

Speak to the future
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www.speaktothefuture.org



**THE CAMPAIGN
FOR LANGUAGES**

Mary Brennan
Partnerships Senior Manager

OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
Partnerships
Westwood Way
Coventry
CV4 8JQ

3rd August 2012

Dear Mary,

I am writing on behalf of the Speak to the Future campaign to express serious concern about the decision not to redevelop Asset qualifications in 20 of the 25 languages currently offered. Speak to the Future is supported by a wide range of organisations and individuals to highlight the importance of languages and language learning for the UK. The campaign has identified five clear and ambitious objectives, each coordinated by a working group, that set out the value of learning and using other languages in all sectors of education and at all stages of life. The first of these objectives, which underpins the rest, is that every language should be valued as an asset. With this in mind, we are encouraging policy makers and citizens to recognise that the many languages used in the homes of UK citizens are a valuable resource for social cohesion and economic success.

Asset Languages are hugely significant, and something to be very proud of. I sat on the National Languages Steering Group, which introduced the concept of the Languages Ladder, eventually developed into Asset Languages by OCR, and this facility was seen as central to achievement of the goal of social inclusion as well as recognition of the linguistic competence existing in our communities. OCR has deservedly gained enormous praise for its support of languages and language learners, which for years had struggled to find acceptance as valued resources. This praise for OCR's pioneering new work is both national and international, and, in the case of languages like Somali, the qualifications have been a unique step forward in the recognition and development of the languages globally.

The decision will leave many languages and language learners without provisions. Asset Languages currently offers accreditation for Cantonese, Cornish, Hindi, Somali, Swedish, Tamil and Yoruba, for which no GCSE examination exists. An IGCSE examination is available in Hindi,

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but only for speakers of Hindi as a second language. In other cases, even where GCSE exams exist, the GCSE is designed only for learners who speak the language at home, not for those who have learnt it as a foreign language. Indeed, if anything, we need to be developing more capability in assessing the diverse range of languages spoken and learned in the UK, not less. Research in 2005 showed that 61 languages are taught to school age children in the UK, for which qualifications were available in only about one third.

In addition, the decision will remove the possibility of receiving accreditation for language learning at a level lower than GCSE. This is particularly pertinent in the case of lesser-taught languages such as Japanese, where the 'progression through small steps' approach has been highly effective, and particularly helpful when the languages are taught as extra-curricular or enrichment courses, sometimes in the Sixth Form, where success can motivate learners to further higher level study at university. In the case of primary schools, GCSEs are inappropriate not only because the level is too high, but because the content is aimed at more mature learners. Asset Languages qualifications on the other hand have been used very successfully in his sector. The removal of Asset Languages qualifications in a diverse range of languages will therefore set back attempts to introduce languages, which business leaders say are needed to develop British exports to BRIC and other high-growth countries, such as Arabic, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and South Asian languages.

The decision also represents a blow to ethnic minority communities who wish to see their children achieve qualifications in their heritage languages, and could be regarded as discriminatory. One of the great achievements of Asset Languages has been to make no distinction between the status of languages or the status of learners: an intermediate level in Bengali is exactly equivalent to an intermediate level in French or German, since all are based on the same 'can do' statements, and the child who learns Russian as a foreign language can take the same exam as a child who speaks it at home.

The flexibility of the Asset languages qualifications to accredit the four skills separately is also a strength which other exams do not have. In languages with different scripts, learners may have a higher level in speaking and listening than in reading and writing, or can gather first a qualification in speaking which motivates them to take reading and writing at a later stage. This flexibility is of particular importance in encouraging learners in the more difficult languages which are needed for global trade, security and diplomacy.

We appreciate your hope to develop a model which could extend your community languages offer in the future, and would be happy to support you with this as we have access to many community languages groups. We do hope, however, that this might include a willingness to re-evaluate your intention not to redevelop Asset languages in the full range of languages. We understand the financial drivers, but would ask you to consult on alternative approaches which would secure these

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valuable qualifications for the future.

I am also writing on behalf of Speak to the Future to the DfE on this matter, as this is a matter of public policy rather than simply a management decision.

I look forward to hearing from you, and possibly to working with you to find a way forward.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Terry Lamb'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large 'T' and 'L'.

Dr Terry Lamb
University of Sheffield

On behalf of Speak to the Future (Objective 1: Every language valued as an asset)
<http://www.speaktothefuture.org/>

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