

MODERN LANGUAGES: DEVELOPING CONCERTED COLLECTIVE ACTION

Modern Languages (understood inclusively as the integrated study of a broad range of languages, cultures and societies) is a subject of crucial importance in HE and across the wider educational sector. It is an essential disciplinary area that contributes to developing interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral solutions to global issues of urgent topical concern. It encourages greater understanding of multilingualism as well as recognition of the limitations of monolingualism; it promotes awareness and engagement with complex linguistic and cultural configurations across the globe; it contributes to the economic wellbeing and security of the UK; it prepares graduates who work across an array of careers.

Opportunities for Modern Languages

- Persistent public curiosity across the four nations of the UK about language learning and acquisition of related cultural knowledge.
- Growing visibility of the multilingual nature of the UK.
- Increasingly integrated infrastructure and government investment, bringing together multiple parts of the sector and discipline (e.g., National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE), <https://ncle-language-hubs.ucl.ac.uk/>).
- Surveys with employers indicate that they value language skills, cultural awareness, curiosity, and willingness to be in dialogue with others from different contexts as extremely valuable as UK employers seek to be internationally recognised and competitive.
- See Wendy Ayres-Bennett et al., 'The economic value to the UK of speaking other languages', RAND Corporation (2022): https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1814-1.html.
- Importance of languages and cultural knowledge for national security, diplomacy and strategic interests <https://theconversation.com/fewer-u-s-college-students-are-studying-a-foreign-language-and-that-spells-trouble-for-national-security-198135>
- The importance of Modern Languages within associations across the Arts and Humanities that enhance the collective voice of the disciplinary field: Arts and Humanities Alliance; Irish Humanities Alliance; Scottish Arts and Humanities Alliance; Wales Arts and Humanities Alliance; Bilingualism Matters.

Challenges facing Modern Languages

It is, however, clear that MLs faces challenges that threaten its ability to thrive and survive. These challenges include:

- Lack of public awareness of the importance of MLs disciplines.
- Declining numbers of students studying languages at GCSE and at A level (and their equivalents).
- Perceived difficulty of language subjects at secondary school level.
- Declining capacity to ensure language education and the existence of *cold spots*.
- Falling recruitment in university courses of MLs.
- Closure or downsizing of university departments of MLs.
- Lack of awareness of the social and cultural applications of MLs research.
- The current HE funding crisis disproportionately affecting MLs.

ACTION TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES THAT MLs FACES

Researchers studying languages, cultures and societies produce research that is world-leading; that is based on deep thinking, critical engagement, and advanced methodologies of linguistic, social and cultural analysis; that promotes interdisciplinarity; that exerts influence in a range of global contexts. But the modes of conducting research and delivering its outcomes develop rapidly and there is a need to ensure greater public awareness of the importance of the research that is conducted in the disciplinary area.

Working closely together with subject associations and many other organisations, the British Academy, the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies (ILCS), the University Council

For Languages (UCFL), and the Association of University Language Communities (AULC) pursue a series of initiatives to ensure the wellbeing and the development of the subject area. These initiatives aim to address all aspects of the disciplinary field and include – though are in no sense limited to – the following areas:

1. Recruitment/pipeline or pathways issues for Modern Languages

- Developing more strategic relationships between universities and the wider education sector and Initial Teacher Education, especially through initiatives like: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/>.
- Building on the highly successful mentoring programmes, in particular in Wales and Northern Ireland: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/what-works-languages-mentoring-and-ambassador-programmes/>; see also the video: <https://x.com/MFLMentoring/status/1630961094264250368?s=20>.
- Developing initiatives aimed at ensuring a coordinated approach to language education (e.g., <https://www.thelanguagesgateway.uk/>).
- Supporting the work of curricular reform across the educational sector (e.g., the work of the National Consortium for Languages Education): <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-centre-intercultural-studies/national-consortium-languages-education-ncle>).
- Supporting more student focussed Open Access resources that can be used across the educational sector, such as *Transnational Modern Languages: A Handbook*: <https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/book/10.3828/9781800348493>.
- Ensuring that research in HE is accessible at different levels of the education system, by supporting initiatives that provide resources for secondary school students, e.g.: <https://www.pearson.com/en-gb/schools/subject-resources/modern-languages/why-languages-matter/diversity-and-inclusion/permission-to-speak.html>.

2. Promoting greater inclusivity in Languages education

- Exchanging ideas and methodologies across subject associations and HEIs. <https://ilcs.sas.ac.uk/blog/modern-languages-and-inclusivity-sharing-ideas-and-practices>.
- Encouraging joined-up approaches to language learning and promoting greater inclusivity across languages: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09571736.2021.1888151#abstract>) and <https://news.hackney.gov.uk/spanish-teaching-in-hackney-schools-is-an-example-to-others/>
- Decolonising Languages: Ways forward for UK HE and beyond: <https://www.lspjournal.com/post/decolonising-languages>
- Promoting and sharing work at individual institutions:
- <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/decolonising-education-from-theory-to-practice/0/steps/190049>
- <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/decolonisesml/about/#:~:text=It%20aims%20to%20initiate%20and,with%20a%20learning%2Fteaching%20resource>
- <https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/modern-languages-cultures/research/groups/decolonising-mlac/>
- Supporting work in decolonising language education in secondary schools: <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/about/community/special-interest-groups/de-colonising-the-curriculum/>

3. Enhancing the visibility of the importance of MLs research

- Enhance the visibility of the research produced by the subject area and understanding of its relevance to multiple contexts.
- Promote, especially through work with the AHRC and UKRI, interdisciplinary and challenge-based approaches to research; <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/03/30/the-humanities-in-the-uk-today-whats-going-on/>.

- Engage with all sectors of society and build on the work of the AHRC's £16m investment in Modern Languages, the Open World Research Initiative (OWRI): <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/browse-our-areas-of-investment-and-support/open-world-research-initiative/>.
- Follow through the recommendations of the three AHRC Future of Languages Research Fellows. See Katie Harrison and Nicola McLelland, 'Research in Languages, Cultures, and Societies: Voices of Researchers in the UK': <https://modernlanguagesopen.org/articles/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.476>.
- The BA and UCFL, with support from the MHRA, have secured funding for developing methods of demonstrating the policy relevance of research outputs – namely short and readable research summaries.
- Engage more consistently with policymakers to demonstrate the societal impact of research in the disciplinary area, e.g., *Languages and Policy: Building Collaborations between Academics & Policymakers*: https://ilcs.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/institute_modern_languages_research/Language%20policy%20report.pdf

4 Greater advocacy for Modern Languages

Key to all of the developments above is advocacy and the development of greater public understanding of the value of MLs. This requires more co-ordinated responses towards the reporting of languages in the media, promoting linguistic sensitivity in a broad range of contexts, an enthusiasm for translating research findings to wider audiences.

MORE CONCERTED COLLECTIVE ACTION ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

The issues that the subject area is confronting are such that there is a need for more strategic, more joined up, and more effective action. The existing situation where individual departments – part of institutions that are in competition with one another – come infrequently together and are not tasked to perform a common purpose is not and cannot be conducive to the long-term sustainability of the subject area.

It is only by working more cohesively as a subject area, in developing agreed upon and followed through responses to the issues that it faces, that MLs can ensure its viability in the longer term. Unless departments and subject associations develop modes of working more closely together around a series of common objectives, then the future will simply be the repetition of defensive action to protect departments that have come under pressure.

Any government initiative that aims to affect MLs, whether that concerns curricular reform or enhanced funding in the educational sector, will not meet with the level of success that it should unless the subject area is able to come together more effectively and participate as a whole in the drive across the four nations of the UK to ensure that language education remains a vital part of the educational infrastructure. What is needed is an ambitious plan for the development of MLs that involves – and that is delivered by – all stakeholders in the subject area.

It is for these reasons that the British Academy (BA), the University Council For Languages (UCFL), the Alliance of Modern Languages, Area Studies and Linguistics Subject Associations (AMLUK) and the Institute for Languages, Cultures and Societies (ILCS) are proposing the actions that are outlined below.

All these actions are aimed at ensuring that the work that is occurring across the sector to sustain the development of the subject area is fully shared and is as effective as possible at a time when the Humanities as a whole are facing very significant challenges. Crucially, each individual action must have an individual/institutional 'owner' or lead, identified below in square brackets:

Actions requiring follow-up:

- Establish a dedicated person in every Department or School, engaged with the bodies above and other relevant organisations, whose role it is to ensure that the Department/School is aware of and committed to collective action aimed at sustaining the subject area. The group of reps will meet 4 times a year, hosted by ILCS and supported by UCFL.
[ACTION: Departments/Schools to identify representative; ILCS and UCFL to liaise with Depts/Schools]
- Concerted action on following up initiatives like the Durham conference on ways forward for Modern Languages or the Languages Gateway.
[ACTION: BA; UCFL; ILCS; Chair, Editorial Group of Languages Gateway; Dept/School reps]
- Create a task and finish working group (including departmental and subject association reps) with a view to design and commission a highly visible public awareness campaign with high profile public figures, to include public talks, articles in the media, evidence submitted to policy makers.
[ACTION: UCFL, BA, ILCS, Subject Associations to deliver; ILCS and UCFL to coordinate]
- Engage all Depts/Schools in developing policy focussed research.
[ACTION: UCFL, ILCS, Dept reps to deliver]
- Advocacy training on how to talk to the media and stakeholders about the importance of the subject field within the Humanities.
[ACTION: School of Advanced Study to deliver]

All actions are subject to ongoing discussion and review. We actively encourage colleagues to get in touch should they like to be involved either as departmental reps or as potential leads on the above actions or others to be agreed. In the first instance, however, we are asking Heads of Dept/School to appoint departmental reps locally

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