

Towards a national languages strategy: education and skills

Introduction and background

Languages are vital for the future of the UK. They are important for trade and business; literacy and skills; community and social cohesion; soft power; culture; diplomacy; defence and national security; public services; health and wellbeing; cognitive capacity; social mobility; and equality of opportunity. Employers value not only competence in specific languages, but also the wide range of skills acquired through language learning. These include an ability to work across different cultures; the Salzburg statement in 2017 stated that ‘proficiency in additional languages is a new kind of global literacy’. There is, however, strong evidence that the UK situation regarding language skills is worsening and that this is having an economic impact. A 2014 report commissioned by UK Trade and Investment estimated that the language skills deficit costs the UK 3.5 per cent of GDP – it identified a strong language barrier effect on trade patterns. The numbers of students studying a language (other than compulsory English or Welsh) to qualification level at school and to degree level at university remains very low. Low numbers have led to a reduction of provision in secondary schools. Furthermore, young people from less affluent backgrounds are most likely to have limited access to languages.

This strategy report, jointly written by the organisations named above (who will, for the purposes of this summary, be referred to as ‘the group’), calls for a number of interventions to address the worsening languages situation. They point out that this strategy differs from previous ones in a number of ways; it is UK wide, it adopts a holistic approach across all jurisdictions and phases of education, and it seeks to quantify the cost of implementation (although the detailed costings are not provided in this summary).

Key points

Short-term actions – in the next 12 months

- The group calls for a UK-wide campaign of awareness raising and information sharing. The languages education and skills community should work together to establish and promote Languages UK as the recognised brand for a collaborative web-based resource which provides a single portal for languages provision.
- In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the grading and setting of GCSE and A level examinations should be adjusted to ensure a level playing field for students taking these subjects. The group acknowledges that Ofqual did recently adjust grading standards for French and German GCSE. It recommends Ofqual now reconsider its decision not to adjust grading standards at A Level.
- The group recommends the introduction of an Advanced Languages Premium for the study of languages at RQF level 3 (A level and equivalent) as an incentive to schools that have low levels of provision and take-up. At a time when languages are rapidly disappearing fast from post-16 provision, especially in disadvantaged areas, this measure is needed to prevent post-16 language teaching from closing altogether. The group suggests that the Premium could be modelled on the maths premium which was introduced in 2017.
- The group recommends that funding models for undergraduate education cover the full costs of provision for language degrees and other learning opportunities for languages, including the costs associated with intensive language teaching and native-speaker input. The funding model also needs to consider the costs of Institution Wide Language Programmes, which enable students to study a language alongside completing a degree in another subject. The group recommends that the UK Governments and funding bodies create ‘Languages Challenge Funds’, central funding pots in each jurisdiction into which higher education institutions can bid where they wish to expand or create new provision.
- The group recommends that schemes for outward mobility such as Erasmus+, and those that enable language



specialists to come to the UK to teach, are enabled to continue into the future. The Government should ensure association for the UK to the next programme which begins in 2021, or the creation of a fully funded domestic replacement. Salary thresholds set for Tier 2 visas for skilled jobs not requiring a PhD should not become an obstacle for language assistants, interpreters, and translators. The Shortage Occupations List should reflect the fact that teachers and language specialists will be needed in a broad range of languages to fulfil the ambitions of a global Britain.

Medium and long-term actions: 1-5 years

- The group recommends the strengthening of existing funded partnerships or centres which support the primary and secondary sectors to spread best practice and help all children have access to high quality provision. The Government should create strategic committees for higher education and further education to facilitate coordination and planning.
- Existing ambassador and mentor schemes which have demonstrated impact through evaluation should be expanded in a similar way to the STEM ambassadors and placement scheme. While focused mainly on secondary schools, they could be coordinated with the new careers education initiative led by DfE and businesses which is focused on primary schools in England.
- The group recommends further work to establish and then implement the best approach for the primary curriculum, and for the transition to secondary. In England, the DfE, together with professional bodies and researchers, should develop clear non-statutory national guidance on the amount of time that should be allocated to language learning at key stage 2. It should provide examples of effective curriculum models.
- Providers of post-16 education should incorporate language elements into existing extension qualifications and explore new types of post-16 qualifications in languages. One possibility would be a new qualification called Core Languages or Language Plus (e.g. Core German/German Plus), which focuses on practical uses of languages. This would be aimed at students with Grade 4 or above at GCSE in a language that they are not continuing to A Level. The qualification could be taken alongside A levels or other post-16 further education pathways. Core Languages would be modelled on the introduction of Core Maths in England. Provision and uptake could be stimulated by the Advanced Languages Premium.
- The group recommends extension of the amount of time allocated to the primary languages subject specialism on teacher training courses and stipulation of a statutory minimum amount of time for subject specific pathways. Universities and colleges should facilitate language learning for primary education trainees via Institution-Wide Language Programmes so that all primary teachers can attain at least the equivalent of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1/A2 level in a language.
- The DfE (England), Education Workforce Council and the General Teaching Council for Scotland should work together to produce a joined-up strategy for the retention and recruitment of language teachers. There is a need to

consider whether bursary payments should be staggered to encourage retention.

- In England, the DfE should build on the success of the Mandarin Excellence Programme by introducing intensive schemes for other languages which are accessible to all learners, with a focus on areas of multiple deprivation in the UK. Funding for such programmes could be sought from overseas governments and partners. Given the fact that the number of learners of German in schools is reaching critical levels, while the language remains strategically important, there is a strong case for this to be the first language to receive this attention.
- The qualifications regulators should ensure that awarding bodies incorporate language-learning into vocational and technical qualifications where appropriate.
- The UK Government's Industrial Strategy aims to boost productivity and increase earning power through investment in skills as well as business, industry and infrastructure. Although it focuses on the shortage of STEM skills, the strategy does not acknowledge that individuals will also need language skills. In England, employer bodies such as the CBI and British Chambers of Commerce should work with the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education to ensure that language learning is incorporated into new T level qualifications where appropriate. Furthermore, Ofqual, Qualifications Wales, CCEA, and the Scottish Qualifications Authority should ensure that awarding bodies incorporate language-learning into appropriate vocational and technical qualifications such as Pearson BTEC in Travel and Tourism, CCEA A Level in Professional Business Services, and WJEC National/Foundation Welsh Baccalaureate and Skills Challenge Certificate. The above-mentioned Core Languages qualification could play a role in meeting this need.

What will success look like?

- The outcomes below are proposed as indicators of success.
- All children learning one or more languages (other than compulsory languages English and Welsh) from at least age 7 to 14, with the overwhelming majority continuing to at least age 15/16.
- A more even quality of experience for pupils (and teachers) at primary level, with clarity around time and accountability, and with support for teachers obtaining appropriate language qualifications and training or professional development.
- An annual increase from 2025 onwards in the numbers of pupils studying languages up to age 18. This will require sustaining and increasing the number of schools and colleges offering languages post-16, including the number offering more than one language at A level or equivalent.
- A stop to the decline across the UK in the numbers of undergraduates studying languages to degree level by 2025 and sustaining a subsequent increase in numbers from 2030.
- Maintenance of the current number of high-quality languages applications across the portfolio of funded schemes and doctoral programmes.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>