

ALL urges members to read the White Paper in detail.

Here we summarise the main points as we see them in relation to languages, although many of the broader strategic changes set out by the Coalition Government will also have an impact on individual subjects.

The importance of languages in education

The White Paper identifies languages as a key subject which needs support and it proposes policy initiatives which could play a significant role in encouraging more students to continue to learn languages throughout Key Stages 3 and 4.

We have also heard positive statements from Ministers in recent days, such as:

Languages are hugely important and under this government will become more so not less.

(Nick Gibb, Schools Minister in a speech at a conference organised by the think-tank Politeia on 30 November)

The place of languages in the curriculum

Primary

There is no mention of primary languages in the White Paper. There will however be a review of the National Curriculum for both primary and secondary and we assume that it will be here that statements about primary languages will be made. The review will focus generally on coherence between primary and secondary, an issue which is particularly relevant for languages.

In the November 30 speech (largely about the teaching of Latin), Nick Gibb said:

We will be launching the Curriculum Review very shortly ... it will, of course, be looking at languages in primary schools as well as secondary schools. We made it very clear when we announced that we would not be implementing the recommendations in the Rose Review, that those primary schools that had made preparations for the introduction of languages at Key Stage 2 or were already teaching languages should continue to do so.

From this it is not clear what the position on languages in primary is likely to be, but we can perhaps be guardedly optimistic that languages will remain an entitlement at the very least. In the meantime the languages community has nothing to lose by continuing to make the case for languages to be made statutory in primary education.

Secondary

Despite a strong emphasis on the importance of languages as a core element in a broad and balanced education, there is no suggestion that languages will be compulsory for all pupils at Key Stage 4. Rather, the strategy is to encourage the take-up of languages rather than prescribe it.

This will be done through the introduction of a new award, the English Baccalaureate, which will be awarded to students who gain a minimum of five A* to C GCSE (or iGCSE) passes in more “academic” subjects, namely English, mathematics, the sciences, a modern or ancient foreign language and a humanities subject such as history or geography.

It is important to note that performance tables will record the numbers securing the combination of GCSEs which make up the English Baccalaureate.

Alternative accreditation

There are many references to GCSE but none to other equivalent qualifications that schools may be using to accredit language learning.

Community languages

We have been asked if mother tongue/home languages qualifications will be counted as one of the five GCSE passes for the English Baccalaureate. We do not know the answer to this but there is as yet no indication that the “modern languages” referred to will be specified.

ALL will be seeking clarification on a number of issues surrounding the curriculum and members will be informed as soon as we are able to find out more.

Curriculum Review

We do not have a date as yet for the Curriculum Review. We do know that once it has been published there will be a period of formal consultation and we will let members know the detail of this as soon as it is available. It is worth noting that the Government intends to publish the new curriculum in the autumn of 2012, with first teaching in September 2013, so there is a long time to go before full implementation.

Subject content

This is one of the apparent contradictions in the proposals – on the one hand we are told that schools and teachers will have autonomy, be freed from governmental diktats about what to teach and how to teach it, but on the other hand there will still be defined core knowledge laid down for subjects. There is as yet no indication what this core knowledge for languages might look like.

Literacy

The emphasis on literacy in the White Paper may provide members with strong arguments when making the case for languages in their schools. ALL believes that language learning has a key part to play in improving general literacy, helping pupils to understand how language works and providing instructive comparisons between languages. This is a key element in Nick Gibb’s own support for Latin, but can be applied to all language learning.

Teacher training

Changes are proposed to teacher training, with more school-based training and continued support for schemes like Teach First. This will be important for language teaching, as we know that the number of language teachers has fallen with the decline of students opting in at KS4 and KS5. If the Baccalaureate means that more students will return to languages at KS4, then teacher supply will become crucial. In ALL’s view a number of measures may be necessary: initial teacher training, schemes to re-train former languages teachers, and flexible training for those in the wider workforce with the potential to become languages teachers.

A thread running through the White Paper is the recognition of teacher professionalism and autonomy. This is reflected in the sections on teacher training (with the best schools becoming “Teaching Schools”, like teaching hospitals) and professional development. It remains to be seen what these statements will mean in practice.

Professional Development

The White Paper underlines the importance of professional development and a highly trained and motivated workforce which can get the very best out of young learners. Teachers working together and learning from one another are emphasised, and it is intended that the Teaching Schools will have a role to play here. There will also be more opportunities for classroom observation. A competitive national scholarship scheme will be introduced to support CPD.

What you can do now

Michael Gove has written to all schools. If you have not seen the letter you can find a copy at <http://tiny.cc/DfELetter>. He invites initial responses to the White Paper by 8 December. They should be sent to schoolswhitepaper.team@education.gsi.gov.uk

ALL will be responding and our letter will be published on the ALL website shortly. We also encourage members to respond as individuals, departments or schools.

If you'd like to contact us about the White Paper, we'd be glad to hear from you. It's important that you let us know your views so that we can reflect them in communications and meetings with politicians and civil servants in coming weeks.