

Dialogues

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Global Britain requires more and better language skills

by [Bernardette Holmes](#)

In this article, Bernardette Holmes, Principal Investigator of [Born Global](#), the British Academy policy project on languages and employability, reassesses the role of languages and intercultural understanding for Britain's global position. It draws on the findings of the Born Global project and identifies the language skills that are most in demand now to establish new global relationships, and locates language skills firmly within the matrix of wider employability skills for the 21st century.

In the current political and economic context following the outcome of the Referendum and the decision to leave the European Union, we must reassess the value of languages and intercultural understanding to Britain's future in the national interest and as a matter of urgency.

The need for evidenced-based policy research

Amid recurrent concerns from employers over the lack of language skills in the labour market (see for example CBI/Pearson [2013](#); [2014](#); [2015](#); [2016](#); [2017](#)), and in response to longstanding public anxiety over the declining numbers of young people studying languages in all sectors of education, the British Academy embarked on a major policy research project on languages in employment in 2013, reporting in 2016. The British Academy policy research project came on the back of significant findings from a survey of 8000 businesses published by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) in 2012. The [BCC survey](#) found that the national deficit in language skills was seriously affecting our propensity to export. 61% of non-exporters that were likely to consider trading internationally considered a lack of language skills as a barrier to doing so. Business owners claiming some knowledge of other languages admitted that very few could speak well enough to conduct a deal in an international market. As an example, 73% of business owners had learned a little French, but only 4% felt confident of using their French to conduct a business deal. The knowledge of other languages in the fastest growing markets was virtually non-existent. In light of these findings, the BCC called for a return of compulsory language learning up to the age of seventeen so that the next generation of business owners could be 'born global' equipped with language skills for the future. In addition, the BCC proposed greater government support for small and medium-sized businesses hoping to export by way of additional financial incentives such as tax credits for those businesses investing in language training for their staff.

The British Academy language policy project, Born Global, set out to elicit new knowledge about the extent and nature of language needs for employment to inform government policy development and implementation at a critical moment in the reform of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools and its assessment system.

Five key lessons from Born Global

1. Employers value language skills, cultural agility and international experience

Employers use a wide matrix of skills when selecting new recruits. They believe that candidates who have studied or worked abroad and have lived through the lens of another language and culture tend to have a more refined cognitive and cultural frame of reference through which they can resolve problems and make decisions, reflecting multiple perspectives and heightened awareness of the ethical issues of working in a global environment

Employers say that it is not enough to speak other languages, successful recruits must demonstrate what they can do through another language and how their international experience equips them for professional activity in culturally diverse global teams, serving a culturally diverse global client base.

Erasmus + plays a significant part in equipping graduates of languages and of other disciplines with essential language and intercultural skills for employability.

2. Demographic change in the labour market.

There has been significant demographic change in the labour market. Unprecedented levels of labour market mobility and skilled migration from the EU and beyond have resulted in a transnational labour force, providing access to multilingual recruits working across occupational categories. Mobility means that young people enter an increasingly competitive labour market. Employers recruit globally, choosing the candidate that is the best fit for their organization from the global talent pool. Highly skilled multilingual international recruits have a distinct advantage over home grown recruits entering the labour market with limited international experience and limited language skills.

Seven out of ten employers from larger organisations believe that school and college leavers and graduates who only speak English are at disadvantage in the jobs market. Over half of all small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) agree.

3. Language skills are part of a broader national skills deficit

National statistics show that language skills feature in hard-to-fill vacancies ([UK Commission for Employment and Skills 2014](#): 122–123). In 2013, a shortage of language skills accounted for 17% of hard-to-fill vacancies in the UK. Close to one in five skills shortage vacancies for managers, skilled trades and occupations, caring, leisure and other service staff, sales and customer services staff and other elementary staff was caused by a deficit in foreign language skills.

To put this in perspective, while the language skills shortage accounted for 17% of hard-to-fill vacancies, skills shortages of technical, practical or job specific skills showed an average incidence of 63% across all occupational categories, with a peak of 72% in associate professionals and in skilled trades and occupations.

There are two clear implications. Employers will continue to recruit from abroad to fill the skills gap. Recruitment from abroad provides access to sector skills and widens the range of languages spoken in the labour market. The second implication is the mismatch in the demand and supply of sector skills will always take priority over language skills deficits. This accounts for the high priority given to the development of STEM subjects and ICT and the relative lack of status given to language skills in national policy documentation.

Employers taking part in the Born Global project took a more objective and long-term view of the relative importance of language skills and STEM subjects.

Eight out of ten employers from larger organisations believe that foreign language skills are equally important as STEM subjects to Britain’s future. Over half of responding SMEs also agree with this view.

It seems self-evident that the potential restriction in access to skilled workers from the European Union post-Brexit, is likely to widen the gap in technical and sector skills and decrease access to multilingual employees in the labour market. This highlights the urgent need for more and better language skills coming into the labour market through the supply chain of school and college leavers and graduates. It goes without saying that investment in a broader and deeper education and skills strategy, which includes languages, must be in the national interest.

4. English is the nexus but global business is multilingual and culturally diverse

Employers recognized that the widespread use of English is empowering, connecting businesses of all sizes across different continents and time zones as part of a global communication network. But cooperation in multiple countries means interaction with multiple languages and cultures. Employers were becoming increasingly aware of the risks of overreliance on the ease of communication offered by English as the lingua franca. False assumptions can be made that using the same language implies understanding and sharing the same values and cultural norms. This is not the case. The study showed a growing interest in optimizing the wide range of languages spoken in our communities and building stronger and more sustainable international networks nurturing cultural links with different communities across the world.

95% of employers from larger organisations believe that young people who speak a different language in addition to English in the home should regard bilingualism as an asset. Nine out of ten SMEs also agree with this view.

5. The Value-Added Recruit

Employers found difficulty in quantifying in an economic equation how much cultural agility was worth to British business but there was a consensus that it was crucial. Employers were unanimous in their view that learning a language should be an essential part of education for the 21st century. Labour market costs in the Western economy are high in comparison with the East. In a value-added economy, employers are seeking value-added recruits. There was general agreement that a graduate of languages can be typified in that:

- They have usually lived in another country and experienced life in another culture
- They have had to adapt to different social and cultural norms
- They are likely to have greater cognitive flexibility through interacting in more than one language
- They are likely to have greater empathy and to understand multiple realities
- They are more skilful communicators, attuned to nuances and cultural identity

All of these characteristics have a business implication. Languages and international experience foster and develop a global mind-set, cultural literacy and agility and intercultural understanding: the characteristics of the Value-Added recruit.

Conclusion: A call to action for more and better language skills post-Brexit

The findings from Born Global reflect the views of employers, business organizations, learned societies, representatives from government departments, private sector fora, and cultural partners. Born Global takes account of evidence from in-depth interviews with over 50 executives from global companies, an independently commissioned survey of 1,300 professionals with the ability to use

languages at work in different occupational categories and from a nationally representative survey of SMEs.

The findings construct a compelling argument for a **call to action** to strengthen our national capability in languages. Brexit or no Brexit, the place of Britain on the world stage is likely only to diminish if its actors are restricted by their inability to communicate in any other language apart from English. Now is the time for a new national conversation addressing how best to educate the [Born Global Generation](#) during compulsory schooling, university and workplace training. As [proposed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages](#), the Brexit process intensifies the urgency to develop a multi-lateral post-Brexit Plan in education (from primary school to post-graduate research, including apprenticeships), business and the civil service, with specific actions to ensure that the UK produces sufficient linguists to meet its future requirements as a leader in global free trade and on the international stage. Every language is an asset and the time has come to value our rich multilingual capital.

References

Born Global website: <https://www.britac.ac.uk/born-global>

Educational Resources for Schools December 2015, Are you Ready for a Global Future? (Cambridge University Press): <http://www.cambridge.org/it/education/news/are-you-ready-global-future/>

About the author

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