

Languages Forum- 1st meeting at BIS 17th March 2010

At this first meeting there were representatives of BIS, DCSF, TDA, HEFCE, CILT, LLAS, specialist schools, UCML, AULC, a PVC from Sheffield and the National Director of Languages

Unfortunately, there was no one from business and Colin Riordan, Essex VC could not attend.

I'm attempting to summarise a somewhat rambling discussion, without always attributing comments to speakers. There's a risk that the same people in varying configurations continue to meet and say the same things to each other about the beleaguered state of languages (which they already know) without getting anything done.

The focus was on **communication**, as per the terms of reference, so there was lots of talk of (mixed) messages, lobbying, champions, advocacy etc.

1. Communication to government and the public

- There needs to be an effort to increase the 'public understanding of the humanities/languages', which has been successful in science..
- STEM subjects lobby hard and repeatedly for their case to be heard, making full use of employers to back them up; the humanities are too polite (DCSF)
- Languages need champions. This was thought to have been effective in the London Olympics bid, but should be taken more seriously and long-term

2. Communication with school pupils

DCSF believes that primary schools should be the focus. It was suggested that there may be a risk in this that children might think that they 'do' languages at primary school and go on to more important, serious, useful things at secondary school and later.

There was a report on the DCSF multi-media advertising campaign aimed at 11-14 yr-olds (£2 million)

- Although this was seen as successful in enthusing those children likely to have been exposed to languages (focus on popular culture as a means of stimulating interest), those who are not exposed do not believe that languages are important.
- These need to be given hard evidence, using experience inside and outside school: just telling them they are significant is not enough, and they may be too young to be swayed by careers information
- Role models would be useful
- Inherent multilingualism among pupils should be made more use of
- Bringing in former pupils who have made use of languages in science etc. can be very positive, especially if they are honest about the experience (languages can be hard work but worth the effort)
- Government needs to get at parents

3. Communication with employers

- This is a problem, as there appear to be mixed messages from employers about the significance of languages.
- In promoting languages we need to focus more on outcomes: what is language capability? It must be tangible and more than vague 'global citizenship', as science, law, medicine etc can demonstrate.
- Languages could be linked more with 'hard' careers such as medicine (e.g. MSF) and the military (peace-keeping)

4. Communication with HE management

- Also seen as a big problem: how do you get 6 VCs around a table to talk about languages?
- It was also suggested that language professionals have a struggle to get their voice heard internally by their senior management in competition with STEM
- Internationalisation strategies don't always include languages
- "Internationalisation doesn't only mean bums on seats" and the situation is changing (David Lammy, Minister for HE, BIS)
- If universities don't believe in language learning, how can schools make any difference? The UCL policy will obviously be watched with interest
- There needs to be a concerted message to VCs

- There needs to be improved information for prospective students about career choices and employability
- Universities need to allocate funds for language skills training as they do for IT etc. (UCML)

Summary of strategic approach

- focus on what can be done with limited resources (not a professional marketing campaign)
- focus on the outcomes of language learning and evidence-based claims
- decide on narrower range of target audiences for messages (currently too broad)
- achieve clarity about language capacity as other subjects do
- be realistic- recognize the UK's cultural position wrt English and challenge it
- be honest- it's possible to get away with monolingualism, but better not to
- link languages with STEM subjects
- consider targetted information for prospective students

Actions

- Write and issue a press release about the Forum's existence and purpose- BIS
- Tackle UUK and SIVS panel via Colin Riordan
- Receive results of the three working groups (supported by HEFCE), set up by UCML, AULC, LLAS and CILT, which are about to start work. These cover: a shared identity for the discipline, internationalisation and the contribution of languages to society
- CILT to help approaches to employers

The future of the forum will depend somewhat on the election. Present ministers are committed (and hope to continue). New ministers might think this is something relatively easy to support.

The state of the economy might work to the advantage of languages, with a keener focus on employability (and working abroad?)

Next meeting: mid-late summer 2010