

Item 9.a: Northern Ireland Report

The political situation in Northern Ireland has experienced significant instability with a new Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen, appointed on 14th June 2021 and a new Economy Minister, Gordon Lyons, appointed on 6th July 2021.

Several informal meetings were held by a group of concerned linguists from HEIs and schools in Northern Ireland in June to discuss proposed changes to the assessment of languages at GCSE and A level that would render speaking examinations optional. The NI representative for UCML attended one of the meetings and was copied into related correspondence. Following these discussions, a letter was sent to CCEA on behalf of UCML (15th June 2021) and a reply was received (17th June 2021). As outlined in the response to UCML and again by CCEA representatives at the NI Assembly Education Committee held on 7th July, the proposals remain, and are attributed to public health concerns and representation received from a number of schools and parents.

An interdisciplinary study (psychology; geography; education; languages) commissioned by the Education Authority Intercultural Education Service was launched at the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University College in June. The report highlighted the need for funded evidence-based support for language development work in Northern Ireland's increasingly multilingual schools. <https://www.stran.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/School-Based-Support-for-Syrian-Refugee-Pupils-in-NI-McMullen-et-al-2021.pdf>

The Languages Trends NI 2021 report, authored by Dr Ian Collen, was published by British Council NI in June. Spanish and Irish are proving more popular than French at GCSE and Irish is likely to replace French as the most popular language at A level. The report highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on language learning in primary schools, and noted that academically selective grammar schools continue to devote much more time to compulsory language learning than secondary schools. https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/m003_01_language_trends_ni_report_final_web_v2.pdf

A very positive meeting was held with the Education Minister, Michelle McIlveen, on 7th July 2021 via Zoom, to discuss language education policy in Northern Ireland, with a focus on the primary curriculum and the absence of statutory provision for language learning in primary schools. The meeting was facilitated by Dr Sharon Jones and attended by Prof Janice Carruthers and Dr Ian Collen (QUB), Dr Sean Mac Corraidh (St Mary's University College) and Mrs Sharon Lamont MBE, Principal of Milburn Primary School. The Minister expressed her intention to hold follow up discussions with her team at the Department of Education (DENI).

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07/07/21