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Languages in Higher Education in the UK

There have been a number of major changes in Higher Education in England and Wales since the late 90s,¹ in particular the closure or reduction of many language departments. To some extent this has been due to changes in language policy at secondary school level, although there was also a marked decline in interest in languages following the high water mark of the early 1990s and the emphasis on the Single Market. A consequence of this has been the concentration of language degrees into fewer (but more prestigious) universities, and a reduction in the number of research-active departments. This in turn has led to growing concern that languages are becoming an elitist subject.

On the other hand, there has been clear growth in the number of students opting to take a language in conjunction with their main subject of study; Law with languages and Economics with languages have proved to be particularly popular, in contrast to the traditional Joint Honours degree, typically in French and German for students with an advanced level of prior knowledge of both languages. The decline in the teaching of literature at all levels has also contributed significantly in this change of direction, as has the change at secondary level in student choice. The number of students taking two languages at A-level has also declined.

However, there are good news stories: there has been significant growth of freestanding language courses, available to large numbers of students, and sometimes across the whole university, which has been achieved by placing the study of the language inside a specialist language centre. These IWLP (Institution-Wide Language Programmes) are not always offered for credit, or even as part of a degree programme, but they have proved to be popular with students, and the range of languages has typically extended beyond the traditional French, German and Spanish to encompass Italian and Russian, not to mention Arabic and Chinese.²

Most of these courses are at beginners' level and seldom go beyond B1 or B2, so that although the growth in interest beyond Arts and Humanities students and the introduction of new languages are to be welcomed, there is still a worry that there will be an insufficient supply even in the medium term of suitably qualified graduates to move on into professional areas such as translating, interpreting and language teaching.

European programmes have contributed a lot to the change in the profile of languages across all British universities. Britain was an early and enthusiastic supporter of ERASMUS, for example, but the level of student mobility declined in the middle 1990s as part of the general decline in languages, and the figures have only recently begun to improve, to the extent that this year has actually been the best since 1994, with no fewer than 12,873 students taking part.³

¹ Note that higher education in Scotland is directed from Edinburgh.

² A prime example is the language centre at the London School of Economics. See www2.lse.ac.uk/language/Home.aspx.

³ See www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/460 for more information on facts and figures.

A number of factors may be at work here: the decision by the government to increase fees, typically to £9,000 a year from 2012-2013 is likely to have a significant impact. It already appears that a far larger number of students entered universities in England and Wales in 2011 to beat the fee increase, and there has been a fall in the number taking a gap year before commencing their studies. This is ironic as universities have viewed gap years as a good way of widening student horizons and giving them some experience of life outside the world of education before embarking on three or four years of further study.⁴ University application figures in November 2011 have caused some concern given that the rate of application has fallen quite significantly, although a few institutions have actually seen a small increase.⁵

However, the cost of fees plus the living costs incurred by students may well prove to be a discouragement to adding a further ERASMUS year to one's programme of study, not so much because of the cost (some of which will be offset by ERASMUS funding) but because the move into full-time employment will be deferred by another year. The current high level of unemployment among the young may, however, persuade students that they should extend their period of study in the hope that the employment situation will have improved by the time they finally take their degree.

The other traditional way of covering the cost of studying abroad is to go as a language assistant, a programme administered by the British Council.⁶ Despite government threats to reduce funding, applications remain buoyant, and to non-traditional countries as well as France, Spain and Germany. The position for incoming international students is not quite so positive, as there have been cuts in the number of assistantships available in Scotland.

In the field of languages, the clearest area of growth has been in MA programmes in translation as language departments diversify and seek ways of attracting more students and covering costs. There are now over seventy, which is a remarkable achievement given that translation *per se* has not traditionally been seen as a specific topic for study, but rather encapsulated within undergraduate degrees as part of language teaching.

There has been a major shift in emphasis towards the theory of translation and reflection on practice, besides the introduction of new areas of work to cover fields such as audio-visual translation. Interpreting, however, has fared less well. High-level oral skills tend not to be covered so thoroughly at undergraduate level and the length of training needed in order to enter the profession is also seen as a disincentive. Public service interpreting, on the other hand, is covered by the Chartered Institute of Linguists, the main professional language body in the UK.⁷

⁴ The number of students asking to defer university entry by one year has fallen from 16,000 in 2010 to 6,000 in 2011. See www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2011/aug/19/end-of-the-gap-year.

⁵ Application numbers have fallen so far this year by 9% overall, with some slight increases, but also some major drops for individual institutions. See www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=417891.

⁶ Go to www.britishcouncil.org/languageassistants.htm for more information.

⁷ See www.iol.org.uk.

The decline in languages at school has had one positive effect – growth in language learning among adults, which is provided largely via further education colleges in the state sector. These programmes, however, have been seriously damaged by cutbacks and economies in recent years, so that students may have to pay over £200 per term for a single evening class per week. As against that, the Open University has been a major success in encouraging language teaching and recruits around ten thousand students a year.⁸

So the overall situation, although apparently somewhat negative, has some notable success stories. UK universities perform strongly in international league tables and the case for languages is being made strongly by both business and politicians, not to mention prestigious bodies such as the British Academy.⁹ⁱ

It remains to be seen what impact the increase in fees for undergraduate tuition will have.

⁸ See the article by Professor James Coleman in *The Linguist*, Vol. 50, No. 5, November 2011.

⁹ See www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/460 for the report entitled “Language matters more and more.”