drop in uptake. Given fewer than half of pupils now take a GCSE foreign language, compared to 76 per cent in 2002, we are far behind the rest of Europe, and changes in governmental attitudes and policy are pressing.³⁵

England

The National Strategy for Languages of 2002 and the more flexible options for accreditation, designed in more favourable economic circumstances, were dependent on considerable government funding that was no longer available following the effects of the financial crisis. Likewise, proposals from Lord Dearing's 2007 review, including more varied assessments for language GCSEs, different kinds of qualifications to suit more students and substantial annual funding for Languages in schools, were not acted on.³⁶

The Coalition Government made radical policy changes, seeking a less interventionist approach, implementing economic austerity measures and discontinuing the National Strategy. This included scrapping the *Framework for Languages*, which offered structured guidance and teaching objectives for Key Stage 3 teaching, and the *Links into Languages* programme, which provided regional hubs, specialist help and useful resources. While schools were given more autonomy over spending, this meant when language uptake and expert staffing dwindled and as the effects of austerity were felt, it was no longer viable for them to prioritise Languages.³⁷

The introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) school performance measure in 2010, however, mitigated the pace of decline in GCSE uptake, and many schools sought more teachers for Languages. This was a positive move for recognising Languages as a key part of the curriculum. However, the exclusion of alternative and vocational language qualifications as qualifying subjects for the EBacc reduced the flexibility of language-learning opportunities.³⁸ The new metric meant there was little incentive for providing options beyond these traditional academic qualifications. The 'Asset Languages' scheme, which provided access to voluntary accreditation for all ages in a variety of community languages, could not be sustained.³⁹ Languages education is increasingly restricted to highly academic GCSE and A-Level courses – Languages are failing to suit the needs of all pupils, and consequently fewer gain any proficiency.

Primary education

The 2002 National Strategy for Languages and the embedding of Key Stage 2 Languages within the English National Curriculum aimed to instil enthusiasm for Languages from an early age, and resulted in schools improving teacher skills and investing in new staff.⁴⁰ However, the funding needed to sustain these ambitious plans was no longer available in the next decade.⁴¹

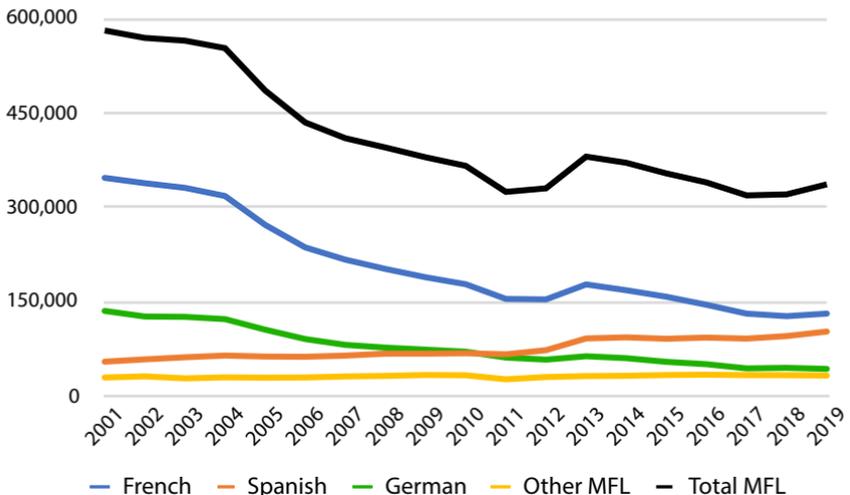
While many primary schools increased and continue with Languages provision, it is not generally accompanied with the resources, specialist teaching and official timetabled hours to be effective. The British Council's 2019 *Languages Trends* survey of English schools identifies staff expertise as a key challenge:

43 per cent of respondents report the highest language qualification of any teacher in the school is below A-Level.⁴² Ofsted note issues in the primary-to-secondary transition, and their 2016 review deemed achievement 'not good enough' in just under half of Key Stage 3 Languages classes observed.⁴³

Integrating languages into the classroom and engaging with diverse cultures should be supported with a more coherent and sustainable National Strategy, with better training provision and guidance for current teachers for incorporating languages into classroom activities.

GCSEs and A-Levels – difficult and dull?

GCSE Uptake for Modern Languages, 2001-2019



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

The scrapping of compulsory GCSEs led to a fall, and national shortages of well-qualified teachers mean for many schools it

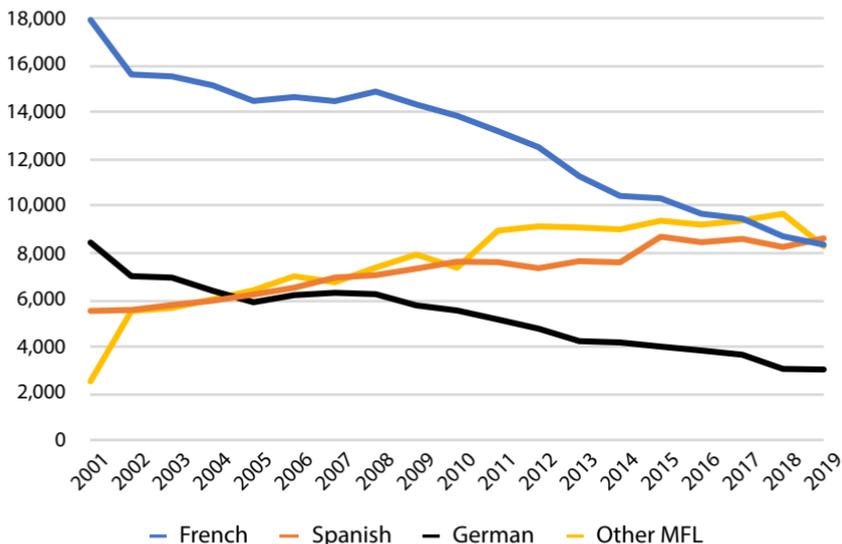
is impractical to insist on Key Stage 4 Languages. Performance measures deter schools from entering lower-attaining students for Languages, resulting in the subjects increasingly becoming the preserve of high-achievers and native speakers.⁴⁴

At GCSE, French and German entries have dropped significantly: French by 63 per cent and German by 67 per cent since 2002.⁴⁵ However, Spanish has experienced growth, overtaking German in 2012. In 2019, there were overall increases in EBacc subject entries, including Modern Foreign Languages, with a small but encouraging rise in French, while German and other Modern Foreign Languages entries decreased.⁴⁶ However, the Government's target of 90 per cent of pupils following the EBacc curriculum by 2025 remains unfeasible.

While traditional language choices have declined, entries for some Modern Foreign Languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Portuguese, Italian and Polish, increased between 2014 and 2018.⁴⁷ This suggests some success in encouraging qualifications in heritage languages and with initiatives like the Mandarin Excellence Programme.⁴⁸ More could be done through a nationwide strategy to recognise existing proficiency and widen access to less widely-taught languages.

French and German A-Levels have been falling since the mid-1990s, though the rise of Spanish continues. 'Other Languages', previously the smallest group, have experienced considerable growth since 2001, albeit with a drop in 2019. From 2018 to 2019, Modern Foreign Languages fell from 3.8 to 3.6 per cent of total A-Level entries. Though gradual, this is a low overall proportion of pupils.⁴⁹

A-Level Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Uptake, 2001-2019



Source: Joint Council for Qualifications

Post-16 curriculum narrowness in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is undoubtedly a factor; particularly for STEM, pupils' three or four A-Level subjects are likely to be determined by course requirements, fuelling a 'Two Cultures' split. High specialisation at A-Level means pupils who might have considered Languages may not have curriculum space, or numbers are not viable for the school to run them.⁵⁰

Ancient Languages

While much has changed during the 21st century, Latin and Greek remain largely the preserve of independent and grammar schools, and Biblical Hebrew of Jewish faith schools. In 2018, 53 per cent of independent schools offered Latin and 26 per

cent offered Classical Greek, compared to 8 per cent and 1 per cent of state schools respectively.⁵¹ Consequently, discussions about classical languages – which are even more strongly associated with irrelevance, independent school traditions and elitism – became politicised. Michael Gove’s curriculum reforms intended to endorse Classical Languages, recognising them in the EBacc. However, later policy decisions, such as scrapping the short course GCSE and removing EBacc status from the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) Latin GCSE, reduced school provision routes. Independent schools are not subject to EBacc performance measures and can offer IGCSEs and also ‘Pre-U’ qualifications.⁵² Though higher education now offers courses from beginner level, flexible entry requirements and numerous volunteer-led teaching programmes, the considerable state-independent divide in Classical Languages remains a serious issue.

Scotland

There has been a drop in Languages entries at National 5 (equivalent to GCSE) and 4 (a less academic qualification, continuously assessed rather than examined) levels, which are taken by most pupils instead of GCSEs. *Language Trends Scotland 2012-2018* noted: ‘while in 2012, 33 per cent of the senior cohort was studying a language, in 2018 it was only 17 per cent.’⁵³ A 2019 BBC survey found 41 per cent of responding Scottish schools had stopped offering at least one Modern Foreign Languages course to 16-year-olds.⁵⁴ Scotland’s Language teacher recruitment crisis has exacerbated the problems of the new system in which pupils typically take a narrow curriculum of six Nationals. However, post-16 Languages are rising. Language Highers entries have increased

from 9.8 per cent in 2012 to 10.6 per cent in 2018, overtaking Biology. Advanced Highers uptake similarly increased from 3.4 to 4.3 per cent during this period.⁵⁵

Scotland's primary school '1+2' policy pledges that by August 2021, every child will have the opportunity to learn a Modern Language from age 4/5 and a second from age 8/9 onwards. So far, guidance materials on language learning and cultural activities for French, German, Spanish, Italian, Gaelic and Mandarin have been published. Education authorities are responsible for supporting teachers, who need not be fluent, and have funds to provide training.⁵⁶ In addition to promoting linguistic and cultural awareness, secondary school teachers feel pupil attitudes benefit from normalising Languages early.⁵⁷

Wales

Learning Welsh at Key Stage 4 has been compulsory in Wales since 1999. Welsh pupils can be educated at English-medium or Welsh-medium schools, learning the other as a second language (a small number of Scottish schools likewise teach through Gaelic, and Northern Irish schools through Irish). At Welsh-medium comprehensive schools, pupils generally leave with native-level Welsh proficiency. However, there are concerns over low GCSE second language attainment levels and, sometimes, pupil apathy; few are inclined to take on another language GCSE, particularly after short course Welsh was scrapped.

Other languages are struggling in Wales, which is experiencing even steeper declines than the rest of the UK. There has been a 57 per cent drop in Modern Foreign Language GCSE entries since 2002, with French and German declining by 66 and 71 per

cent respectively.⁵⁸ GCSE entries fell by 29 per cent in the past five years, resulting in schools discontinuing language options. A-Level uptake has halved since 2001.⁵⁹ The Modern Foreign Language requirement in addition to Welsh was removed from the Welsh Baccalaureate's priority subjects in 2015, leading to languages provision being squeezed out of the curriculum.⁶⁰ However, curriculum reforms planned for 2022, which will develop a new integrated approach to Language teaching, with a single Welsh Language qualification, hold potential for positive change.

The impact higher education institutions can have in supporting schools by supplying expertise from students and academics is well-demonstrated in Wales. A mentoring initiative led by Professor Claire Gorrara and funded by Wales' *Global Futures* programme trained pupils at four Welsh universities to support pupils with language skills.⁶¹ Since 2017, the 'Digi-Languages' scheme facilitated expansion all over Wales. Results were striking:

*The team has achieved great success, working with nearly half of all secondary schools in Wales. Partner schools have reported on average a doubling in the number of pupils choosing languages at GCSE, as well as improved motivation to continue studying and go to university.*⁶²

With further Department of Education support, the project has partnered with Sheffield universities to mentor South Yorkshire pupils.

Northern Ireland

Almost 90 per cent of schools in Northern Ireland responding to the BBC's survey reported 'a perception that the courses and exams were too difficult'. The language teaching budget at 75 per cent of schools surveyed has been cut in the past five years. While numbers of Spanish and Irish exam entries are stable, French has dropped considerably since 2010. In 2018, only 110 pupils took A-Level German, and 429 A-Level French.⁶³

Currently, Languages are not a compulsory part of Northern Ireland's primary school curriculum. Accordingly, 55 per cent of primary schools provide some form of Language teaching (33 per cent if voluntary and after-school provision is excluded).⁶⁴

Who studies Languages?

Independent and grammar schools are more likely to insist on a foreign language GCSE, and to provide Languages beyond French, Spanish and German. Yet socio-economic divides in Languages are increasing further. The British Council's survey found that schools where under 25 per cent of the cohort took a language at Key Stage 4 were statistically likely to have a higher proportion of pupils on Free School Meals, higher levels of Pupil Premium funding and lower Attainment 8 scores (calculated from average pupil EBacc GCSE grades).⁶⁵ The report concluded:

*Pupils from poorer backgrounds and those who are less academically inclined are much less likely than their peers to acquire any substantial language skills or access foreign cultures in any significant way, challenges that Brexit looks to exacerbate.*⁶⁶

The challenging new Languages assessments have exacerbated existing divides, offering more rigorous preparation for those receiving high-quality teaching while alienating others.⁶⁷

Improving Languages in schools

The UK must start to esteem Languages as educational preparation for analytical and communicative challenges, for pupils of all interests and levels, with widely accessible and appealing qualifications. Efforts to promote Languages and cultural understanding in primary schools will be undermined if pupils continue to reject Languages due to the assessments, or if schools are unable to continue offering the options they used to.

To safeguard Languages and ensure the next generation are better linguistically equipped, study of an additional language at Key Stage 4 (and Scottish equivalent) should become compulsory for all. However, pupils should not all be forced to take the current GCSEs. Rather, the Government should re-evaluate secondary language education in the UK, diversifying GCSE and A-Level Languages assessment, and instating EBacc-accredited provision of alternative qualifications for vocational and community languages.

Modern Foreign Language GCSEs and A-Levels, with pressured speaking components and fast-paced listening examinations, can be an unduly stressful experience that fails to reflect pupils' true capabilities. Ofqual's decision in November 2019 to lower grade boundaries in French and German GCSEs marks a positive step in addressing schools' concerns of disproportionately harsh marking compared to other subjects.⁶⁸ However, further measures such as introducing continuous assessment methods,

like dialogue recordings and creative coursework options, could also reduce aversion. The International Baccalaureate (IB) in Latin or Classical Greek, for instance, features a research dossier aspect whereby students choose any aspect of the ancient world that interests them and develop a portfolio around source material.

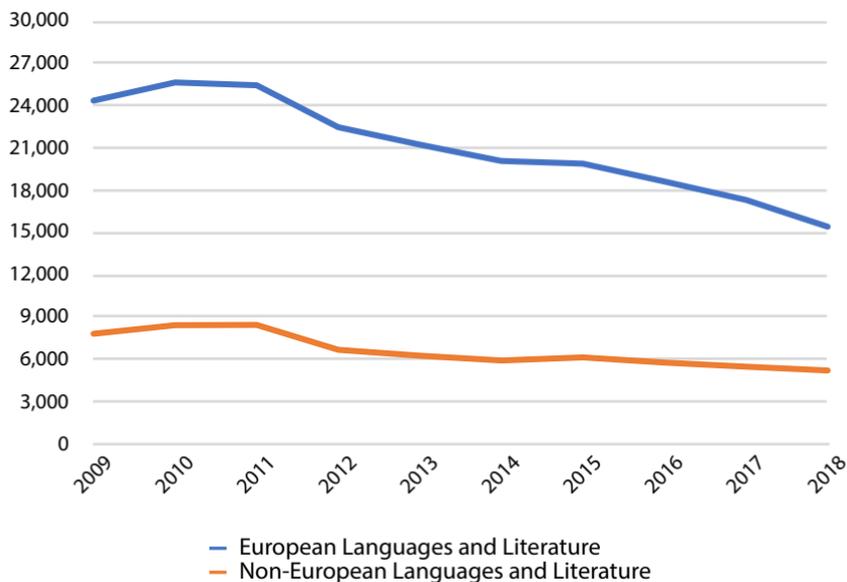
Staffing shortages

These 'pipeline' issues are impacting numbers of Languages graduates and trained teachers, which, combined with reductions in EU staff, will threaten school provision.

For Modern and Classical Languages, training bursaries of £26,000 for graduates attaining a 2:2 or higher provide an incentive to go into teaching.⁶⁹ There is also a pilot scheme for Languages and STEM teachers working at eligible schools to receive student loan reimbursements. However, despite such measures to increase availability of high-quality language teachers, poor retention remains a serious problem.⁷⁰ Jack Worth, school workforce lead at the National Foundation for Educational Research, says that 'to be effective and offer good value for money, bursaries need to be coupled with a robust retention strategy'.⁷¹ Furthermore, other Language teachers and assistants should be added to the Home Office's Shortage Occupations List (which currently only includes secondary school Mandarin teachers).⁷² Recruiting Languages teaching staff from overseas would help facilitate increases in school and tertiary education provision, in addition to offering pupils the opportunity to gain experience and expertise from those who have taught in other countries and / or are native speakers.

4. University Languages courses

Total Applications for Language Courses



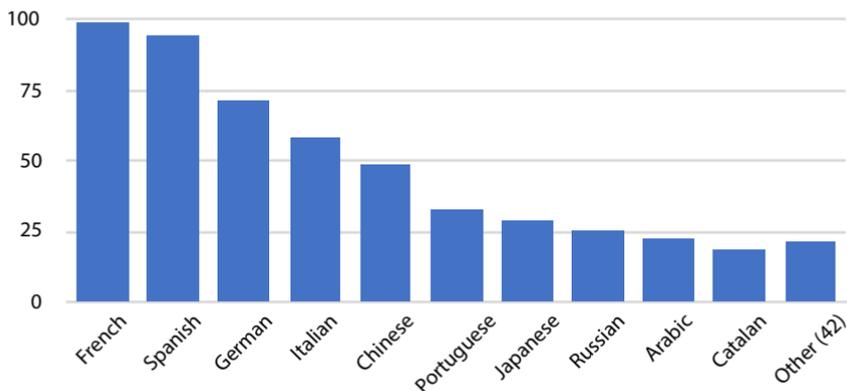
Source: UCAS ('European' and 'Non-European' defined by historical language origin rather than geographical speaker distribution)

Secondary school qualification trends have led to declining applications for Modern Foreign Languages. Since Languages account for relatively small proportions of students, shifts in student choices are strongly felt. Between 2010/11 and 2016/17, the number of university students taking French studies declined by 45 per cent, German studies by 43 per cent, and Italian studies by 63 per cent.⁷³ There have been concerns that lower numbers have resulted in higher acceptance rates for Languages at Russell Group universities, making Modern

Foreign Languages statistically one of the 'easiest' programmes to get into at Oxbridge and leaving non-Russell Group universities with fewer students.⁷⁴

Which languages?

Distribution of MFL degree programmes in UK higher education in 2018 (% of institutions offering)



Source: UCML Language Provision in UK MFL Departments Survey, 2018

The University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) 2018 survey found that ten widely-taught languages (21 per cent) occupy 80 per cent of the current Modern Foreign Language presence at the 44 UK universities surveyed, while 42 other languages (79 per cent) represent only 20 per cent of those offered, a 'Pareto distribution that raises questions about equal opportunities'.⁷⁵

French, Spanish and German dominate, despite A-Level trends indicating that the 'Other Languages' group is now more popular. Several languages, including Hindi, Urdu and Indonesian, were offered in only one institution surveyed

by the University Council of Modern Languages. From a foreign policy as well as cultural perspective, it is particularly concerning if provision of a language is threatened at its sole higher education provider. The limited range of Languages widely recognised in traditional academic contexts can also restrict such opportunities to only higher-achieving students.

Case study: The School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS)

The School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), part of the University of London, was founded in 1916 to train colonial administrators in local languages and cultures. Today, it offers ancient and modern languages from Africa and Asia, few of which are provided elsewhere in UK schools or higher education. In addition to Japanese, Korean and six European languages, SOAS offers six African languages, four Chinese languages, twelve 'Near and Middle Eastern' languages, twelve 'South Asian' languages and seven 'South East Asian' languages.

A small specialist institution, SOAS has struggled in recent years, with undergraduate admissions falling by 37 per cent since 2016. The Director, Baroness Amos, warned that without action, cash reserves would be exhausted during 2020/21. Professor Stephen Hopgood, SOAS' International Pro-Director, noted Philip Augar's recommended student fee cuts would be disastrous without additional government funding.

SOAS has taken measures to attract more students and cut costs to reduce its operating deficit, offering foundation courses and new online programmes, while merging public

affairs services. However, its unstable position reflects uncertainty for wide-ranging and inclusive language provision in UK higher education, a tragedy for British multilingualism and dangerous for UK foreign policy capability.

Sources: Andrew Jack, 'Spiralling costs, high debt and Brexit: can UK universities survive?', *Financial Times*, 5 February 2019; 'SOAS, one of Britain's most unusual universities, is in trouble', *The Economist*, 13 June 2019

Course sustainability

Declining enrolments have affected viability for Languages in higher education. The British Academy reported that between 2007 and 2017, at least ten Modern Foreign Language departments were closed in UK higher education institutions, and nine more 'significantly downsized' undergraduate provision.⁷⁶

While all 24 Russell Group universities offer some form of Modern Foreign Languages teaching, the University Council of Modern Languages report that courses and extracurricular programmes have 'fared less well in new universities (if programmes were opened they are all but closed), and only one MFL [Modern Foreign Languages] department has opened in the last ten years.'⁷⁷

The nature of Languages courses means high-quality teaching is expensive compared to most classroom-based subjects. Though technological tools are helpful, gaining confidence in a language ultimately necessitates small class sizes, numerous contact hours, detailed individual feedback and often time abroad.

It can be challenging for institutions to find teaching staff for less widely-taught languages, especially since pupil numbers and viability are unstable. The British Academy's *Lost for Words* report warned: 'student demand is unlikely ever to reach levels that make such provision economically self-sustaining.'⁷⁸

Leaving the EU can be expected to impact the availability of expertise. An exodus of academics from other European countries, and potential increased difficulty for UK researchers to collaborate with EU colleagues will further affect Languages, which rely on intercultural interactions, and native speakers serving as teachers and language assistants.

Given these difficulties, and especially if the Government were to lower tuition fees from £9,250 to £7,500 a year without compensatory increases in other income, the UK must safeguard Languages provision in higher education. The Office for Students' (OfS) funding guidelines outline:

*Support is given to subjects which are strategically important and vulnerable, as well as high-cost specialist providers such as arts providers.'*⁷⁹

As demonstrated, Languages courses are 'strategically important' and 'vulnerable', with relatively high costs. Yet Modern Foreign Languages and Classics do not receive government grant funding. There is a case to be made for additional government funding to support, at least, vulnerable and less widely-taught languages, and to facilitate the option of high-quality additional language-learning provision (Chapter 5) for students on any course.

Interdisciplinarity

Given their shared aims and methods, disciplinary divides between different types of languages (including verbal and signed) can prevent a more collaborative approach which could be mutually beneficial. The University Council of Modern Languages argue this divided concept of Languages is outdated and not conducive to valuable mutual support:

There is clearly an argument in favour of grouping all languages, ancient and modern, foreign and local, for those with and without disabilities, under a unitary 'languages' label that drops the 'modern' and the 'foreign' from its conceptualisation.⁸⁰

In addition to divisions and departmental separations within Languages, language courses also risk operating in isolation from other academic disciplines, despite pertinent expertise in literature, history and international relations faculties and also among scientific researchers.

The University of Cambridge has demonstrated commitment to interdisciplinary enterprise in language through Cambridge Language Sciences. This interdisciplinary research centre connects academics in humanities, social sciences and STEM, with the provision of specialist technology, to collaborate in varied topical research. These areas include dementia, forensics, 'fake news' and artificial intelligence. This is an inspiring instance of Languages and Linguistics working with other disciplines and a positive example of an institution challenging the 'Two Cultures' divide.⁸¹

Widening participation

Beginner Languages courses, which allow students to learn new languages from scratch, are increasingly available, counteracting low levels and limited variety of school provision. Joint honours courses, and options to include a language as a 'minor' degree subject, have also increased study routes.⁸² However, the state-independent gap is particularly striking for Languages at top Russell Group universities. For example, at the University of Oxford, the overall proportion of state school pupils admitted for the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 was 55.0 per cent for MFL and just 29.2 per cent for Classics.⁸³ Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data show that out of UK-domiciled, full-time first degree entrants in 2017/18, only 9.5 per cent of Languages students came from 'low participation neighbourhoods'.⁸⁴

Despite the current zeal for widening access to prestigious universities, statistics remain disappointing for Languages, with serious inequalities developing at school level. Falling provision and exam entries in non-selective state schools need to be addressed before significant progress can be made in reducing higher education imbalances. Contextual admissions are therefore highly justifiable for Languages especially, given strong evidence that school and social disadvantages are preventing uptake and attainment in languages. Institutions can also continue to develop and increase their role in providing academic opportunities and encouraging applications from less advantaged pupils, such as school visits, study days, summer schools and essay or translation competitions specifically for non-selective state schools.

5. Languages as a core competence

Language ability is not just useful for Languages students but is an asset for all disciplines and career paths. Language learning, because of its intellectual challenge and encouragement of interpersonal skills, is a valuable aspect of a well-rounded education.

While A-Levels and Languages degrees will always suit a small specialist-interest cohort, schools and higher education should emphasise these are by no means the only routes to language aptitude.

Current offerings

Additional language provision allows institutions to provide a wider range of languages than those featured in undergraduate courses. A 2019 survey by the Association of University Language Communities (AULC) and the University Council of Modern Languages noted:

Mandarin Chinese, Italian, Japanese and Arabic, are offered by the majority of HEIs [Higher Education Institutions], with more than half or around half of those surveyed also offering Russian and Portuguese respectively. The data also tell us that around just over 25% of the responding institutions offer classes in Korean, British Sign Language and Greek.⁸⁵

Some universities allow students to take language modules as part of their total course credits, responding to demand for more flexible interdisciplinary courses. Such opportunities for language learning as a core competence should be available to all as a recognised part of the educational experience covered by their fees, rather than a separate and expensive service.

Around two-thirds of institutions also offer language-learning services to the general public as well as to current students.⁸⁶ This can engage the local community and generate further income.

The University of Exeter provides the opportunity for any undergraduate to take a 15 or 30 credit module in one of seven languages as part of their degree programme credits, with no additional fees. The module is subject to the same academic standards of commitment and assessment as the rest of a student's degree programme. Accordingly, study is incentivised by official recognition. Students can add 'with proficiency in [language]' to their degree title on graduating.

Alternatively, students can enrol in an unassessed Evening Language Programme for an additional fee, which does not take up degree credits. There are a greater number of languages to choose from, and provision is open to all students, staff and members of the public.

Cardiff University offers free and flexible non-assessed language-learning to all students through the 'Languages for All' programme. Students can take weekly or crash courses from all levels in Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Students can participate in partnered practice with a Language Exchange Scheme and converse with native speakers at a Language Café. They can also learn independently or gain further practice with physical and online resources, including a purpose-built 'Languages Hub'. There is also a 'Welsh for All' programme, which allows any student to learn or improve their proficiency in Welsh for free.

Sources: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/flc/>, accessed 29 August 2019, and <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/study/student-life/languages-for-all>, accessed 29 August 2019

Collaboration

While Modern Foreign Languages has a research-led focus on applying language knowledge to literary, artistic, historical and linguistic contexts, institution-wide language provision (IWLP) is geared towards more practical usage. Universities vary in whether Modern Foreign Language faculties and institution-wide language provision collaborate, given their differing approaches and staff qualification criteria. Obstacles such as hierarchical prejudices and traditional divisions can hinder a productive partnership.

Some institutions have unified Languages provision, while others have a separate 'Languages Centre'. Formal integration can be strategically advantageous but requires effective leadership which represents the interests of both groups, rather than an externally managed merger which amounts to staff and budget cuts. If the bodies are separate, informal collaboration makes sense in ensuring awareness of the other's staff and resources (especially for minority languages) and improving visibility of language opportunities.⁸⁷

Student-run initiatives

Higher education should also acknowledge and encourage informal cost-free opportunities for plurilingualism among the student body, even at institutions which do not offer Languages courses. Students have succeeded in setting up 'languages cafés', student pairing schemes, social network groups, international pen-pal initiatives and promoting online tools. Societies for Modern Foreign Language subjects or national communities also organise language practice schemes and cultural events.

6. Conclusion

The idea of a 'crisis', as discussed in the Introduction, fails to illuminate the long-standing and complex issues facing Languages today. The assumption that 'the rest of the world speaks English' hinders new international collaborations and overlooks cultural and cognitive enhancement developed by learning. Political developments mean change is more pressing. If the UK is to thrive outside the EU, language skills cannot be ignored – the UK must address educational declines and capitalise on 'untapped reservoirs of linguistic capacity'. It is crucial that ancient and modern languages receive support in schools and higher education.⁸⁸

Though policy can combat languages shortages, entrenched attitudes towards languages as a 'skill' measured in binary terms present difficulties – individuals are put off further attempts after disliking Languages at school.⁸⁹ Fostering the 'plurilingual' mindset held in much of Europe and Asia would better acknowledge a spectrum of language proficiency and redefine language ability as a transferable problem-solving mindset of finding linguistic patterns, comparisons and connections.

7. Policy Recommendations

1. *Policymakers should implement a strategy for languages in schools*
- 1.1 At Primary level, the rest of the UK should take note of Scottish and Welsh precedents. Northern Irish schools should also introduce language-learning as a compulsory activity, and a **commitment and guidance scheme like Scotland's '1 + 2' should be applied in each part of the UK**. UK primary schools should also apply the 'plurilingual' method Wales is preparing to introduce, integrating languages and cultures into usual classroom activities.
- 1.2 **In England, National Curriculum guidance should be improved, including more detailed objectives for Key Stage 3 languages**, with frequently updated online example resources of literary texts at a suitable level. These should be modern and varied, using media suitable for different vocabulary topics, such as magazines, recipes, webpages and music.
- 1.3 **Languages GCSE courses should remain academically rigorous, but offer more flexible components of assessment**, for around 10 to 20 per cent of the total mark.
- 1.4 Policymakers should also institute or reinstate **two forms of language-learning qualifications**. First, accreditation geared to **vocational language use**, giving students a less academically demanding option developing practical usage for business. Secondly, a scheme, similar to the former 'Asset Languages', to facilitate **accreditation**

at different levels for a wider range of community languages, available for all ages and with detailed syllabuses. This would enable recognition of languages for which GCSEs are unavailable and / or unsuited (since they are geared towards academic pupils rather than heritage learners). Both should be **included in the EBacc** in addition to GCSE, and also be an option at 16-to-18 in addition to A-Levels.

- 1.5 **Some form of language learning should be compulsory for all students at Key Stage 4.** Accreditation would be encouraged by EBacc recognition but would not be compulsory. In Wales, Welsh learning should continue to be compulsory in primary and Key Stage 3 education, though perhaps with an option of replacing Welsh GCSE with a different foreign language at Key Stage 4.
- 1.6 **A-Level Language courses should become more varied, for example, allowing students a greater choice of components exploring culture, media and linguistics.** Courses should offer creative coursework and speech recording options to comprise around 10 to 20 per cent of the total mark, to widen the subject's appeal and reduce exam pressure.
- 1.7 **Ancient language qualifications should continue to emphasise language competence and reading original texts.** However, a **coursework element** could encourage pupils engaging creatively with source material and cultural contexts.

1.8 Administrations across the UK should also consider the longer-term possibility of a **broader 16-to-18 curriculum** in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This would facilitate a well-rounded education and increase Languages uptake, particularly among pupils otherwise taking only STEM A-Levels.

2. *Staffing and funding*

2.1 Primary school Languages teaching should also be accompanied by infrastructure – primarily virtual – **with guidance, online resources and training provision for teachers.**

2.2 Graduate teacher-training bursaries should promote **teacher retention.** Bursaries could be subject to teaching for a five-year period, with financial incentives for staying in the profession and / or teaching in high-shortage regions.

2.3 In addition to secondary school Mandarin teachers, **other Languages teachers and assistants should be added to the Home Office’s Shortage Occupations List.**

2.4 To supplement tuition fees in light of declining enrolments and growing vulnerability for lesser-taught languages, **the Government should provide additional grant funding.** This would protect minority languages provision for strategic and cultural reasons, and allow institutions to offer additional language learning to all without additional fees.

3. *Institutions*

- 3.1 Since applicant numbers and diversity remain low, **Languages departments should be proactive in widening participation, particularly in promoting beginner language opportunities** to pupils of all backgrounds. Taster experiences can demystify Languages courses, especially those featuring ancient languages and / or new alphabets. Clear online information is also crucial.
- 3.2 Languages departments should consider **further collaborations** between: different Languages subjects and with other language teaching services at the institution; different disciplines, facilitating varied courses and the sharing of relevant expertise; and staff from different institutions, to support minority languages by collating teaching expertise and resources.
- 3.3 **Institutions, with official support, should emphasise languages as a core competence and ensure they are available without extra charges** to students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and staff, ideally offering accredited provision to count towards credits for any course and unassessed extra-curricular learning. This would help to mitigate language skills shortages in the workforce and academic research.

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This paper takes stock of the state of language learning in the UK, as the country teeters on the edge of Brexit and becomes used to being led by the first Prime Minister in over 50 years to have studied Languages at university.

The author, Megan Bowler, a Classics student at the University of Oxford, looks at the broad benefits to individuals, society and the economy of learning languages. She also shows the UK has sunk far below other European countries in the proportion of young people who are familiar with another language, and she explains how this is now hitting university Languages Departments.

Packed with case studies and based on a wide range of source materials, the report ends with a list of recommendations for policymakers and educational institutions throughout the UK, including: making Language courses more interesting to study; reintroducing compulsory Languages at GCSE (where this does not already exist); and ensuring migration rules encourage the supply of those who can teach Languages.

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