
THE NATIONAL LANGUAGES STRATEGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Hilary Footitt

(University Council of Modern Languages)

*Project managed by the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies.
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Introduction

This report is about the role of Higher Education in the National Languages Strategy in England, *Languages for All: Languages for Life* (DfES, December 2002). The HE part of the Strategy aims to increase the numbers of university students who are taking an active part in language learning, and encourage Higher Education to work with schools to support the Strategy overall.

The report addresses the following questions:

- What is the baseline of HE provision from which the National Languages Strategy is starting?
- What current trends in provision may be of particular relevance in developing a National Languages Strategy?
- What are the factors at institutional level which are likely to support and sustain languages in HE?
- How can the National Languages Strategy relate to the central concerns of HE leaders?
- Is increasing internationalisation reflected in HE curricula in ways which are supportive of foreign languages?
- Are there undergraduate degree/postgraduate degree/supplementary modules which provide routes into professional practice?

Four main sources of information are used:

- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to examine national/regional trends in HE languages provision
- Qualitative research - interviews in 6 case-study universities with senior managers in the institutions - to establish factors which promote language learning in HE
- Undergraduate and postgraduate course descriptions in English HE institutions to map trends in the development of professional and vocational routes in HE degrees
- A pilot project to explore the motivations of non-specialist language-learners.

Key Findings

The National Languages Strategy

- The credibility of the National Languages Strategy is low among senior managers in HE.

Diminishing national/regional capacity

- There has been a marked national decline in the numbers of undergraduates taking languages, either in single honours, joint honours, or in combined degrees, with particular regions experiencing more severe reductions.
- Undergraduate numbers in strategically important languages like Arabic, Chinese and Japanese have also fallen.
- With these unplanned changes, the institutional map of language provision shows an increasing concentration of languages undergraduates in certain types of institution.
- Language degrees attract a smaller percentage of students from the lower social classes than the average for all subjects.

International Strategy

- An institutional policy which is particularly important in supporting languages is the university's International Strategy. There is however a wide range of levels of explicit policy development, and the extent to which International Strategies impact on curriculum within HE is unclear.

Widening participation in language study

- Languages Departments in the case-study institutions are strongly committed to outreach programmes to schools and colleges. These cross-sectoral initiatives however are institution-based, and financially vulnerable.

Factors influencing demand

- There is concern within universities about the likely impact of variable tuition fees on future recruitment.
- Whilst the range of courses preparing students to operate internationally is large, many of the possible subject combinations with languages are seldom chosen by students.
- A large number of students are taking a language module within non-languages degrees. Evidence suggests such students believe languages to be part of a broad demonstration of 'graduateness' in an international context.

The National Languages Strategy

The credibility of the National Languages Strategy was low among senior managers in Higher Education: 'The National Languages Strategy, as far as HE is concerned, is at best described as warm words. There are neither carrots nor sticks in it for HE as it stands at present, and every university responds to one or the other'.

There was a widespread perception that the National Languages Strategy would have no effect on universities unless it was made specifically relevant to HE. Suggestions for this included: additional earmarked funding; initiatives to ensure a regional spread of languages; continued support for minority languages, with a possible widening of the definition; and systematic and durable support for cross-sectoral activities to increase the take-up of languages in schools and colleges.

The evidence of the qualitative research was that institutional perceptions of languages played a considerable role in their survival within a university, so that the low credibility of the National Languages Strategy among senior university personnel is a matter of concern.

Diminishing national/regional capacity

Over the four years of data surveyed (1998/9-2001/2), UK domiciled students taking languages at English universities (either in single honours, joint honours, or in combined degrees) fell by 15%, at a time when overall HE numbers were expanding. The shrinkage in numbers was unplanned, with the result that, whilst all English regions had been affected, some (the North West, the East and the West Midlands) experienced reductions above the national average. Undergraduates in strategically important languages like Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, had also fallen by 12%, 16% and 27% respectively, and the numbers of UK domiciled postgraduate students in these languages, including PGCE, were low. The perception of languages as a subject in difficulty was now widely shared across the sector. Senior managers saw no real alternative income streams for their languages departments which could substitute for the loss of volume undergraduate recruitment. Internally, the often imaginative survival strategies which had been adopted - changing and adapting offerings - had not been able to affect perceptions of the overall institutional position of language departments. New external policies, most notably those in the HE Act (2004) and the National Languages Strategy itself, were expected to worsen the situation. The consensus view which emerged from the qualitative research was that time was running out: 'We've reached the point where survival strategies can't be maintained'.

With these changes, there was an increasing concentration of undergraduate numbers in particular types of institution. 46% of the national complement of undergraduate language students in 2001/2 were located in 14 Russell Group institutions. Nearly half of the post '92 universities had at least 30% fewer language undergraduates in 2001/2 than in 1998/9.

UK-wide data indicated that the percentage of accepted applicants to language degrees from the lower social classes (semi-routine, routine occupations) was some 3% lower than the average for all subjects.

The shrinkage in languages capacity at national and regional level in Higher Education, with institutional concentration of provision, and the evidence of a narrow student class profile, represents a major challenge for the successful implementation of the Languages Strategy nationally and regionally. Unless the unplanned diminution in provision is publicly perceived as a matter of national strategic concern, university managers are likely to continue to deal with the consequences of subject decline in purely institutional terms. Formal mechanisms are needed to address the consequences of changes in provision for national capacity and for regional access to languages, and to provide annual information on developments in this area.

International Strategy

University International Strategies were of major importance in supporting languages within universities. However, whereas the institutions in this study had detailed teaching and learning strategies, the existence of fully documented international policies was much more uneven.

As well as a sometimes limited institutional understanding of International Policy, there was a tendency for many undergraduate and postgraduate courses to use 'international' in their titles without any obvious consensus as to what the word might imply for course content, pedagogy, or professional practice. A number of professional bodies accredited courses which were 'international', but languages did not always seem to form part of these accreditation packages.

Widening participation in language study

In all the institutions studied, subject staff were highly committed to a range of languages outreach programmes to schools and colleges. These cross-sectoral initiatives however were institution-based, and financially vulnerable, dependent on staff good will, and financed by creative virement locally, or by

fixed-term institutional pump-priming: *'The thing that shocks me most is that there's a tremendous resource in universities...a resource for schools actually. But we can't do it on good will'*. Given what the available data has suggested about the social class of language applicants, the growing institutional concentration of undergraduate language courses, and the general decline in numbers, it seems to be crucial to develop and support these activities.

Factors influencing demand

The universities in this study expressed concern about the likely impact of variable tuition fees in a subject area like languages which was already suffering recruitment difficulties, and where undergraduate degrees were often four years in duration.

Although the range of 'international' courses available to students was large, and language routes in them were offered at a variety of starting levels, many of the possible subject combinations with languages (Creative Arts, Communication, Engineering, Architecture, Technologies) were seldom taken by students. The messages about 'How to study languages in HE' and about 'Careers with languages' might be helpfully reframed as 'HE courses which prepare students to operate globally', with a clear public message that students can continue studying their chosen (non-language) interest, but can set it within an international context.

Current data indicated that there were as many as 20,000 'non-specialist' students taking a language module as part of a non-languages degree. The evidence of the pilot study was that such learners were motivated less by specific career intentions, and more by a belief that languages are part of a broader demonstration of 'graduateness' in an international setting: *'an accepted view ..that languages are an essential and invaluable part of the make up of a high profile graduate'*. Since the number of these students is potentially considerable, it is important to obtain more precise information about their language learning motivations, which can then serve to inform future promotional activities, and stimulate further demand.

Policy implications

Communicating the National Languages Strategy

- The National Languages Strategy should be communicated more clearly to HE, with targeted information for senior managers on the importance Government attaches to the role of Higher Education in the National Languages Strategy, and the steps which it is intending to take in this area.

Safeguarding provision at national and regional level

- To safeguard languages provision at national/regional level, certain Modern Foreign Languages should be designated subjects of strategic national importance.
- The Funding Council should explore the possibility of instituting a notice period of 12 months before the closure of any language departments offering undergraduate teaching.
- In conjunction with Regional Development Agencies, the Funding Council should take a more active role in examining the implications that falling languages provision may have for student access at the regional level, and should consider providing additional funding to university departments if there is a powerful case that falling provision in a particular region would hinder access to languages which are important for national/regional development.
- A regular update on national/regional capacity should be undertaken, with an annual monitoring of numbers at undergraduate and postgraduate level, by language, region, type of institution, and course, with information on gender, disability, ethnicity and social class.

Developing International Strategy

- Within the framework of the DfES International Strategy (November 2004), universities should be encouraged to see the benefits to their UK students of a fully developed international policy which might include: strategies for the provision of study/work placements and for an extension of Erasmus take-up; steps to encourage the international dimension for staff at all levels; strategies for internationalising the curriculum; institutional language policy; and strategies for promoting an inclusive international community within the university.
- A formal dialogue with professional bodies should be instituted in order to extend understanding of international competence in the professions, and there should be a broad discussion among HE institutions of the implications of 'international' in degree titles.

Widening participation in language study

- Funded languages outreach projects for each region should bring together consortia of universities to develop outreach activities for regional secondary schools and colleges, including: provision of language learning materials; ambassador/buddy schemes; motivational road shows; taster courses; and open days.

- The range of languages outreach activities across universities in England should be surveyed, and good practice in this area disseminated.

Stimulating demand

- As part of its communications strategy, the DfES should develop its suite of 'Languages Work' material to include information for students which focuses on the international/global context of professions, and lists HE courses which prepare for them.
- As the new variable tuition fees structure is put in place, universities should be encouraged to develop Languages Strategy bursaries and scholarships, specifically targeted on able linguists from less advantaged backgrounds.
- More information should be gathered on the motivations of non-specialist language learners which could then be fed into future National Languages Strategy promotional material.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR625) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB625) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Monika Sandhu, 1G3, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

Email: monika.sandhu@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

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