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We need to put the case for languages, and universities should lead the way

Michael Worton

Michael Worton, who has chronicled the beleaguered state of modern languages, argues that in an age of global citizenship it must be revitalised

During my research for the Review of Modern Foreign Languages Provision in Higher Education in England, I discovered a community that feels itself vulnerable and beleaguered to the point of being in a crisis of confidence.

Now, a year on, things seem to be, if anything, even worse for modern languages in universities. More universities are restructuring their language departments, often cutting posts and reducing the number of degrees in languages that they offer.

Reasons given for this are that numbers are insufficient to sustain the departments as they are and/or the fall in research funding to language departments after the last research assessment exercise has rendered them non-viable in their current state.

The recent GCSE results reveal that French has dropped out of the top 10 of GCSE subjects for the first time that anyone can remember, with German down as well.

Some languages have seen increases, such as Mandarin and Portuguese, but the numbers taking these subjects remain small.

At A level, there has been another drop for French, German and other languages. Although there was a small increase of 4 per cent for Spanish, the number of candidates taking language A levels overall is down for yet another year.

Pre-1992 universities, mainly members of the Russell Group, continue to attract significant numbers of applications to study languages, but they are not seeing the increase in applications that many other subjects are seeing and they, too, are engaging in various forms of restructuring and downsizing.

Also, and worryingly, it would seem that a class divide is opening up; the National Centre for Languages' CILT Language Trends figures for 2009 note that last year 41 per cent of comprehensive school pupils at Key Stage 4 were entered for a modern language, compared with 91 per cent of selective school pupils and 81 per cent of independent school pupils.

Furthermore, there is now increasing talk of market failure and how to address it - and talk of who should address it, whether it is the government, employers or the educational sector itself.

One of the problems with languages is that for the past decade there has been a distinct lack of joined-up thinking about the value and place of modern languages in the UK today, with employers making different arguments from those of government, which are themselves often different from those of educators and researchers.

One of the recommendations of my report was that there should be a national forum of all stakeholders that would work together to provide a clear and compelling identity for the study of and research into languages in the highly competitive world of the globalised 21st century. This forum was set up and was co-chaired by David Lammy, then minister for higher education, and Diana Johnson, then parliamentary undersecretary of state for schools. The forum did good work, but its future under the coalition government looks very uncertain.

We need to continue to engage in advocacy for languages, and, crucially, we need to move beyond the defensive arguments about languages that tend to dominate debate at present, and move into proactive positive arguments about their value.

At the heart of this must unashamedly be the argument that intercultural competence is not only one of the essential skills for modern life and work, but is in itself exciting, pleasurable and rewarding.

Much is rightly made today of the importance of helping all of our young people to become global citizens, by which we mean that they will learn to think in new, critical and creative ways; that they will be committed to ethical and socially responsible behaviour; that they will be ready to embrace professional mobility; that they will assume leadership roles, sometimes very locally within the family or a group of friends and sometimes nationally or even internationally; that they will embrace entrepreneurship and embrace and develop their own ability to innovate; and, crucially, that they will be not only sensitive to cultural difference, but also able to appreciate and mobilise its value in intellectual and social contexts.

This is a new form of citizenship that has no global governing body, but whose importance is recognised by many national and regional governments. Global citizenship is marked by a sense of responsibility, both individual and collective, and by a commitment to living in and with difference, in all of its complexity, ambiguity and challenge. This is the fundamental reason why we should encourage as many people as possible, both young and old, to learn a language, since this involves encounters and learning about a different culture as well as a different linguistic system, and thereby enables an understanding of just how much sameness and difference are bound up together and define each other. Without some knowledge of another language, we remain locked into a single system.

All too often, people talk about how difficult it is to learn a language, projecting on to children and young people an assumption that has no basis in reality.

Almost every living human acquires his or her own native language - and we acquire this essential skill of communicating linguistically in many different ways. We also all learn rapidly to enjoy and play with languages, be it through jokes, puns, euphemisms or exaggerations, borrowing foreign words that seem to us appropriate (even if we use them wrongly), and creating new forms of our own native language when texting or using social networking tools. This pleasure in learning to use and creatively manipulate language is always latently with us - and is one reason why the study of literature and other cultural expressions is so vital, since it reveals to us a different culture in its fullest creative complexity as well as often in its most playful and joyful form.

To learn another language is, quite simply and profoundly, one of the best ways of learning to recognise the world and to see how others and otherness inhabit it. It is an education in difference as a pathway to understanding how to contribute to integration and fellowship (or global citizenship). This is why universities have a vital role to play and should act urgently and boldly, taking on the responsibility of leadership that other bodies seem unable to do. Of course, we need to accept that not all universities will be able to offer the traditional languages in the future. However, this need not sound a death knell for language teaching and research in universities, as long as we take a strategic view of the way forward.

All universities should recognise and promote the importance of foreign language study for undergraduate education, but this will not be achieved by expecting universities to continue to teach the languages that they have done in the past or indeed to teach languages in the ways they have done in the past, nor by focusing exclusively on the creation of specialist linguists and cultural experts. Across the sector, although not necessarily in every single university, we need to continue to provide for specialist training in foreign languages in ways that are sustainable and that also ensure that all students can continue with (or start) a language programme, regardless of their discipline. There is clear evidence that students will want to study languages in joint degrees or in degrees that come "with languages". Diversity of provision across the sector is both necessary and inevitable, but it needs to be underpinned by a shared commitment to the importance of languages for all.

The insightful cultural commentator Timothy Radcliffe has described universities as "places of resistance to the imperialism of the single vision", memorably stating that "universities should be places where we learn to speak with strangers". This is surely one of the noblest (and most urgent) missions of universities today: to facilitate intellectual and scientific debate and to promote active tolerance, which is an ongoing and often difficult process, rather than a simple passive state of well-intentioned liberalism. In this mission the role of other languages, other cultures and other times has a key role. It is up to universities to give a lead.

My own institution, University College London, has recognised the centrality of languages and intercultural competence in 21st-century education and is

therefore introducing from 2012 a requirement that every applicant should have a qualification of at least GCSE level in a foreign language, whatever degree programme they follow.

Gradually, other universities are recognising this centrality, often by introducing for their students an entitlement to study a foreign language, whatever the degree programme.

There are many ways forward, and each university must choose one that is consonant with its own particular mission.

However, even in the difficult financial days that lie ahead, it is important that universities have the wisdom, the insight and above all the courage to invest in modern language education.

The case for modern languages in universities has never been more compelling, but it must be adapted and articulated differently for the 21st-century context. Our universities have the scholarly capital, the intellectual capacity and the moral responsibility to ensure that the 21st century is indeed a century of global citizenship where differences are not only celebrated but understood. Do we have the courage to do so? I hope with all my heart that we do.

Postscript: Michael Worton is vice-provost of University College London.