

Lost in translation: 'Language matters more and more'



WITH OVER two-thirds of employers not satisfied with the foreign language skills of young people and over half perceiving shortfalls in their international cultural awareness, the onus on universities to ensure graduates are equipped for the current competitive job market has never been greater. *Language matters more and more*, the latest Position Statement by the British Academy's Policy Centre, advocates that universities should respond to the growing internationalisation of the graduate jobs market; provide language training to meet the needs of their researchers; encourage and enable their students to take time out of their studies to work or study abroad; make provision for their students to study a language while studying for a non-language degree; and work collaboratively to sustain languages at a time of considerable fiscal restraints.

The Academy's 2009 *Language Matters* statement warned of the damaging impact on universities, the skills base of UK citizens, and the UK's future international competitiveness. *Language matters more and more* moves on from this and makes recommendations on how the higher education sector itself can incentivise and increase language take-up at both school and university levels, whilst building the capacity of the UK's knowledge economy to meet national and international challenges. Professor Nigel Vincent FBA, Vice-President for Research and Higher Education Policy at the British Academy, said: 'This is a challenging time for UK students, and we should be making their transition from university to the globalised world easier, not harder. The British Academy has voiced its concern over the growing language deficit for some years, and the gloomy statistics speak for themselves. We need decisive action if we are to remedy this worsening situation.'

The Position Statement recommends that UK Vice-Chancellors adopt a wider definition of 'internationalisation', in line with the Bone report, *Internationalisation of HE: a ten-year*

view, rather than focus simply on recruitment of overseas students. The report argues that UK universities should develop long-term collaborative partnerships, stating that language provision must be available and part of a normal core curriculum.

It goes on to argue that this broader understanding of internationalisation and language learning needs to be placed at the heart of university missions and strategies. In view of the importance of languages to intercultural understanding, social inclusion, and the employability of graduates, the management and governing bodies of universities should ensure language learning is a key element of their strategies. Professor Vincent said: 'The roots of the problem lie within schools, but Vice-Chancellors have the power to drive change and help their students recognise the importance of learning languages, and about the countries where they are spoken and the cultures they sustain. We urge them to act and protect this country's long term economic, social and cultural standing.'

New programme

Language matters more and more is merely one example of the Academy's work and advocacy in support of the health and sustainability of the humanities and social science research base. The British Academy is pleased that its efforts have been recognised by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and that it has received almost £5 million of new funding for the period from 2011 to 2015 to develop a new programme supporting languages and the use of quantitative methods, including (but not restricted to) statistics. The objective is to build capacity to address certain longstanding skills deficits, recognising that it is a deep-seated challenge. Over the next four years, the British Academy will undertake, facilitate and support a range of projects, fellowships and activities – including workshops, conferences and policy studies – that will foster not only research in these areas

respectively, but also allow the Academy to explore in greater depth the issues dealt with and brought into focus in our Position Statement and other British Academy work.

As Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, said: 'It is a very wide-ranging discussion and we [the Academy] have a special obligation to take this issue forward, not just from the phase of identifying the problem, which was the phase we were in two years ago, but in the phase of recommending action. We will be looking not only for people with expertise in these matters, but champions who will be able to advance the cause of, among other things, language studies. There are many other elements that we recognise need to be part of a co-ordinated programme, including publications on key aspects of these two issues, language and quantitative studies.'

Launch

Language matters more and more was launched at a special event on 9 February 2011 organised by the British Academy Policy Centre. It brought together experts to discuss their different perspectives, and the action that needs to be taken to promote and incentivise the learning of foreign languages both at school and at university.

The event was attended by over a hundred researchers, teachers, diplomats and business people.

Language matters more and more was praised by speakers and participants alike as a significant and timely contribution, and was supported by Rt Hon. David Willetts MP as 'an excellent and very useful document with valuable recommendations'.

The British Academy's Position Statement *Language matters more and more*, together with a record of the launch event, may be found via www.britac.ac.uk/policy
