

The relationship between academic departments of modern languages and language centres

The Worton Review (October 2009) has highlighted, within its description of the modern languages sector in England and in its recommendations, a perceived 'tension' between academic departments of modern languages in English universities and language centres operating in the same HEIs. In other words, the tension (where it exists) is described as internal within an institution (perhaps a matter of demarcation) rather than as competition between the two sectors nationally.

This document attempts, in the spirit of the report, to identify what the obstacles may be in the way of greater collaboration and harmonious relations, while recognizing that the 'problem' is not universal, and that positive and productive contacts already exist in some institutions. The assumption is that it is in the interests of both types of operation that any mutual suspicion is removed.

1. Obstacles to closer collaboration

1.1 How is the relationship described?

The starkly negative words 'threat', 'tension', 'hostility', 'petty jealousies' have recently been used in a variety of documents (both official and informal) to characterise the relationship, though sometimes qualified by 'alleged'.

The following quotes from the Worton report give a flavour of the impression he gained during his review:

- "the relationship between Language Centres/IWLPs and the Modern Language Departments is often an uneasy one, with the Language Centres often being perceived by the MFL Departments as mere service providers of 'everyday' language learning." (para. 135)
- "there was some anxiety amongst a group of respondents about the profile of Language Centres and the extent to which they represented a threat to the status of the academic Departments." (para. 161)
- "There is clearly a certain degree of tension between MFL Departments and Language Centres, with the latter often being seen as simply providing 'service' language teaching or 'basic', 'everyday' language teaching." (para. 162)
- "A recurring theme was the need to challenge the 'false dichotomy' which exists between Language Centres (perceived as merely teaching language skills) and academic Departments (who define themselves as teaching language through content and culture)." (para 174)

This impression was noticed and repeated by a contributor to a House of Lords debate "Foreign languages and the UK economy" on 3rd December 2009:

- "There have been some petty jealousies between language centres and the researchers—the "real" university people. I am pleased to say that that is not the case at X, my old university, but I am aware that it is a problem in some places" (Lords Hansard 3/12/2009 column 826).

It is in the belief that this dichotomy is a false one that this document aims to analyse the differing perspectives and attempts to identify more productive ways of working.

1.2. The academic perspective

At a time when national trends in student demand indicate a shift away from full-time languages degrees towards the kind of credit-bearing elective modules provided by language centres, it is perhaps natural that relationships can become strained. Most serious are cases where institutions have closed academic departments, leaving the only language teaching operation on campus that provided by the language centre or equivalent.

There clearly are genuine differences between the two sectors: e.g. area and cultural studies, research activity and research funding. Within language teaching itself, there are justifiable demarcation lines between what the two types of department wish to call their own. In research and teaching the natural avenues for collaboration are often found with other humanities disciplines. Academic departments have responded to student demand, in the range of joint honours combinations they have offered, the range of specialised optional courses and interdisciplinary opportunities for students.

1.3. The language centre perspective

Recognition and parity of esteem

There is a perception that academic departments (and individuals) are not aware of the work of language centres, and this may reflect a general lack of understanding in the institutions as a whole. This includes the complexity and range of their activities, the academic and professional qualifications, specialist skills and experience of their teaching staff, the academically demanding level of their courses and the practical, transferable skills that their students acquire. The comments repeated in the Worton report, that language centres are “merely teaching language skills”, reflects a view of language teaching (‘anyone can teach their own language’, ‘it’s only survival French etc.’) reminiscent of the attitude towards the teaching of EFL prevalent until quite recently (‘English can be taught to foreign students by the wives of academics’), which has taken a lot of time and effort to extinguish. The latter has been achieved partly by the professionalisation of EAP operations, provision of credit-bearing courses in some institutions and rigorous external accreditation by bodies such as BALEARP and the British Council.

Professional status

There are, however, problems with professional status in foreign language teaching in language centres. Many teaching staff have traditionally been given short-term, part-time contracts, and their conditions of work in some institutions (overcrowded office space, lack of benefits and perks) may be perceived as second-class. These conditions are often related to the way language centres are financed, which requires flexibility of teaching staff employment in order to balance the books and respond rapidly to demand for additional languages or levels. They are often categorised as ‘non-academic’, ‘teaching fellows’, ‘other related’, ‘tutors’, labels which can be used to separate them from ‘lecturers’ and reinforce a lower status.

Subject specialism

An examination of the range of courses typically provided by language centres shows a great deal of collaboration with non-humanities schools, offering specialist language components for students of aerospace, medicine, engineering etc. These are highly valued by the academic schools and their students, contributing as they do to cultural awareness and practical skills that are much sought-after by employers. In this kind of co-operation, language centres often pride themselves on a relatively rapid response to student demand and on tailoring the curricula to the detailed analysis of specific, current and real-life needs.

Finance

Those language centres that have a profitable and integrated EAP operation may have a suspicion that any larger unit they belong to values them largely for their external income. In the other direction, there may be envy of language centres’ ability to attract ‘easy’ money for what is perceived as not much effort.

2. The scope for a complementary relationship

‘We’ in this context means all those in an institution involved in language-related activities.

2.1. We should stop using the terms ‘specialist’ and ‘non-specialist’ to differentiate students following degrees in languages from those taking a credit-bearing language course as part of a degree. Any learning of a language could be called specialist (perhaps French for the aerospace industry is more specialised than French for film studies).

2.2. Both types of department have an international perspective, though one that is perhaps somewhat differently orientated. Language centres may have incoming international students on EAP courses and be preparing UK students from any faculty for study abroad. Academic departments send students on a year abroad and are involved in international research collaboration and publication. Both are employers of international staff. These are strengths that should be used jointly to influence university policies and promote internationalisation.

2.3. We should reflect on the question “What is language teaching in an academic degree for?” How much overlap already exists with what language centres do and how much can co-operation be increased and duplication or competition be decreased?”

2.4. The area of language-related teaching and research has an active subject centre (LLAS), which supports academic departments and language centres equally.

2.5. We have two strong associations (UCML, AULC) with scope for working more closely together. The working groups they have jointly proposed are an excellent opportunity to demonstrate this positive spirit.

2.6. Language centres are a resource which could be used for pedagogic research by academic departments. Languages departments are a source of linguistic expertise and research-led teaching that could be shared more widely.

2.7. In order to work more productively together, there is need for much greater understanding of each other, which should result in greater mutual respect. We should be identifying, promoting and making use of relative strengths not attempting to defend relative status.

3. The benefits of collaboration

3.1. Our common interest in defending the subject area as a whole internally and externally should unite us.

3.2. Our joint aim should be to raise the quality of provision in language teaching and related activities. There is clear demand from employers for graduates with additional language skills, and we can contribute to universities' employability targets.

3.3. Languages have a clear role to play in enabling universities to meet their internationalisation objectives, and we can demonstrate this much more easily if we campaign jointly.

3.4. However, the student body we are catering for is segmented, with a range of ambitions, uses for language skills and target levels of proficiency. Recognising this differentiation is the key first step towards no longer seeing each other as rivals.

3.5. We should be aware that university administrations have little sympathy for professional squabbling, and senior managements may be quite willing to enforce collaboration where it seems logical to them.

3.6. In this regard it is particularly important to demonstrate to funding bodies that we can be a united discipline and can make provision more efficient and effective. After all, that we are significant has already been recognized.

4. Relevant recommendations from the Worton Review

- University Modern Languages Departments, Language Centres, LLAS and CILT should work together to promote a clear and compelling identity for Modern Foreign Languages as a humanities discipline, one which:
 - Articulates the relationship between specialism in languages and general language competence. (para. 207)
- Vice-Chancellors and Senior Management teams should provide sufficient funding and support to MFL Departments and to Language Centres to allow them to develop together in ways which are appropriate to the institutional context. (para. 209)
- Universities need, where appropriate, to address the tensions that can exist between MFL Departments and Language Centres, ensuring that there is parity of esteem for both, and with a commitment to building a culture of collaborative development for languages provision. (para. 214)
- The importance of contextualised language learning should be recognised by the appointment and the continuing professional development of highly trained specialist language teachers, in MFL Departments as well as in Language Centres. (para. 215)

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