

Language Alliance Letter to OCR

Dear Lindsey,

Further to my correspondence of Spring 2012 I write now in the light of the recent announcement from OCR of the proposal to 'redevelop' the Asset Languages qualification at the cost of a large number of World Languages studied in the UK which will in consequence no longer have any comparable accreditation. I acknowledge receipt of your letter of today but thought I would send you this (already drafted) in case it can inform your further discussions. I am copying the message to my co-chairs.

Members of the Language Alliance are concerned about the long-term impact of this decision on the reputation of the UK and on our capacity to build up skills in certain key international languages, with consequent deleterious effect on our international trading and standing.

We are keen to be supportive in any way which reduces these threats and in advising relevant agencies on a positive way forward.

The report concerned states:

*'Asset Languages being re-developed for September 2013
Wednesday 4 July 2012*

We'd like to keep you up to date with our plans for Asset Languages.

The range of current qualifications is accredited until December 2013 and plans are already underway to redevelop successor Asset qualifications in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Mandarin.

....

At the present time we're not planning on redeveloping any other qualifications in Asset Languages other than those mentioned above.

....

If you need to speak with us, you can call our dedicated helpdesk at 01223 553998 or alternatively you can email us at general.qualifications@ocr.org.uk.

Members of the Language Alliance recognise that this decision by OCR is very likely to be based on commercial decisions but feel that some consultation with the Languages community should take place before a final decision is made. As well as those commercial imperatives there are political and social responsibilities which we feel must be acknowledged and recognised. Hence I am writing also to the Secretary of State.

Since the announcement there has been considerable reaction in the online fora,

including via the ALL World Languages forum, the Language Alliance, linguanet-forum and the Arabic Network, some of which I summarise for you here. Many of the views expressed are significant to the economic and social well-being of the UK as well as to the communities of language-speakers/ learners most immediately affected, and they are based on research as well as in personal, professional and emotional response:

'Based in university, I have worked on outreach projects such as

1 e-mentoring using undergraduates to mentor on-line school students of languages, including MFLs and Arabic, Dutch, Japanese, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese and Russian, (see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/crosscall>)

2 an introduction to a range of languages www.ucl.ac.uk/atlas in order to encourage their take up at university

3 collaboration between Russian teachers in 3 sectors (university, state schools and complementary schools). (The Onstream project see <http://www.linksintolanguages.ac.uk/resources/2589>)

I also conducted a piece of research for the ESRC on the factors affecting the recruitment of students to courses at university in the less widely taught languages

In all the projects and research it is obvious that a key factor in encouraging school students (mainstream and complementary) to continue study is the availability of a qualification.

If the proposal is to save money then nationally it is a false economy. We all know that British business is crying out for linguists and that one "asset" that Britain has, is the potential for training linguists, native speakers and beginners or heritage learners for this purpose.

The small savings that might accrue are nothing compared to the damage the cut will have on teaching and learning languages in this country and negate all the good work that has been done so far. If the problem is low take-up, then an effort should be made to publicise the existing Asset languages and to develop the range further..'

There is an issue about perceived parity between languages and cultures:
' I am sure every language is valuable , and it is not ethical to think one language is more important and superior to another and deserves special treatment however good the argument of the economics may be... the 20 languages dropped from the Asset Languages in favour of the selective 5 can not be either ethical or economical in the long run. The Community Languages have

progressed this far after a long period of struggle and hard work done by so many caring people who gave hours of their time free for the teaching of their language on weekends in the community schools to serve their community and preserve their language and culture. In the school like mine we are fortunate to have the provision of several community languages being taught, though they have not achieved the same status as the so called MFL because the teaching of these languages still takes place after school and is not on school timetable. But it shows progress though as the need and demand for learning of these languages is being acknowledged by our fair minded head. By the way, we use the Curriculum Guides for the teaching of community languages in our school. The Units of teaching in the Levels of these guides are related to the Asset Languages Levels.'

There are suggestions for potential solutions:

'If their imperative is solely commercial could OCR be encouraged to think of reducing cost by providing assessment online? or considering whether consulates / embassies might to some degree 'sponsor' the qualification in their languages? or simply raising the candidate fee rather than closing down the route entirely?

It seems unjust that learners cannot gain recognition for their competence.'

and the Languages Community would certainly be willing to work together with relevant agencies to seek a workable solution.

There are politically sensitive questions being asked - about the message being given about the value of some languages over other (with the potential accusation of racism entailed, as well as about other Government policy:

'Another matter which raises concern is that the Specialist Language Colleges have started to turn into academies specialising in music, arts or something else. Then first thing they do, is to drop any community languages being taught there, so these languages will suffer further decline.'

'It seems likely that the proposed narrowing of Asset qualifications is related to schools switching to GCSEs which (unlike Asset) are accepted for the EBacc.'

There is a general feeling of wasted effort and funding in response to short-term, or to political, imperatives:

'.. waste of all the research and work that's gone into developing a structure of exams which may not be perfect but has given hope and confidence to a lot of students who do not have the time or ability to study as far as GCSE but nevertheless deserve recognition for their effort and enthusiasm in studying less mainstream languages.'

The strengths of the Asset provision are noted:

1) *Flexibility*

By assessing skills separately it was possible through Asset to develop/assess a jagged profile for the learner of the kind that many employers say they want (e.g. CBI report). The plan was to develop some more "vocational" Assets which

would have gone a long way towards the kind of requirements we are hearing from our employers' groups.

It would also be possible to include an asset qualification in a broader set of competences (Diploma type)

2) Validity

Asset was developed along side the Common European Framework of Reference and the Asset descriptors were used in the revised National Curriculum levels. There is therefore equivalence with GCSE at Level 1 and level 2. That is why a full set of Asset qualifications at Intermediate (7-9) achieved GCSE equivalence. In a sense the new GCSE levels were developed through Asset.

As your discussions proceed, please bear in mind that we and other organisations have extensive networks within the Languages community with members who may be able to inform your work.

Steven Fawkes for the Language Alliance