

British Academy response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Call for Evidence: Languages Subjects

22 November 2024

Background

In September 2024, the Department for Education opened a [call for evidence](#) for a Curriculum and Assessment review, with Professor Becky Francis FBA CBE as review chair.

The British Academy has a long-standing languages policy programme. Our work is largely guided by *Towards a National Languages Strategy* (2020), which we developed along with the British Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association for School and College Leaders, and Universities UK. Given the extent of our involvement in policy debates regarding languages education, alongside its cross-disciplinary response the British Academy has decided to submit this separate, subject-specific response to the Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review where we can provide detailed evidence and proposals on languages education and skills in England.

The British Academy has submitted a general response to the Review, in which we provide our broader, cross-disciplinary evidence and recommendations. The principles guiding our wider response underly this languages-specific response as well, and the two responses are intended to complement each other. The answers below comprise our languages-specific response.

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

10. What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways are working well to support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

The right of every young person to a broad and balanced curriculum has been a longstanding principle of the national curriculum in England since its inception. Reasserting this commitment and strengthening its delivery across the education system should be a core aim of any potential refresh of curriculum and assessment. It is positive that young people currently have a statutory entitlement to a broad curriculum from Key Stages 1-4, because it is vital that learners should leave school having been exposed to, and benefiting from, the rich insights, skills and knowledges bases from across a wide array of disciplinary areas, including languages subjects. The inclusion of languages as a core subject for the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) has been an important statement of the value and worth of languages education in a young person's educational development, and is one that should continue, as should the DfE's ambition for almost all learners to learn a language other than English to at least age 16. We welcome the decision to apply the national curriculum to all schools to ensure breadth and balance for all pupils regardless of school type. We also continue to support the 'Purpose of study' and 'Aims' of the national curriculum's statutory guidance for languages programmes of study.

There is strong evidence, however, that this commitment to a broad and balanced national curriculum on paper, as well as the purposes and aims of the statutory guidance, does not reflect the languages education many young people receive up and down the country. This is evident in young people's access to and experience of learning languages subjects. Therefore, despite strong evidence of the cognitive, economic and social benefits of studying a language for young people and for society more broadly, modern and ancient languages subjects are often deprioritised, and uptake has declined.^{1 2 3}

There is also evidence that this commitment to breadth and balance, for most young people, ends at age 16. England's curriculum has long been narrow compared to many peer countries: where most pupils in OECD countries take seven subjects post-16, in England students typically only take three. But recent research from the British Academy and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) suggests a worrying trend towards further curricular narrowing at Level 3 in recent years, as well as declining take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects post-16.⁴ This has been particularly evident across all languages subjects, which have experienced a decline in take-up and provision at Level 3.

Given the increased shortage of language skills, and of the associated intercultural agility and global outlook, needed for the UK's economy and international trade, security, research base, social cohesion and global relationships, this ought to be cause for concern. Ensuring all students, regardless of background or region, can access languages and cultural education throughout their schooling must therefore remain an important aim of any proposed curricular reform. Exposure to different languages and cultures is valuable for young

¹ Ayres-Bennett, W., Hafner, M., Dufresne, E. and Yerushalmi, E. (2022) *The Economic Value to the UK of Speaking Other Languages*. RAND Europe and University of Cambridge.

² The British Academy (2019) *Languages in the UK: a Call for Action*.

³ The British Academy (2019) *Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Findings and Implications*.

⁴ Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.

people's academic performance and their development as individuals and as citizens. Ninety percent (90%) of studies on the cross-curricular effect of second language learning report a positive impact, across English language learning, literacy, maths and science.⁵ We remain concerned about the varying access to a broad curriculum according to socioeconomic disadvantage and encourage the review board to prioritise equal access to languages education as any part of curricular reform. It is important that any potential reforms are planned and implemented carefully, collaboratively and sustainably with the sector, with input from teachers, school leaders, academy trusts, and others working 'on the ground' in our schools.

11. What aspects of the current a) curriculum, b) assessment system and c) qualification pathways should be targeted for improvements to better support and recognise educational progress for children and young people?

As the British Academy have submitted a separate response to the Review where we present our broader answers and evidence, our intention with this response is to look specifically at subject-related issues and improvements relating to languages education. We are concerned about the decline in uptake of modern foreign languages subjects at GCSE and A level.⁶ In 2020, the Academy published *Towards a National Languages Strategy* with partners the British Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association for School and College Leaders, and Universities UK. This document provides evidence-based recommendations for languages education and skills across the United Kingdom. We continue to advocate for and work towards these recommendations, and they largely guide our response to the questions within this Call for Evidence.

While we provide more information and evidence within our answers to later questions, we stress the following points:

- There is a pressing need to recognise and communicate the benefits of languages education, including how languages help develop key oracy, literacy and critical thinking skills.⁷ Languages are also important in terms of their significance in intercultural communication and understanding, how they are valued by employers, their strategic importance for the UK, and their cognitive benefits including increased attainment across all subjects.
- There is a need for focus and improvement in provision and delivery of language learning in the primary curriculum, as well as implementing a coherent and well-structured transition to secondary education that ensures students build on prior knowledge effectively (see question 22). Ensuring a solid foundation at the primary level as well as a clear transition into secondary is the first step to improvements across the languages pathway.⁸
- The commitment to curricular breadth and balance must include post-16 education. We recommend languages be considered a core part of the curriculum through to Key Stage 5, with a statutory right to language learning for all students on all pathways. We also suggest exploring alternative qualifications at Level 3 to make languages more accessible at this stage of education (see question 47).
- There are improvements to be made regarding equality of provision and inclusivity of the curriculum. The opportunity to study languages should be equally available to all

⁵ The British Academy (2019) *Cognitive Benefits of Language Learning: Findings and Implications*.

⁶ The British Academy: *SHAPE Indicators*.

⁷ Oracy Education Commission (2024) *We Need to Talk: The report of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England*, p. 31.

⁸ Holmes-Henderson, A. (2024) 'Par excellence? Government-funded language education programmes in England' in Czerniawski, G., Jones, S. Holmes-Henderson, A., Poutney, R., Pugh, V.-M. and Yang, W. (2024) *Curriculum in a changing world: 50 thinkpieces on education, policy, practice, innovation and inclusion*, Troubador Press, Market Harborough. p. 38.

students, of all backgrounds, in all localities. Relatedly, it is important to counter the incorrect perception that languages are 'difficult' and/or 'elite' subjects, and work to ensure there are options and provisions that cater to all learners. This includes (but is of course not limited to) diversifying the range of languages on offer, and recognising and providing qualifications appropriate for those who are learning languages in which they have a home, heritage, or community background.

Section 3: Social justice and inclusion

12. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation (class ceilings) for learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

There is strong evidence to suggest that learners experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage have little to no access to high-quality language teaching, or indeed language learning opportunities of any sort. The British Council's Language Trends reports have for many years documented the socioeconomic discrepancies in provision and take up of languages subjects.⁹ Availability of languages subjects varies greatly by region, and areas with higher levels of disadvantage have less access to language subjects and languages teaching.¹⁰ At Level 3, languages provision is low and for many languages subjects has been declining.¹¹ We are concerned that this is disproportionately affecting students in disadvantaged areas. Research has shown the emergence of 'cold spots' in provision of languages at the level of further and higher education, which exacerbates the problem of access and participation across the pipeline, particularly since universities train the next generation of languages teachers.^{12 13 14}

The 2020 National Association of Language Advisers survey report on the languages curriculum and disadvantaged students provided evidence that the curriculum, particularly at GCSE level, disadvantages and excludes students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁵ The survey shows that a lack of inclusivity in content not only demotivates students, but creates barriers in their ability to engage with, understand and answer questions about the content. This has negative impacts on attainment and progress for these students and limits their future options. This also contributes to the perception of languages being exceptionally 'difficult' and 'elite' subjects, which discourages young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – away from these subjects.

We encourage a system-wide, joined-up approach that empowers learners and offers more flexible and varied opportunities and contexts to develop their skills and knowledge of languages, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be the best way to provide young people with language and intercultural skills.

13. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways are there any barriers to improving attainment, progress, access or participation which may disproportionately impact pupils based on other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity)?

[do not intend to respond]

⁹ See for example: British Council (2023) *Language Trends England 2023*; British Council (2021) *Language Trends England 2021*; see also: Hunter, A., Arfon, E., and Z. Hua (2024) 'Opportunity for all? Which pupils are studying languages in England and why?' 7 Nov 2024, UCL Institute of Education Blog.

¹⁰ Lanvers, U. (2017) 'Elitism in language learning in the UK.' In: Rivers, D. and A. Zotzmann (eds.). *Isms in Language Education*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 50-73.

¹¹ Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.

¹² The British Academy: *Mapping SHAPE Provision in UK Higher Education*.

¹³ Collen, I., Henderson, L., Liu, M., O'Boyle, A. and Roberts, J. (2023) *Languages Provision in UK Further Education*. Commissioned by The British Academy.

¹⁴ Muradás-Taylor, B., & Taylor, P. (2023) 'Cold spots' in language degree provision in England. *The Language Learning Journal*, 52(1), 92–103.

¹⁵ National Association of Language Advisers (2020) *NALA survey: The languages curriculum and disadvantaged students*.

14. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

Evidence shows that there are many advantages of language learning for learners with SEND, however, the content and the assessment system for languages subjects is not sufficiently inclusive to these learners. The Academy suggests the review board consult the work of Dr Katie Howard, which outlines emerging research about the positives of second language acquisition for learners with SEND, considers the specific challenges they may face in the languages classroom, and outlines strategies to facilitate inclusion amongst this group of learners.¹⁶

15. In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any enablers that support attainment, progress, access or participation for the groups listed above?

The Academy has been encouraged by some efforts to diversify the language options on offer. We very much welcomed the announcement of the new GCSE in British Sign Language, as well as the findings from the British Council's 2024 Language Trends survey that found that most state secondary schools support pupils to take examinations in home, heritage and community languages.¹⁷ We discuss the importance and benefits of home, heritage and community languages in our answer to question 23.

¹⁶ Howard, K. (2023) 'Supporting learners with special educational needs and disabilities in the foreign languages classroom', *Support for Learning*, 38(3), 154-161.

¹⁷ British Council (2024) [Language Trends England 2024](#).

Section 4: Ensuring an excellent foundation in maths and English

16. To what extent does the content of the national curriculum at primary level (key stages 1 and 2) enable pupils to gain an excellent foundation in a) English and b) maths? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim? Please note, we invite views specifically on transitions between key stages in section 9.

[do not intend to respond]

17. To what extent do the English and maths primary assessments support pupils to gain an excellent foundation in these key subjects? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support this aim?

[do not intend to respond]

18. To what extent does the content of the a) English and b) maths national curriculum at secondary level (key stages 3 and 4) equip pupils with the knowledge and skills they need for life and further study? Are there ways in which the content could change to better support this aim?

[do not intend to respond]

19. To what extent do the current maths and English qualifications at a) pre-16 and b) 16-19 support pupils and learners to gain, and adequately demonstrate that they have achieved, the skills and knowledge they need? Are there any changes you would suggest that would support these outcomes?

[do not intend to respond]

20. How can we better support learners who do not achieve level 2 in English and maths by 16 to learn what they need to thrive as citizens in work and life? In particular, do we have the right qualifications at level 2 for these 16-19 learners (including the maths and English study requirement)?

[do not intend to respond]

21. Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths a) curricula and b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))? Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

[do not intend to respond]

Section 5: Curriculum and qualification content

22. Are there particular curriculum or qualifications subjects where:
a. there is too much content; not enough content, or content is missing;
b. the content is out-of-date;
c. the content is unhelpfully sequenced (for example to support good curriculum design or pedagogy);
d. there is a need for greater flexibility (for example to provide the space for teachers to develop and adapt content)?
Please provide detail on specific key stages where appropriate.

Across all key stages, the British Academy agrees with language subject organisations that within the modern and ancient languages curricula there is a need to balance ‘technical’ content – what is known as the ‘three pillars’ of grammar, vocabulary and phonics – with communication and intercultural learning. As mentioned below, the pendulum has recently swung at some key stages towards a focus on the ‘technical’ aspects of language learning which, while important, should not be at the expense of more culture- and communication-focused learning.¹⁸ Language learning should be seen and approached as a key part of the development of cultural literacy, creativity and communication.¹⁹ We note with interest the new Languages, Literacy and Communication Area in the new Curriculum for Wales, which stresses the relationality of languages and their importance to social cohesion and cultural understanding.

Further, we identify the following issues in relation to languages subjects, as presented by key stage:

Key Stage 2:

As the British Academy and partners stated in *Towards a National Languages Strategy* (2020), there is evidence to suggest that, despite pockets of good practice, there are severe shortcomings in approaches towards the primary languages curriculum and towards the transition from primary to secondary.²⁰ These shortcomings are evidenced in Holmes and Myles’s 2019 white paper on primary languages policy in England, as well as Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers’s 2019 policy briefing on modern languages educational policy in the UK.^{21 22} Both state that the response of primary schools to statutory guidance to introduce a language at KS2 has been uneven. The main challenges identified include those of time allocation, teacher subject knowledge and language proficiency, limited amount of cross-phase planning for progress and transition, lack of recognition of children’s heritage languages, and, as mentioned, inconsistency of delivery across schools.

Largely in line with the proposals developed in Holmes and Myles’s 2019 white paper, we continue to recommend the commissioning and development of clear non-statutory national guidance on the amount of time that should be allocated to language learning at KS2, giving

¹⁸ The British Academy (2021) ‘Consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in modern foreign languages: Cultural learning – proposal to replace themes’.

¹⁹ Burdett, C., Burns, J., Duncan, D. and Polezzi, L. (2018) *Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Reframing language education for a global future*. University of Bristol, Policy Report 35: September 2018.

²⁰ 9 The British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK (2020) *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*.

²¹ Holmes, B. and Myles, F. (2019) *White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward*. RIPL.

²² Ayres-Bennett, W. and Carruthers, J. (2019) *Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in England*. Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies.

examples of effective curriculum models which illustrate how time is best distributed per week, per term, per year and per key stage.

The British Academy and the Association for School and College Leaders (ASCL) have together built on these recommendations and have previously jointly submitted to the Department for Education evidence-based proposals for the languages curriculum at KS2, comprised with input and evidence from members of the British Academy Education Researchers Group. The proposals recommend the following minimum twin outcomes at KS2:

- a) A multilingual outlook, based on learning about the multiplicity of languages and about connections and differences between them. This element in particular opens up space to tap into the resource of the many home, heritage and community languages spoken by primary pupils in England, in a way that benefits both them and their monolingual classmates.
- b) Learning one language at a rudimentary level, to help learners develop fundamental language learning competencies and related skills, in particular oracy.

These twin minimum outcomes would represent ‘evolution, not revolution’ in relation to the existing National Curriculum’s KS2 Programme of Study for Languages. The vision of the existing Programme of Study should be maintained. What the Academy and ASCL have proposed is a tweak of the subject content so that the existing requirement to ‘make substantial progress in one language’ is replaced by (a) more rudimentary progress in one language, but, crucially, in conjunction with (b) the acquisition of a multilingual outlook. The proposals developed by the British Academy and ASCL provide evidence and reasoning for the above twin outcomes, as well as outlining how they could be practically delivered (taking as the starting point the existing state of subject expertise in the teacher workforce) and how they would aid in ensuring a smoother transition between KS2 and KS3. The proposals crucially support the commissioning of non-statutory guidance on minimum core content for languages at KS2, (i) outlining what should be achieved, both linguistically and ‘culturally/multilingually’, and (ii) raising in the process the status and visibility of the subject for school leaders. Clarity is required as to how languages can be integrated with other aspects of the primary curriculum and how they support a whole range of outcomes – not only literacy and oracy, but also the development of additional attributes such as creativity and empathy.²³ Such non-statutory guidance would include examples of how the development of a ‘multilingual outlook’ can be integrated into developing linguistic competence, with links to appropriate sample resources. This should indicate also what children need to know/be able to do in terms of, e.g., pronunciation, phonics, grammatical structures, vocabulary (all at a rudimentary level appropriate to KS2) and knowledge about language. It should also provide much clearer guidance on the need for schools to provide at least 60 minutes of language instruction per week, aligning with recent research findings about the importance of teaching time.²⁴

An expert advisory panel could engage with the sector to determine what is the best means of formulating the guidance, draw on a wide range of existing expertise (including international best practice on pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures), assess recent educational research, and explore approaches to primary languages in the devolved nations of the UK. Part of this process would draw on evaluations of the effectiveness of existing materials, such as those produced by WAMCAM and WoLLoW, and consider how these materials might be integrated into delivery.

We continue to welcome the opportunity to present and discuss our evidence and proposals with the relevant policymakers and stakeholders.

²³ Graham, S., Fisher, L., Hofweber, J. and Krüsemann, H. (2020) ‘Getting creative in the languages classroom’. In: Kohl, K., Dudrah, R., Gosler, A., Graham, S., Maiden, M., Ouyang, W.C. and Reynolds, M. (eds) *Creative Multilingualism: A Manifesto*. Open Book Publishers

²⁴ Graham, S., Courtney, L., Marinis, T. and Tonkyn, A. (2017) ‘Early language learning: The impact of teaching and teacher factors,’ *Language Learning*, 67(4), 922-958.

Key Stage 3:

Our main concern in relation to the languages curriculum at KS3 is that of the transition between KS2 and KS3. We worry that the lack of cohesive approach to transition demoralises and demotivates learners from an early stage.

There is no system-wide or cohesive approach to this transition period, which creates challenges for both teachers and learners. The British Council's Language Trends surveys have documented the incoherence of the transition for many schools and learners. Although one factor is the lack of communication or collaboration between primary and secondary schools, structural factors are even more important, e.g., inconsistency as to whether pupils can continue with the same language from KS2 to KS3, and great variability in pathways and experiences of transition.²⁵ There is evidence that many schools restart language learning at KS3 due to the inconsistency of provision and transition pathways, which is frustrating and demotivating for those who have already had several years of language learning.²⁶ The new transition model that the Academy and ASCL propose is realistic in that it recognises that it will not always be possible (for many practical reasons) for the language learned at KS2 also to be learned at KS3. But by instilling a 'multilingual outlook' this new transition model will change learners' (and parents') understanding of such a switch (where it occurs), and of the relation between languages, so that the switch becomes an experience of enrichment rather than of discontinuity.

Key Stage 4:

Despite being a core subject within the EBacc, languages take-up at KS4 is much lower than it should be. The British Academy welcomes the Government's ongoing attempt to address this through a National Consortium for Languages Education. Another attempt to increase uptake is the reformed GCSE in French, German, and Spanish (to be first examined in 2026). While the Academy applauds the aims, underlying this reform, of making the qualification more accessible to all and more conducive to sequenced learning, it has expressed concerns that the reformed qualification downplays cultural learning, and that this might dampen motivation and uptake.²⁷ At this early stage, the jury is out on the impact of the reformed GCSE, but it is hoped that the impact will be carefully evaluated so the qualification can be duly modified if needed.

Specifically, the Academy has previously identified that one significant reason for low uptake has been unduly severe grading of the GCSE examination in French, German, and Spanish (see Question 41 below).

Overall, we strongly encourage the review to heed the responses of subject experts and subject associations for detailed evidence for what is and is not working and for suggestions of improvement.

Key Stage 5:

As with KS4, we refer to the expertise of subject experts and subject associations to specific issues of content at KS5. Please see our answer to question 23 regarding the need for content and qualifications in home, heritage and community languages, to question 41 on severe grading, and to question 47 for proposals regarding an alternative languages qualification at Level 3, as well as Sections 6 and 8 for broader thoughts regarding languages subjects at post-16.

²⁵ See for example: British Council (2024) [Language Trends England 2024](#); British Council (2023) [Language Trends England 2023](#).

²⁶ Ayres-Bennett, W. and Carruthers, J. (2019) [Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in England](#), Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies.

²⁷ The British Academy (2021) ['Consultation on revised GCSE qualifications in modern foreign languages: Cultural learning – proposal to replace themes'](#).

23. Are there particular changes that could be made to ensure the curriculum (including qualification content) is more diverse and representative of society?

England is a culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse society. The languages subjects on offer at schools are often not representative of this national diversity or indeed of the specific diversity of the school's locality. At primary level, approximately one in five children has a first language other than English. Schools should be able to tap into the multilingualism of their local community, within the languages classroom and beyond it, to value and build on it as part of learning about the world of languages (rather than seeing it as an obstacle to learning English). Beyond the primary level, there is a need to diversify the range of languages offered to reflect local communities and to provide a broader range of recognised qualifications in home, heritage and community languages. There is a growing body of evidence on the benefits and importance of home, heritage and community languages as well as on the practicalities of provision of qualifications in these.²⁸ We note the breadth of the consensus across the languages community regarding substantial readjustments required in language education to align it with contemporary linguistic realities more effectively.²⁹ We also note the potential of partnerships between mainstream schools and complementary schools (community language schools) in terms of curriculum sharing, teacher sharing, and mutual support for students wanting to take qualifications in home, heritage and community languages.

24. To what extent does the current curriculum (including qualification content) support students to positively engage with, be knowledgeable about and respect others? Are there elements that could be improved?

Language learning is often seen as the acquisition of a set of technical skills – an approach which suggests that languages can be learnt with little reference to culture. However, languages are deeply connected to social, cultural and political life and thus are a key element in the development of intercultural communication and understanding. Language learning and teaching should be viewed largely through the lens of the development of cultural literacy and the process of cultural translation.³⁰ According to Wei (2024), cultural translation is 'about bringing values and practices that have evolved in a specific community to another community so that members of both communities can interact with each other to achieve a certain level of understanding'.³¹ To harness these important elements of language learning, the languages curriculum and pedagogical approaches to language learning and teaching should go beyond technical and mechanical learning and focus on engaging in meaningful interaction. Integrating languages into the curriculum, with a focus on communication and cultural awareness, is an important and effective measure in fostering intercultural knowledge and respect amongst learners.

25. In which ways does the current primary curriculum support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for life and further study and what could we change to better support this?

[do not intend to answer]

²⁸ See for example: Ayres-Bennett, W. and Carruthers, J. (2018) *Policy Briefing on Community Languages and Social Cohesion*. Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies; Association of School and College Leaders (2022) *'Supporting Students with Home, Heritage and Community Languages.'*; Association for Language Learning: *'Home, Heritage and Community Languages Advisory Group: Vision and Goals'*

²⁹ Coalition for Language Education: *Founding Statement*.

³⁰ Burdett, C., Burns, J., Duncan, D. and Polezzi, L. (2018) *Transnationalizing Modern Languages: Reframing language education for a global future*. University of Bristol, Policy Report 35: September 2018.

³¹ Li Wei (2024) *'How do we reinvigorate language learning for the benefit of culture and society?'* UCL IoE News. 25 September 2024.

26. In which ways do the current secondary curriculum and qualification pathways support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

[do not intend to answer]

27. In which ways do the current qualification pathways and content at 16-19 support pupils to have the skills and knowledge they need for future study, life and work and what could we change to better support this?

[do not intend to answer]

Section 6: A broad and balanced curriculum

28. To what extent does the current primary curriculum support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

The national curriculum supports a broad and balanced primary curriculum, but, as outlined in our answer to question 22, the languages offer at Key Stage 2 is uneven and varies extensively by school in terms of time allocation and content. As explained in our answer to question 22, and in line with the proposals developed and evidenced in Holmes and Myles's 2019 white paper, we recommend the commissioning of an expert taskforce to develop clear non-statutory national guidance on the amount of time that should be allocated to language learning at KS2, giving examples of effective curriculum models which illustrate how time is best distributed per week, per term and per year.³²

As the British Academy outlines in its cross-disciplinary response to this review, there is also a need to better ensure that enabling skills, such as oracy, literacy and numeracy, are purposively embedded across the primary curriculum. We welcome the renewed emphasis on oracy in young people's development though emphasise that oracy is as much about pedagogy as it is about curriculum.^{33 34 35} The study of languages is beneficial in developing literacy and particularly oracy skills, and we encourage the review board to refer to the expertise of subject experts and associations on the best curricular and pedagogical approaches to language study that help learners develop these skills.

29. To what extent do the current secondary curriculum and qualifications pathways support pupils to study a broad and balanced curriculum? Should anything change to better support this?

The British Academy acknowledges that there is commitment to a broad and balanced secondary curriculum, with Languages subjects included as core subjects throughout. Although Languages subjects stop being compulsory at the end of KS3, they remain a core element of the EBacc.

However, despite this commitment on paper, evidence suggests worrying trends in participation in and provision of languages subjects at the secondary level. At KS3, although there is statutory guidance for the provision of modern languages, there is some variation in engagement with languages depending on the status of learners. The British Council's Language Trends surveys annually report on the numbers of pupils that are disappplied from language learning at KS3. There is also evidence that in some areas pupils are only receiving language teaching in the first two years of secondary education, with KS4 effectively starting in Year 9 – schools where this takes place are more likely to have a higher proportion of students eligible for FSM, a higher allocation of Pupil Premium funding, and have lower Attainment 8 results, which points to a social justice issue.^{36 37}

At KS4, languages subjects continue to experience worryingly low levels of uptake despite the introduction of the EBacc. The level of EBacc pupil entries for GCSE in languages subjects remains persistently low (47% in 2019) – of pupils who entered four out of the five EBacc

³² Holmes, B. and Myles, F. (2019) *White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward*. RIPL.

³³ Oracy Education Commission (2024) *We need to talk: the report of the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England*.

³⁴ Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (2021) *Final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry*.

³⁵ Alexander, R. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*. London: Routledge, especially chapter 6, 'Grand dichotomy'.

³⁶ Ayres-Bennett, W. and Carruthers, J. (2019) *Policy Briefing on Modern Languages Educational Policy in England*. Multilingualism: Empowering Individuals, Transforming Societies.

³⁷ British Council (2020) *Language Trends England 2020*.

components in 2019, 86% were missing the languages component (Holmes-Henderson 2024).³⁸

30. To what extent do the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 support learners to study a broad curriculum which gives them the right knowledge and skills to progress? Should anything change to better support this?

The British Academy is very concerned that the current qualifications pathways at 16-19 do not provide learners with access to a broad curriculum, nor to the skills and knowledge bases they will need in later life and which are in high demand in a changing UK economy. As discussed throughout our response, the phasing out of AS level qualifications in 2015-16, with AS levels no longer counting towards the overall A level, may have exacerbated a further narrowing of England's already narrow post-16 curriculum, with students taking fewer qualifications and increasingly all from one subject group. This phenomenon, coupled with an overall decline in take-up of Arts and Humanities subjects, should raise alarm bells about the lack of disciplinary breadth and exposure to SHAPE subject skills, including language skills, among young people at 16-19.³⁹

Some subjects, such as modern foreign languages, have seen a larger decline than others. With Languages subjects, we have also seen a worrying decline in provision – in 2021/22, only 54% of providers were offering French at Level 3, as compared to 76% in 2011/12. In the same period, German saw a decline in provision from 50% to 28%, and other non-European languages 36% to 22%. Languages that saw an increase in provision from 2007 to 2015, such as Spanish and other European languages, have experienced a decline again since 2015. Provision of classical languages has remained stable but low at 12-14%. It is of course difficult to disentangle questions of provision from questions of demand. However, we are concerned that low and declining levels of provision are making languages increasingly inaccessible in the post-16 curriculum and, as mentioned in our answers in Section 3, this is affecting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds most.

More research is needed to better contextualise and understand student subject choice, particularly curricular narrowing. Nevertheless, this research may provide an instructive example of how changes to qualification pathways designed to make qualifications more rigorous may have an adverse effect on curricular breadth. It makes clear that pressure on schools regarding assessment and performance is directly linked to curricular provision. We can see that, in other national contexts – for instance, with Scottish Highers – curricular narrowing and pressure on attainment are also closely linked.⁴⁰

We are also concerned that this narrowing may be a symptom of young people's views that studying SHAPE subjects such as languages will negatively impact their opportunities, when in fact the opposite is true. We continue to publish and promote robust evidence on demand and need for languages skills and on the link between language skills and the UK's economy, security and global reputation.⁴¹

³⁸ Holmes-Henderson, A. (2024) 'Par excellence? Government-funded language education programmes in England' in Czerniawski, G., Jones, S. Holmes-Henderson, A., Poutney, R., Pugh, V-M. and Yang, W. (2024) *Curriculum in a changing world: 50 thinkpieces on education, policy, practice, innovation and inclusion*, Troubador Press, Market Harborough. p. 38

³⁹ Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.

⁴⁰ Shapira, M., and Priestley, M. (2023) *Exploring the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations*. Nuffield Foundation.

⁴¹ See: The British Academy (2019) *Languages in the UK: a call for action*; The British Academy (2013) *Lost for Words: The need for languages in UK diplomacy and security*; Ayres-Bennett, W., Hafner, M., Dufresne, E. and Yerushalmi, E. (2022) *The Economic Value to the UK of Speaking Other Languages*. RAND Europe and University of Cambridge.

31.To what extent do the current curriculum (at primary and secondary) and qualifications pathways (at secondary and 16-19) ensure that pupils and learners are able to develop creative skills and have access to creative subjects?

[do not intend to answer]

32.Do you have any explanations for the trends outlined in the analysis and/or suggestions to address any that might be of concern?

As our response to Q30 suggested, languages are not uniquely impacted by curricular narrowing at Level 3. Take-up of other Humanities subjects, such as history and English, as well as Arts subjects have all also decreased over the past two decades. Understanding student subject choice is complex and challenging, given students may consider a wide variety of different factors in making their choice, including prior attainment, quality of teaching, plans for further study or employment, as well as enjoyment. Students also make choices in the context of changes to provider offer. Providers' ability to offer subject provision is likely to have changed in response to funding pressures and recruitment challenges, particularly at FE colleges and in subjects facing particularly acute teacher shortages. The ability of schools and colleges to provide language subjects at A level will be particularly impacted by challenges with teacher recruitment and retention in languages.⁴²

While more research is needed to better contextualise and understand motivations for student subject choice, the Academy's work with NFER has provided clear evidence that changes to the A level after 2015/16 played a key role in the reduction in the range of subjects taken up by many students at Level 3 and exacerbated a trend towards reduced curricular breadth/narrowing in England. Changes to qualification pathways, particularly changes intended to make qualifications more rigorous, have an impact on what students ultimately study. Our research suggests that such reforms lead to curricular narrowing and less exposure to a variety of different disciplines for learners, which will necessarily shape their options for further study, training and work after compulsory schooling. With these trends showing fewer students choosing (or able) to take languages at Level 3, and fewer students choosing to combine a language or other Humanities subject with subjects in STEM, Social Sciences or Arts, we are concerned that the number of people in England developing much-needed languages for use in later life will decline further still.⁴³

33.To what extent and how do pupils benefit from being able to take vocational or applied qualifications in secondary schools alongside more academically focused GCSEs?

[do not intend to answer]

34.To what extent does the current pre-16 vocational offer equip pupils with the necessary knowledge and skills and prepare them for further study options, including 16-19 technical pathways and/or A levels? Could the pre-16 vocational offer be improved?

[do not intend to answer]

⁴² Report of the Education Committee (2024) *Teacher recruitment, training and retention*. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmeduc/119/report.html>. For recruitment challenges faced particularly by FE colleges see Ian Collen, Leanne Henderson, Minchen Liu, Aisling O'Boyle and Jennifer Roberts (2023) *Languages Provision in UK Further Education*. Commissioned by the British Academy. 73-74.

⁴³ Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.

Section 7: Assessment and accountability

35. Is the volume of statutory assessment at key stages 1 and 2 right for the purposes set out above?

We note evidence from relevant subject associations and organisations that at KS1 and KS2, there is an overemphasis on summative assessment. There is a risk that the focus on using language assessments for school and teacher accountability undermines their primary purpose of supporting student learning, and that such an approach particularly disadvantages lower-attaining students.⁴⁴

36. Are there any changes that could be made to improve efficacy without having a negative impact on pupils' learning or the wider education system?

[do not intend to respond]

37. Are there other changes to the statutory assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 that could be made to improve pupils' experience of assessment, without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

The Academy points to evidence provided by the Coalition for Language Education, in that language and literacy assessments at primary level should focus on assessment for learning. Particularly in the context of languages education, we note with interest the main recommendations of the Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education.⁴⁵ These include the phasing out of high stakes assessments, and the introduction of a system of teacher-led pupil profiling drawing on a variety of assessment methods reflecting the full curriculum and documenting children's progress in all aspects of language and literacy, including in heritage and foreign languages.

38. What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

[do not intend to respond]

39. Is the volume of assessment required for GCSEs right for the purposes set out above? Are there any changes that could be made without having a negative impact on either pupils' learning or the wider education system?

There is strong evidence that the current volume of assessment required for GCSEs is too high.⁴⁶ We encourage close dialogue with subject experts regarding challenges posed by the current volume of assessment at KS4 and regarding potential reforms to curricular content and structure where appropriate.

⁴⁴ Hargreaves, E., Quick, L., & Buchanan, D. (2023) National Curriculum and Assessment in England and the continuing narrowed experiences of lower-attainers in primary schools. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 55(5), 545–561.

⁴⁵ Wyse D, Bradbury A and Trollope, R. (2022) *Assessment for Children's Learning: A new future for primary education*. The Independent Commission on Assessment in Primary Education (ICAPE). Final report.

⁴⁶ OCR (2024) *Striking the balance: A review of 11-16 curriculum and assessment in England*.

40. What more can we do to ensure that: a) the assessment requirements for GCSEs capture and support the development of knowledge and skills of every young person; and b) young people’s wellbeing is effectively considered when assessments are developed, giving pupils the best chance to show what they can do to support their progression?

[do not intend to answer]

41. Are there particular GCSE subjects where changes could be made to the qualification content and/or assessment that would be beneficial for pupils’ learning?

As the British Academy and partners outline in *Towards a National Language Strategy*, there are longstanding issues of severe grading of languages subjects at GCSE (which have carried over from similar issues relating to O levels) and at A level.⁴⁷ At the time of publication in 2020, Ofqual had accepted that there was statistical evidence of severe grading and pupils of the same prior attainment had been getting on average a lower grade in French, German and Spanish GCSE than in subjects such as history and geography. This has been a significant factor in depressing uptake of GCSE languages. For example, when answering a recent questionnaire asking them to identify challenges for providing high-quality language-learning experiences in their school (ticking as many as they wished), 503 out of 769 responding state secondary schools (65%) ticked “The way external exams are marked and graded”. In the Independent sector, 131 out of 189 responding schools (69%) ticked that same box.⁴⁸

In August 2024, the Academy welcomed Ofqual’s announcement that exam boards will be required to make positive adjustments to the grades they award in French and German, but this still leaves the problem mostly unsolved.⁴⁹ We continue to argue that (a) there should be a greater adjustment across all Languages subjects so that pupils’ grades in modern languages GCSE are comparable on average with the grades in other EBacc subjects for pupils of the same prior attainment; (b) beyond GCSEs, the question of severe grading of modern languages at A level should be reopened by Ofqual.

42. Are there ways in which we could support improvement in pupil progress and outcomes at key stage 3?

[do not intend to answer]

43. Are there ways in which we could support pupils who do not meet the expected standard at key stage 2?

[do not intend to answer]

44. To what extent, and in what ways, does the accountability system influence curriculum and assessment decisions in schools and colleges?

[do not intend to answer]

⁴⁷ The British Academy, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Association of School and College Leaders, British Council and Universities UK (2020) *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*, Recommendation 2.2, p.10.

⁴⁸ British Council (2022) *Language Trends England 2022*. Raw data not included in the report, shared by permission of report author and British Council. Not for publication without further permission.

⁴⁹ Blow, D. (2023) ‘*Standing up for fairness on exams*’. *Languages Today*.

45. How well does the current accountability system support and recognise progress for all pupils and learners? What works well and what could be improved?

[do not intend to answer]

46. Should there be any changes to the current accountability system in order to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and/or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what should those changes be?

[do not intend to answer]

Section 8: Qualification pathways 16-19

47. To what extent does the range of programmes and qualifications on offer at each level meet the needs and aspirations of learners?

a. Level 3

In *Towards a National Language Strategy*, the British Academy and partners recommended the introduction of a new one-year language qualification at Level 3.⁵⁰ The intention is not to compete with the A level, but to enable those students who are not continuing their GCSE language to A level to carry on with it via another route.⁵¹ This need has become more pressing since AS and A levels were decoupled, which has led to students taking fewer qualifications at post-16 and has likely exacerbated the decline in languages qualifications taken.⁵² The aims of such a qualification would be to diversify post-16 language pathways, enable more students to continue with languages beyond GCSE (regardless of their overall pathway), promote inclusivity, and remove barriers to opportunity by enhancing learners' oracy, intercultural agility, autonomy and confidence.

The British Academy and the Association for School and College Leaders (ASCL) have jointly held preliminary consultations with diverse stakeholders, including teachers, educational researchers, and representatives from subject associations, universities and an examination board. Based on these discussions, our proposal is for a one-year Level 3 qualification in languages, provisionally called 'Applied Languages' or 'Using Languages' (for example 'Applied Spanish' or 'Using Spanish', etc.), to be taken in either year of post-16 education alongside A levels or other post-16 further education pathways. The qualification would be open to students who have achieved Grade 4 or above at GCSE (or equivalent, particularly in the case of heritage languages where no prior qualification may be needed). The content of such a qualification would focus on consolidating and extending the four skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading via the study of a personalised area of interest, which would make the qualification relevant to students on all subject pathways.

We are currently developing a paper that outlines our proposal and its evidence base in detail, including suggestions for content, teaching and assessment. We would welcome the opportunity to share and discuss this with relevant policymakers when appropriate.

b. Level 2

c. Level 1 and entry level

48. Are there particular changes that could be made to the following programmes and qualifications and/or their assessment that would be beneficial to learners:

a. AS/A level qualifications

b. T Level and T Level Foundation Year programmes

c. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 3

d. Other applied or vocational qualifications at level 2 and below

Research commissioned by the British Academy and undertaken by Queen's University Belfast on languages provision in UK further education (FE) showed that there is a need to undertake an urgent review of qualifications for languages in FE, as currently they suffer

⁵⁰ The British Academy, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Association of School and College Leaders, British Council and Universities UK (2020) *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*, Recommendation 3.5.

⁵¹ See: Steer, P. (2015) 'Why we can't go on like this – Language qualifications in the UK,' Cambridge Assessment Network and Research.

⁵² Scott, M., Julius, J., Tang, S., and Lucas, M. (2024) *Subject choice trends in post-16 education in England*. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Commissioned by the British Academy.

from a narrow focus on certain languages and qualifications. There is a need to support and expand language qualifications for vocational routes, particularly those for which languages are critical, e.g., qualifications allied to travel, hospitality and communication. Together with such a review of qualifications, strategic investment in languages other than French, Spanish and German – and including home, heritage and community languages – would be beneficial economically at the individual and societal level.⁵³

We also recommend exploring options for students to learn a language *ab initio* – from the beginning – at post-16, rather than being limited only to continuation of languages studied in previous stages of education.

49. How can we improve learners’ understanding of how the different programmes and qualifications on offer will prepare them for university, employment (including apprenticeships) and/or further technical study?

[Do not intend to answer]

50. To what extent is there enough scope and flexibility in the system to support learners who may need to change course?

[Do not intend to answer]

51. Are there additional skills, subjects, or experiences that all learners should develop or study during 16-19 education, regardless of their chosen programmes and qualifications, to support them to be prepared for life and work?

Currently, only a small proportion of learners in 16-19 education – those that take a languages A level – are able to develop and benefit from the skillsets gained through studying languages and intercultural communication, many of which have been outlined throughout this response. We reiterate the importance of diversifying the offer and provision of languages options and qualifications to be available to a wider range of learners on various pathways.

Section 9: Other issues on which we would welcome views

52. How can the curriculum, assessment and wraparound support better enable transitions between key stages to ensure continuous learning and support attainment?

[do not intend to answer]

53. How could technology be used to improve how we deliver the curriculum, assessment and qualifications in England?

We agree with other organisations such as the University Council for Languages and the Coalition for Language Education that digital technologies can enhance language teaching and learning and offer potential to support multilingualism in education.⁵⁴ The growth of AI has implications for language practices and learning, and teachers and students will need to develop new skills to both integrate it constructively into the languages curriculum, and how to use it effectively and critically in both educational and non-educational contexts (see our cross-disciplinary Academy response to this review for more detail regarding the development of digital skills). We also agree that while digital technologies can be beneficial to learning, they cannot substitute for the social experience of the classroom, particularly in the context of languages education.⁵⁵

We also echo the Academy's broader response to this question, provided with accompanying evidence in our cross-disciplinary response, where we warn against the adoption of new technologies without addressing the serious issues posed by digital inequalities.

54. Do you have any further views on anything else associated with the Curriculum and Assessment Review not covered in the questions throughout the call for evidence?

[do not intend to answer]

⁵⁴ See: Research in Primary Languages (2024) 'Digital Empowerment in Language Teaching: Using Technology to Boost Learning, Creativity, and Teacher Motivation,' 13 Nov 2024.

⁵⁵ Lee, H., & Lee, J. H., 2024. 'The effects of AI-guided individualized language learning: A meta-analysis,' *Language Learning & Technology*, 28, 134-162.