

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP on MODERN LANGUAGES



Chair: Tonia Antoniazzi MP (Lab); Co-Chair: Baroness Coussins (CB);
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Response to the Curriculum & Assessment Review from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages – November 2024

For reference: the CAR's sections (each section comprises several sub-questions)

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Section 1: About you

[APPG contact details were submitted here].

Section 2: General views on curriculum, assessment and qualifications pathways

Summary of key points

The APPG on Modern Languages (APPG ML)'s response refers to positions it set out in its *National Recovery Programme for Languages* in 2019 (<https://nationalrecoverylanguages.weebly.com/>) and is informed by further decline in the uptake of languages in England's schools over the last 5 years. It also recognises important sector leadership of this agenda, in particular the British Academy's *Towards a National Languages Strategy* in 2020 (<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>).

Languages education must be at the core of any 21st century curriculum in England.

As early as 2012, research found just 9% of 14-15 year olds in England could use their first foreign language independently – compared to a European average of 42% (European Survey on Language Competences, 2012). England's poor performance relative to other OECD countries was confirmed in the 2020 PISA report.

The APPG ML has three main recommendations for the Review:

Recommendation 1: The government should have a strategic cross-departmental approach to ensure the teaching and learning of languages is at the core of the education, acknowledging the importance of language skills to the UK's security, defence, diplomacy, economic growth and community cohesion. (See APPG Modern Languages 2019, *National Recovery Programme for Languages*).

Recommendation 2: There should be an overarching policy of languages for all for age 5-18 in schools.

The Review should acknowledge that languages should not be regarded only as an academic subject for high achievers, but as a vital skill for the 21st century which has proven benefits for learners at all levels, including SEND pupils.

Recommendation 3: the government should take measures to enhance the supply chain of languages teachers.

While it is not for the APPG ML to comment or make specific recommendations on pedagogical detail, or technical detail with regard to assessment, we strongly recommend the Review consults the expert organisations and subject associations for languages, including (but not limited to) the Association for Language Learning (ALL), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), ASCL, the British Academy, the British Council, the civil service's Cross-Government Language Group, the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), NALA, the National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE) and the University Council for Languages (UCFL).

What follows lists key references for the evidence base for each of the above recommendations, and additional, specific recommendations.

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

Low languages uptake is in itself a barrier to overcoming the 'class ceiling': high-performing education systems have language skills for all pupils at their core.

- PISA (2020) found England performs poorly in languages uptake and curriculum time compared to almost every other OECD nation, yet found evidence that equality of access to languages education is a hallmark of high performing education systems internationally (OECD 2020: *PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective Policies, Successful Schools*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris <https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en>)
- The government should close gaps in participation and attainment irrespective of socio-economic or regional factors.
- Statistics show languages uptake is correlated with socio-economic advantage from primary to university and the disparity is also reflected in other characteristics such as gender and SEND. (British Council and Education Policy Institute 2020: *Boys studying modern foreign languages at GCSE in schools in England*; British Council *Language Trends* series; Muradas-Taylor 2023: *Undergraduate language programmes in England: A widening participation crisis*; Muradas-Taylor and Taylor 2023: *'Cold spots' in language degree provision in England*; evidence from APPG ML meetings from key stakeholders including UCFL).
- There is evidence that provision and uptake of qualifications in home, heritage and community languages is affected by systemic disadvantages compared to other languages, which should be addressed (APPG ML submission to *Ofqual's Consultation on exceptional arrangements for exam grading and assessment in 2020*).
- The APPG ML urges the government to take inspiration from existing initiatives which show how languages uptake and motivation can be improved, such as the Hackney Spanish First initiative, action research from NCLE Language Hubs, MFL Mentoring in Wales, North East Festival of Languages run by International Newcastle, and Languages for All in Hounslow.

Widening access to international experiences must be a priority.

- School visits and exchanges are declining across the UK, and declining fastest in schools in the most deprived areas (68% of these schools cutting trips) compared to schools in least deprived areas (44%). (APPG ML meeting on international visits 2023).
- Yet they are crucial to motivation and uptake: a British Council survey showed 62% of language students said a prior international exchange influenced their decision to do a language degree (British Council survey 2014 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/contact/press/british-council-says-bring-back-school-exchanges>).
- The positive socio-economic impact of language skills and experiences abroad are well documented (for example: Ayres-Bennett et al. 2020, *The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages*).
- Students (of any subject) who study or train overseas report significantly higher earnings, better employability, and confidence in their future careers. (European Commission 2014, *The Erasmus impact study – Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions*.)
- The government should boost the current Turing scheme or consider returning to the Erasmus+ scheme to reinstate reciprocity (funding for in-coming exchange students from abroad) and eTwinning (allowing UK schools to partner with schools abroad virtually).
- The government should also ensure adequate opportunities to learn languages in the FE sector, as many socio-economically disadvantaged students study courses in FE colleges. Recent research from the British Academy shows that language provision in the FE sector is limited (British Academy 2023, *Languages provision in UK Further Education*).

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

Learning languages helps students learn across the curriculum.

- Learning a language has a positive cross-curricular impact on learning English language and literacy, maths, science and other subjects (RIPL Research In Primary Languages research papers; Woll 2019, *Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Broadening our perspectives. Final Report to the British Academy*; Bak & Mehmedbegovic-Smith at the APPG ML meeting on Neuroscience, 2018; Bak & Mehmedbegovic 2017, 'Healthy Linguistic Diet: the value of linguistic diversity and language learning across the lifespan', *Language, Society and Policy, Vol 1*).
- Other studies have shown cognitive benefits from acquiring language skills, including protective effects on the brain (APPG ML meeting on Neuroscience, 2018).

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

- The APPG ML has received representations that the scope of language learning should include more real-world relevance such as richer cultural content and linguistics and recommends that the Review takes advice from expert organisations about these approaches.
- The APPG ML has seen evidence from initiatives that embed language learning in students' real lives including their communities successfully, such as the North East Festival of Languages and Hackney's Spanish First initiative.

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

Languages from 5-18 should be at the core of a broad and balanced curriculum. There should be an overarching policy of languages for all for age 5-18 in schools.

- At all stages of education from 5-18, language learning can have a positive cross-curricular effect including on English literacy, intercultural, creativity, confidence and cognitive resilience and performance (RIPL Research In Primary Languages research papers; Woll 2019: *Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Broadening our perspectives. Final Report to the British Academy* ; Bak & Mehmedbegovic 2017, 'Healthy Linguistic Diet: the value of linguistic diversity and language learning across the lifespan', *Language, Society and Policy, Vol 1*).
- There is also evidence that language learning leads to better social cohesion/understanding others (for example: Dewaele and Wei 2013, 'Is multilingualism linked to a higher tolerance of ambiguity?' *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 16:1).
- Increasing languages provision could be popular: parents support compulsory languages to 16 (British Council survey 2024 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/most-parents-england-support-mandatory-foreign-language-classes-survey>).
- The Review may consider a wider range of available qualifications in addition to the GCSE. We recommend expert organisations are consulted on this.

Trends affecting the decline in languages take-up

This submission covers many of the issues that contribute to falling uptake in languages:

- Inconsistent provision of languages at primary level with insufficiently supported teachers; ineffective primary-secondary transition; declining statutory requirements for languages uptake at secondary; severe grading at GCSE; low numbers at A Level and FE impacting the number of graduates, which affects teacher supply. More recent trends arise from Brexit and its impact on international mobility, international recruitment of language assistants and teachers.
- The APPG ML recommends that the government should have a strategic cross-departmental approach to ensure the teaching and learning of languages is at the core of an education system fit for the 21st century, and overcome these systemic challenges.

Curriculum: A broader range of languages should be available on the curriculum.

- This can build on successful but currently small-scale programmes to diversify the languages offer on the curriculum such as the Mandarin Excellence Programme or the Latin Excellence Programme.
- Measures must be taken to support home, heritage and community languages – recognising the potential to benefit the UK's language skills needs in a diversity of fields including business, diplomacy and security with bilingual children who have been able to get a qualification in their home language. At present the provision of these less-taught languages is affected by systemic disadvantages compared to other languages, which should be addressed (APPG ML submission to *Ofqual's Consultation on exceptional arrangements for exam grading and assessment in 2020*).

A strong foundation in languages at primary level has long been recommended by the APPG ML and other key stakeholders including the British Academy's *Towards a National Languages Strategy*.

- Currently, primary provision is uneven (British Council *Language Trends* series) and there are recognised issues with a lack of CPD and support for primary teachers with regard to effective primary languages teaching.
- The APPG ML is aware of a growing debate about moving away from the current primary curriculum to a 'language awareness' model and urges the Review to listen carefully to expert organisations including Research In Primary Languages (RIPL).
- Whether making a success of the current model, or implementing a new, linguistics-based or 'language awareness' approach, primary teachers need properly funded, systemic training in pedagogy and language skills alongside support and sufficient curriculum time. (Graham et al. 2014, *Primary modern languages: the impact of teaching approaches and preparedness for secondary school language learning*; and RIPL research papers).

The transition from KS2 to KS3 must be more systematic and better supported.

- Too many secondary schools start over when pupils enter Year 7 (British Council *Language Trends* series).
- When successful, properly planned primary-secondary transition can lead to large increases in uptake at GCSE and A Level – for example, the Hackney Spanish First approach saw entries in GCSE Spanish doubling in four years (Baldwin 2021, *The Spanish First Language Initiative Evaluation Report*).

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

Severe grading at GCSE should be addressed.

- The reputation of languages as a harshly graded subject is detrimental to uptake and the severe grading issue is long standing (ALL London <https://all-london.org.uk/severe-grading>).
- Recent grading adjustments in French and German appear not to have resolved the issue (FFT Education Datalab 18 April 2024, *Languages are still harshly graded at GCSE*).
- The APPG ML is aware of a range of proposals, from grade boundary adjustments to considering alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and examining whether the unpredictability of grades that comes with norm-referencing could be better managed. We recommend the Review consults the expert organisations on this crucial issue.
- The EBacc performance measure has helped stem the decline in GCSE uptake and boosting languages would help increase the number of schools reaching the EBacc target. The APPG ML recommends that the Review consults with expert organisations on how the EBacc measure could be improved, for example in its interaction with the Progress 8 performance measure.
- The APPG ML is aware that there is widespread agreement that assessment should move towards more real-world and perhaps continuous models, and away from assessment primarily focussed on written exams, and urges the Review to listen to the views of expert organisations on this.

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

Post-16 provision in languages must be improved.

- A Level classes are closing because of low numbers making courses financially unviable (British Council *Language Trends* series). This disincentivises uptake at GCSE.
- The government should consider bringing back the AS Level; and consider the idea of a temporary Advanced Language Premium, modelled on the Advanced Maths Premium, which would encourage schools and colleges to maintain A Level provision until uptake at GCSE has improved (see the APPG Modern Languages, British Academy and ASCL joint response to the Comprehensive Spending Review 2021).
- Further reform might consider broadening the number of subjects studied post-16 as research shows students' range of subjects studied post-16 has narrowed over the last two decades (NFER 2024, *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*).
- The fall in A Level entries also has a great impact on the sustainability of language degrees in universities, which in turn exacerbates the teacher recruitment crisis.
- The government should classify languages as strategically important and put them into Category C1 for the Strategic Priorities Grant, recognising languages degrees as relatively teaching-intensive. This would support universities in maintaining provision, and incentivise post-16 provision in all regions.
- Vocational qualifications should integrate language skills, and FE colleges should offer languages more widely (British Academy 2023, *Languages provision in UK Further Education*). The Review should

consult expert organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of some innovations in the FE sector, for example remote teaching (Edinburgh College presentation to the APPG ML meeting on languages in FE 2023) and considering a wider range of qualifications.

Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

Use technology with caution.

- Technology can be a valuable supplement but cannot bridge the learning gap when teacher resources are low (APPG ML meeting on Artificial Intelligence 2023).
- The Review must also consider the risks of exacerbating inequalities in access to technology (British Academy 2022, *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK*).
- The Review should consult expert organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of technology in language learning, for example using AI in language teaching methodology (see NCLE CPD resources); virtual teacher support (for example the British Council's *Plan Ceibal* initiative).
- The APPG ML has heard from researchers and employers who use AI in the languages sector that these tools only make human skills such as critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, intercultural understanding and leadership even more important. (APPG ML meeting on Artificial Intelligence 2023; British Academy and UCL Public Policy, 2021, *AI and the Future of Work: Policy Briefing*).

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