

# The British Academy

## Language Matters – follow up

**Brainstorming session on 3 February 2010, between 11am and 1pm.**

### **Aims of the meeting:**

- To seek the views of an invited group of experts on the follow-up activities (policy study and/or workshops and other events) where the Academy is well placed to make a distinctive and authoritative contribution.
- To identify the focus of any follow-up policy studies or events.
- To identify possible partners.

### **The British Academy's concerns**

1. The Academy considers that language training and take-up at GCSE and beyond in secondary schools is inadequate to support the development of high-level graduate studies and academic research in the humanities and social sciences. Research in all subjects is becoming increasingly insular in outlook, because PhD students do not have language skills, or the time to acquire them. Fewer language students at GCSE means fewer students at A-level and degree level, with a potentially extremely damaging effect on the supply not only of secondary and primary school teachers but also of HE researchers. The Academy is not convinced that making languages mandatory at primary level will be the quick fix to the current crisis in language learning, because there is no mandatory continuation into, or mandatory correlation with, secondary school education.
2. In June 2009, the Academy published a position paper, *Language Matters*, which accompanied a report commissioned from RAND Europe to explore the hypothesis that UK-born and -educated researchers lacked essential foreign language skills, which limited their ability to engage with research topics requiring advance knowledge of languages other than English. RAND Europe's findings led the Academy to make 8 recommendations, grouped under 4 headings:
  - What can the HE sector itself do to encourage more pupils at secondary school to take up language learning?
  - What can individual university HSS departments of faculties do to ensure that their students improve or acquire the languages skills needed for the highest-quality HSS research at postgraduate level?
  - How can we build language capacity in the HSS research base?
  - What should be the next steps?
3. Following the launch and publication of *Language Matters*, the Academy has followed-up the paper's main messages. This work has included further liaison with the Chairs of both the Russell Group and the 94 Group of universities, as well as a letter to all university vice-chancellors, the chairs of university groups (including Universities UK), calling on them to follow the lead set by UCL, and require their

students either to have a language qualification on entry or to take a language qualification as part of their degree studies. The Academy also made a submission to the HEFCE's Review of Modern Languages, which was chaired by Professor Michael Worton. We are very grateful that Professor Worton is able to join us today.

### **Policy Centre substantive policy reports and research overviews**

4. The British Academy has recently enhanced its programme of policy related activities, which has two strands of work: the way in which HSS research sheds light on major public policy issues; and the way in which HE policies impact on the health and well-being of HSS research. In the past, the Academy's activities have focused on the way in which HE policy impacts on the HSS research base. With effect from September 2009, the Academy established a Policy Centre, which aims to develop both strands of activity, and draws on resource from within the Academy's budget and personnel and, from the ESRC. With effect from 1 April 2010, the Centre will also be able to draw on support from the AHRC.
5. The Centre's outputs will include:
  - substantive policy studies (alone and in partnership with sister academies);
  - topical research overviews;
  - submissions;
  - policy briefings.
6. Activities will include:
  - the organisation of events;
  - liaison with learned societies and Higher Education Institutions;
  - promotional work on impact and profile
7. *Substantive Policy Studies*. The aim of these substantive studies is to utilize the Academy's particular strength in being able to draw together leading academic experts across the range of humanities and social science; to look to the medium term rather than the immediate future; and to complement, and perhaps integrate, the work of current shorter-term research projects currently pursued by the research councils and other agencies. Reports will contain conclusions and recommendations for policy and practice. Each study will be overseen by a group of specially convened experts, who will have intellectual oversight of the study. Substantive reports may typically be around 20,000 to 30,000 words in length, and will contain an executive summary that can be published as a free-standing document.
8. The Academy is committed to start four substantive policy studies in 2009/10. Three studies are currently in train: Family Patterns and Public Policy; Human Enhancement; and Changing Britain.
9. *Research overview reports* These aim to draw research together in fresh and critical ways, in order to inform policy-makers understanding of the issue and the appropriateness or not of the various options for intervention. Unlike the substantive policy reports, research overviews do not contain recommendations for policy and

practice. Leading researchers are commissioned by the Academy to produce research summaries of the current state of knowledge on issues of public policy concern. Research overview reports aim to bring together what is known about a particular topic, and to identify where there might be gaps in understanding. Research overviews are launched at specially convened meetings of relevant stakeholders and users. The reports should typically be c 10,000 words in length, which should include an executive summary of 1,000 to 2,000 words in length. There are two research overview projects in progress: *Election systems* on the likely outcome of using different electoral systems; *Stress at Work* on work related stress as well as the various options available to policymakers seeking to mitigate work related stress and to address its impact.

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*ubmissions and advocacy activities.* The Academy is also maintaining its programme of submissions in response to national consultations. These tend to be on issues related to HE policy.
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*etings and Activities* These include a range of policy related events, notably, the Academy's recently established series of Forums, which are attended by academics, policy makers, civil servants and other practitioners, politicians, and journalists.

### **Questions to be addressed at the brainstorming meeting**

12. This brainstorming session is an opportunity to seek the views of an invited group of experts, in order to develop the Academy's thinking in this area and help to give focus to any follow-up activity. The following suggestions have been made as possible areas for the Academy to focus its efforts, and are shown in no particular order of priority.
- (i) To undertake a study of government and public sector needs in language, considering the strategic need for skills in certain languages, both for issues such as national security, and for ensuring that research capacity in relevant areas can be supported and maintained. [This overlaps with a suggestion made by officials in the BIS HE team that the BA should gather evidence and case studies of the difficulties that many Gov depts (Home Office, GCHQ, MoD, FCO etc) were having in the recruitment of qualified linguists.]
  - (ii) To look at ways of supporting a proposal being adopted by some universities to make a year abroad compulsory for all bachelor's degrees.
  - (iii) To look at how language tuition was financed at university.
  - (iv) Regional Studies. To examine the UK's need for knowledge of other languages, cultures and societies. Language issues relate closely to the question of the UK's research relations with different areas of the world, including issues of UK-International collaboration, and are of major interest in relation to the Academy's International Engagement work, including its various area panels. A conference may be a possible way of

taking this suggestion forward in the short-term. It may also be worth considering ways in which a project on these lines might also link up with some of the Academy's International Engagement work. For example, there might be possible synergies with a forthcoming study of the state of Latin American and Caribbean Studies in the UK.

- (v) Languages and the upskilling agenda. To hold a seminar for representatives of CBI, IoD etc, in order to discuss their need for language skills. This could develop some of the points raised, for example, in last April's CBI report, *Emerging Stronger: The Value of Education and Skills in Turbulent Times*, which said that "more than a third of companies (26%) recruit employees specifically for their language skills, considering these vital to retain their competitive edge in an increasingly globalised business environment".
- (vi) To set up a study to examine the socio-economic profile of UG language students, and produce figures on numbers and proportion from private and state schools. For example, Ron Dearing's report gave figures on the link between language take-up and free school dinners.
- (vii) To set up a study to consider the role of OFSTED.
- (viii) To consider the relative costs and policy priority of motivational campaigns directed at students and their parents, compared to the structure of the school curriculum as influenced by league tables.
- (ix) To examine the drop out rate from languages between AS and A2; we usually look at GCSE take up, but this point half way through the 6th form is another critical stage which needs attention.
- (x) To examine the issue of how few school students (and by implication university students) are taking only one language, rather than two, and how this might affect their future employability, as well as the UK's capacity to provide professional linguists for international institutions as well as business.
- (xi) To examine signals of decline in language learning in the independent school sector.

13. In considering these suggestions, you are asked to bear in mind the following:

- What are the areas where the Academy has something distinctive to say, and is well placed to say it? Care must be taken to ensure that the Academy's study complements rather than duplicates the work that is already in hand.
- Should the Academy consider linking its project to work that others may already have in hand? For example, should it consider ways in which it could follow-up the recommendations that may arise from one of the research projects in the Routes into Languages Programme?

- Should the Academy consider undertaking the project in collaboration with other bodies?
- Who should be the key target audience for the Academy's final recommendations?
- What recommendations are likely to flow from the project?

**14. Agenda for the brainstorming session (11am to 1pm)**

- (a) Welcome and introduction. Sir Adam Roberts, President, The British Academy and Dr Robin Jackson, Chief Executive and Secretary, The British Academy.
- (b) Introduction to the issues under consideration. Professor Helen Wallace, FBA.
- (c) To consider the various approaches that have been outlined.

**1pm** Lunch