

Languages provision in UK Further Education (FE)

Background

The British Academy is the United Kingdom's national body for the humanities and social sciences. Our language programme monitors trends in languages education and utilises expertise to inform debate about languages in education and society.

In 2020 we published with partners *Towards a National Languages Strategy*, which highlighted a dearth of accessible data and evidence on the provision and uptake of language learning in FE. To combat this, in 2022 we contracted researchers from Queen's University Belfast to provide an assessment of the evidence base and consider longitudinal trends in provision and uptake.

This briefing summarises the evidence set out in the full, independent research report, which will be used to bolster the Academy's understanding of the health of languages across all parts of the sector, and support work demonstrating the value of language learning to the economy and society.

Results and conclusions

The review of literature demonstrates - for the first time - the considerable lack of research on languages provision in FE over the past 20 years. The voices of language learners and teachers in FE have rarely been heard, with research focussed on declining entries in secondary and higher education, particularly in post-1992 universities.

Through analysis of language uptake data, we know that low levels of participation in languages in FE reflect years of underinvestment. There are a substantial number of FE colleges with no languages provision and a widespread lack of clear progression pathways through appropriate vocational qualifications. This contributes to creating breaks in the pipeline, with 'cold spots' for languages in Higher Education created in the north, east and southwest of England, particularly in universities with lower-than-average entry tariffs.

By gathering the voices of staff and students through bespoke surveys, we revealed a frustration that languages are undervalued by leadership teams and a lack of strategic direction about the future place of languages in FE settings. French and Spanish are the main languages taught (echoing the compulsory school system), meaning that opportunities to engage in other languages - including ancient languages such as Latin - are very rare.

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders uncovered that the economic and societal value of languages for the UK are not being heard. There is little evidence of the integration of language learning into core programmes and vocational qualifications.

Executive summary

Languages Provision in UK Further Education (FE) examines the extent of the provision and uptake of languages in the FE sector, and trends in that provision over the past 20 years.

Commissioned by the British Academy, the research undertaken by a team from Queen's University Belfast finds that language learning in FE is in a precarious state, reflecting severe underinvestment and contributing to a decline in provision in higher education which is creating geographic 'cold spots'. The evidence suggests that the economic and societal impacts of language learning - which are substantial - are not being heard, risking the future prosperity and global outlook of the UK.

Methodology

Using multiple primary and secondary sources, the evidence assessed includes a systematic style review of existing literature, analysis of national statistics on languages uptake, a survey of FE staff, a survey of FE students, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

FE is defined as any study after secondary education (compulsory until age 16) that is not part of higher education and not part of a secondary school with inhouse sixth-form provision. FE is not limited to 16-19-year-olds - indeed many students are older than 19 - and includes both part- and full-time learners.

The research by Queen's University Belfast identified the following five opportunities:

Opportunity 1: Develop a unifying voice for languages in FE

Create a Strategic Committee for Languages in Further Education, led by the Association of Colleges, Colleges Scotland, Colegau Cymru, and NI Colleges, and informed by the languages education and skills community.

Modelled on the related Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education, a Strategic Committee for Languages in FE could meet the need for a unifying voice. Under the direction of the four established devolved voices for FE in the UK, the Committee could offer national and regional strategy for provision; be able to plan long-term, proactive measures; and support FE leaders to effect meaningful change. The Committee could help realise further policy opportunities, including those below, in collaboration with stakeholders and policy makers.

Opportunity 2: Increase cooperation between colleges and sectors

Utilise existing mechanisms - such as School College Partnerships, Area Learning Communities, and Institution Wide Language Programmes - to increase collaboration for the benefit of learners and sustainable provision.

There is untapped potential for languages education to forge a link between schools, FE colleges and higher education, enabling a more diverse community of learners to engage with post-compulsory education. School College Partnerships and Area Learning Communities are mechanisms within which schools and colleges can collaborate to plan curricula and share resources. Working with Institution Wide Language Programmes in higher education would offer all students the opportunity to continue with previously learned languages or start a new language. A similar programme in FE would offer a clear language learning progression route.

Opportunity 3: Improve and expand qualifications in further education

Undertake an urgent review of qualifications for languages in FE which suffer from a narrow focus on certain languages and qualifications, are varied in offer and accessibility across the UK, and fail to include vocational qualifications for which language is critical e.g. qualifications allied to travel, hospitality and communication.

The UK is potentially a linguistic powerhouse, with many languages spoken in our communities. Together with a review of qualifications, strategic investment in languages other than French and Spanish could provide employment for people in the UK. To support this, a review of the way in which qualifications are reported is needed. Increasing fine-grained data for language enrolments and achievements would allow for a clearer understanding of language qualifications and provision in FE.

Opportunity 4: Improve evidence-based policymaking in languages

Improve data collection on language learning, particularly in complementary schools, and support further research into effective language provision in further education settings.

The lack of systematic, reliable data about language learning makes it difficult to assess the full picture of language provision and uptake, the social and cultural dimensions of language learning, and the identity of the language teaching professional. More in-depth and longer-term research would improve the evidence base on which education policy is made. In particular, there is a critical need for increased understanding on what constitutes effective second language acquisition across the lifespan in FE settings – not only in award bearing courses, but also in courses which are perceived to be for pleasure.

Opportunity 5: Invest in languages for future UK prosperity

Develop a programme of investment in language education in further education, running alongside the review and reform of qualifications and their reporting.

College lecturers of languages are frustrated by two decades of low investment. The economic argument for language education is well documented, and the strategic importance of languages for UK trade and investment means that more investment in language provision is overdue. Without this investment, it is difficult to see how the crisis point for languages in FE will ever be reversed.