

Press release

Calamity or opportunity? High time to turn the tide for UK languages.

Once again the language community faces depressing headlines about the further decline of languages at GCSE. Results show that entries for French and German have decreased by 13.2% since 2010. To make matters worse, the steady increase in numbers of students studying GCSE Spanish since 2006 now shows a dip of 2.5% with a reported cumulative decrease in entries of other languages of 19.7%.

Bernardette Holmes, President of the Association for Language Learning, said in an interview earlier today, 'The crisis in languages has to stop and stop now. Our first priority as the national association of teachers of languages is to support teachers, head teachers and parents to reverse the decline in students taking languages for GCSE. This is no time to lag behind other countries in our abilities to use languages. Languages and intercultural communication are crucial for the future success of our country both socially and economically. To leave education without an ability to speak another language leaves our young people seriously disadvantaged in comparison with their European peers and less employable in the global labour market.'

She was swift to congratulate students who despite the dispiriting reports of declining numbers of language entries have succeeded at GCSE and at A level. 'ALL would like to congratulate all of the many students who have passed GCSE and A level in a language this year. They and their teachers should be rightly proud of their achievements in languages and spread the word that languages are important, essential and not optional.' She emphasised that the A level results actually show an increase in student numbers, rising from 34,181 in 2002 to 34,925 in 2011. There is also an improvement in the number of boys achieving top grades A* and A in French.

When asked her thoughts on reasons why there were fewer students taking up languages post 14, her answer was emphatic, 'We have been faced with a number of competing initiatives in education which have in some respects undermined one another and led to some unfortunate and unintended consequences. If you have a focus on widening participation, personalising the curriculum and offering more choice of subjects, it is unsurprising that more traditional, possibly more rigorous subjects will lose out to newer, apparently more accessible ones.'

'Setting all of this within a context of performance measures, students have tended, with guidance from schools concerned about league tables, to move towards subjects where there is a likelihood of a stronger

grade. Severe grading for languages both at GCSE and A level remains a matter of serious concern for ALL members; a concern shared by our colleagues in the Independent Schools Modern Languages Association.'

When asked about the future, she was very positive, 'We have to turn the tide. Is this a calamity or an opportunity? We must build on the proposed policy reforms put forward by the current government. We need to develop the E-Bacc, making sure that it can fulfil its purpose and lead to more young people continuing with languages. We must avoid polarisation and ensure that the outcomes of the Curriculum Review provide challenging and inclusive programmes of learning, which will close rather than widen the poverty gap and will level out the disparity between boys' and girls' attainment.'

'Language learning is unquestionably part of the core curriculum for all students, enhancing young people's opportunities for mobility for their studies and working life. We must be unafraid to review radically not only what we teach, but why and how, and embrace unreservedly the opportunity to put teachers and their students at the heart of policy reform.'

ENDS

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Notes to Editors:

The Association for Language Learning (ALL)

ALL is the UK-wide subject association for language teachers – of whatever language, at any level. It is run by teachers and other professionals actively involved in language learning and teaching. It exists to represent and support language teachers.

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