

Speak to the future: the story so far

The beginnings

Speak to the Future (STF) was first mooted around the time of the last general election in May 2010. The immediate spark was a meeting with outgoing ministers, who sharply criticised language representatives for having no clear agenda and no common agreement on their aims. The languages community responded energetically, and over the following six months developed a clear statement of aims and a campaign strategy.

STF was designed as a five-year campaign, running from 2011 to 2015, to improve the UK's understanding of the value of languages in all areas of life; to achieve a step change in language learning at all levels; and to improve the nation's capacity in language skills and professional services.

In its first year, the campaign was largely carried forward by volunteer effort, with administrative support at the University of Southampton and modest financial support from language organisations. This enabled it to tap a great deal of good will and commitment, which translated into the efforts of five working groups to develop the campaign's objectives and attract a respectable amount of publicity. It was a largely informal campaign, assisted by the unflinching moral support of Baroness Jean Coussins, and by the effective project management of Jane Collis.

The last year

During the spring of 2011, the British Academy invited the campaign to make proposals for support, under its government funded initiative to promote languages and quantitative skills. As a result, the Academy agreed to provide core funding over the five year period. Shortly afterwards, the campaign moved to adopt a formal constitution, and elected its officers and Executive committee. It also received a very generous donation of office space in central London, thanks to the Chartered Institute of Linguists.

The office at Saxon House and the funding of £25,000 per year has enabled the campaign to ramp up its activity and make its presence more widely felt. As well as applying for charitable status, we have been able to appoint a longer term project manager. Since his appointment in September 2011, Dominic Luddy has worked energetically to put the campaign on a professional footing and raise its profile. The systems are now in place. The campaign has active participants on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. The first newsletter was circulated before Christmas, and with assistance from the European Commission a high functionality website has been commissioned, which we hope will provide a strong platform for participation and dissemination.

Over the past year, we have worked to implement an ambitious programme of activities. Members have addressed numerous audiences around the country, including leading associations ALL, ISMLA, UCML and English PEN. The campaign has had a visible presence at major shows, including the Language Show, Language World and regional language festivals in Leeds and London. We have gathered a very broad consensus in the language community, and feel that the time is right to switch focus more consistently to addressing the unconverted. We have issued a small number of press releases and short articles, and have undertaken a good deal of informal briefing with the press and with business leaders. A business breakfast is planned for April. This activity is hard to quantify, but it is no doubt an

area in which we need to increase our efforts.

A good deal of activity has focused on the five working groups, which are developing policy and addressing policy makers in relation to the campaign's headline objectives. The Group Chairs will report to the Forum.

1. Every language valued as an asset

The group is focusing on the promotion of multi- and plurilingualism, encouraging policy makers and citizens to recognise that the many languages used in the homes of UK citizens are a valuable resource for social cohesion and economic success. It is currently preparing policy documents on the inclusion of community languages in the Ebac and school league tables, and on developing a wider range of world languages within the school curriculum.

2. A coherent experience of languages for all children in primary school

The group has worked on updating its Primary Languages briefing document, and on responding to the Expert Panel's report on a review of the National Curriculum. It is arguing that in order to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, primary schools should be planning to maintain language teaching.

3. A basic working knowledge of at least two languages including English for every child leaving secondary school

The group has reviewed and refreshed its membership and has extended its presence in the regions. It is supporting initiatives to collect interviews with prominent advocates of languages, including the Bishop of Bradford and the actor Larry Lamb.

4. Every graduate qualified in a second language

The group's work has centred on debate within the HE languages community through existing networks. It now plans to engage and mobilise students and recent graduates, to address a wider audience including students, their families, employers and the wider public.

5. An increase in the number of highly qualified linguists

The group has reviewed recent changes in the supply of potential specialist linguists, noting the expansion of postgraduate translation programmes, and problems in demand of public service interpreting courses. It argues that the campaign needs to widen its scope to encourage sectors where there is a need for language skills to recognise this fact and make full use of suitably qualified staff.

During the summer, the campaign prepared a number of small research bids to provide better evidence for policy discussions in relation to the impact of language learning on cognitive development, the value of languages for employability, and the importance of languages in security and global issues. In the event, these bids were not successful and we have drawn the lesson that, though we would like to stimulate research in these and other areas, this should not in future distract us unduly from our core mission of campaigning.

The campaign continues to attract a wide range of supporters, with more than 20 organisations in membership, several business partners, many individual ambassadors, and tangible support from embassies and the European Commission. Groups of student supporters have been successful in attracting the endorsement of celebrities. And the campaign is explicitly supporting several language-related projects, including a singing competition, 'Sing to the Future'.

The campaign has engaged in active fund-raising, addressing both individuals and organisations. Donations of support in kind have been very significant, now amounting to over £20,000 for the year, including an office at the CioL, continuing admin support from LLAS, direct financing of web development by the European Commission and exhibition space at the Language Show and Language World. Sums of money have generously been pledged by ISMLA, ITI, NALA, Televic and the Languages Company, totaling over £3,000. On top of that, the campaign has benefited enormously from the commitment of time and the free use of venues by many individuals and organisations.

We have managed prudently within our means, and looking to the future we are likely to need a great deal more disposable income and sponsorship of activities if we are to take our message effectively to the wider community who are not aware or not yet convinced of the importance of languages.

For the future, we are aware that we shall need to use our resources effectively and target our efforts on the most important priorities. In consequence, we would like to invite the Forum to reflect on three practical questions:

1. While we would like to get the message out to all of the unconverted, we need to prioritise the most important audiences. Which are the most important audiences to address and who are the key people in them that we need to influence?
2. While we would like to use as many media of communication as possible, we need to focus on the most effective media to get our message across. Which specific channels should we target, and how can we best gain access to them?
3. While the campaign has secured some resources to operate, we need to raise significant additional funding to amplify our activities. What funding sources should we approach and how can we best stimulate them to contribute?

Michael Kelly
Hon. Secretary
14 March 2012