



*Regular updates on the campaign for languages*

## On the campaign trail

**Dominic Luddy** *looks at the work ahead in our new feature on Speak to the future*

Launched in 2011 and funded by the British Academy, Speak to the future wants to see a step-change in attitude and policy towards languages in all phases of education. The campaign has rallied more than 20 organisations and dozens of leading figures in the languages field. They share a vision, described by the campaign's five objectives (see right). Among them is the aim for every UK graduate to be qualified in a second language – this year, applications to European languages courses fell by 11.2 percent and to non-European languages by a staggering 21.5 percent.

A working group has been formed for each objective, to collate evidence, identify gaps, engage supporters and lobby government and policymakers, helping to achieve our ambitious goals. Businesses are also being recruited to the cause, able to demonstrate the strong and growing demand for languages in many industries, and the frustration that employers find when recruiting for UK-educated linguists.

The campaign is building a collaborative action programme, but equally wants to inspire supporters to do their bit for languages, and promote existing projects that can make a difference. For higher education, we have backed the excellent Year Abroad Graduate Project led by the British Academy, the University Council for Modern Languages and ThirdYearAbroad.com, which is showcasing the value of time spent overseas, and we have been delighted to see universities running language festivals around Mardi Gras for two years consecutively, in support of Speak to the future. We want to ignite the debate beyond the community of dedicated linguists, present our case and show the sceptics – government, media, parents and students alike – that languages need to be taken much more seriously in the UK.

# Higher ambitions

**Pam Moores** *explores the challenge of switching students on to languages in higher education*



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What distinguishes human beings from the rest of the animal world is our linguistic ability. No matter where we migrate, whatever the complexity of the language of the community we join, our children grow up happily mastering the language they need. We rarely question their ability to do so, or the essential value of this competence. Yet despite the ubiquitous and overwhelming evidence of globalisation in almost every aspect of our daily lives, the British blindly continue to underestimate the advantages of learning a second language, not to mention the benefits of multilingualism. There is a complacent consensus that languages are 'hard' and we are 'not much good at them'.

For readers of this journal, it is scarcely necessary to warn that the current UK deficit in language skills represents a major source of vulnerability as we navigate the economic downturn. This argument is made persuasively in the recent Education and Employers Taskforce publication, 'The Economic Case

for Language Learning and the Role of Employer Engagement' (2011), which suggests that UK plc loses £7.3 billion a year in a 'tax on trade' due to a lack of language skills. Indeed, as the report highlights, a plethora of reports over the last decade have underlined the urgent need to reverse the decline in language learning: *Languages: The next generation* and *A New Landscape for Languages* (Nuffield, 2002, 2003), *The National Languages Strategy in Higher Education* (DfES, 2005), *Dearing's Languages Review* (2007), the British Academy's 'Language Matters' and 'Language Matters More and More' (2009, 2011). Yet clearly the message has not been conveyed sufficiently widely or persuasively to halt the trend. Those of us lobbying for language education find ourselves preaching to the converted.

Evidence of the lack of public awareness continues to accumulate. Figures released at the end of January by UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) indicate that, among the general decline in



## CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

- 1 Every language valued as an asset.** This will encourage 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.
- 2 A coherent experience of languages for all children in primary school.** This will introduce the learning of other languages and cultures as well as develop a better understanding of how the child's own languages work.
- 3 A basic working knowledge of at least two languages, including English, for every child leaving secondary school.** This will equip every school leaver to live and work in a global society where confidence in learning and using other languages is a major advantage.
- 4 Every graduate qualified in a second language.** This will prepare future leaders in business, the professions, voluntary organisations, education and research to thrive and communicate confidently in complex global societies.
- 5 An increase in the number of highly qualified linguists.** This will fulfil the growing need for language professionals, especially English-speaking interpreters and translators, and for teachers and researchers specialising in languages and cultures.

applications for autumn 2012 (which was not unexpected in the context of the new fees regime), languages and related studies are the subjects worst affected. Applications to courses in European languages have fallen by 11.2 percent, and in non-European languages by 21.5 percent. Language graduates may have the highest average salary of all arts graduates three and a half years after graduation (Hefce, 2008), but such facts do not seem to be widely known.

Students' choices are influenced by parents, teachers and careers advisors, and reflect prevailing public perceptions. These clearly conflict with what informed sources tell us about the employability of candidates with language competence and international experience.

The recent UCAS press releases have, at least, generated a spate of media attention. Will Hutton laments in *The Observer*: 'We continue to harm and isolate ourselves by only speaking English. Self development and national development will both be enhanced if we embrace foreign languages' (5/2/12). *The Times* joins in: 'We just don't get it. How the language barrier is killing the British economy' (7/2/12). Rare and inspiring coverage! A high-profile, national debate is long overdue.

Those in the know are certainly concerned. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) classes language studies as 'strategically important and vulnerable' (SIV),

and has invested in protecting and promoting them (see, eg, [www.ucml.ac.uk/shapingthefuture](http://www.ucml.ac.uk/shapingthefuture) and [www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk](http://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk)).

Yet the challenges remain substantial: one third of university language departments closed between 2002 and 2009 ('Language Matters'), and modern foreign language provision is increasingly concentrated in the prestigious Russell Group universities. This reinforces the social selection that takes place at secondary level, where state school pupils have less opportunity for language learning than those in the independent sector.

A marked reduction in university provision is evident from analysis of UCAS degree programme information. The number of universities offering degrees in specific languages fell consistently between 2000 and 2011. German degree programmes had been on offer in 126 institutions at the turn of the millennium but this had decreased to 57 by 2011, a reduction of 55 percent; for French and Italian the figure is 42 percent; for Japanese 55 percent; Russian 60 percent and Spanish 34 percent. This is not because students are recognising the rising power of

growing economies and flocking to Arabic or Mandarin; rather they do not appear to rate the value of learning about other cultures and languages in general.

There are tentative explanations one might offer: changing qualifications and education policies, the obsession with choice, the drive for high performance in school league tables. All have militated against commitment to rewarding but demanding subjects which require sustained effort and progress along well-planned learning pathways. When it comes to university choices, language degrees are usually four-year programmes with an integrated year abroad, and in the context of the rise in fees, a three-year programme must be less financially daunting (although many universities are subsidising the year abroad).

Risk aversion may also explain the much bigger drop in non-European languages. Usually students learn these from scratch, the cultures are little known to them, and there is an unfamiliar writing system to master. It may seem a safer bet to focus on our European neighbours. Are we lowering our ambitions?

For the older and wiser, this may seem short-sighted. We know that English is not enough, that Great Britain is no longer a great imperial power, that this country itself is increasingly multicultural, and that the global economy offers exciting new opportunities to those who are equipped with the confidence, skills and knowledge to launch into the unknown. The Speak to the future campaign focuses on these challenges.

## CAN YOU HELP?

Find out more about the campaign and how you can get involved at [www.speaktothefuture.org](http://www.speaktothefuture.org). The Speak to the future campaign, which is hosted at Saxon House, is fully endorsed by the CIOL, who have kindly donated an office.

