

Jocelyn Wyburd, Chair
Jmw234@cam.ac.uk

UCML

UNIVERSITY COUNCIL
OF MODERN LANGUAGES

Web: www.ucml.ac.uk
Email: ucml@soton.ac.uk

14th July 2014

Open letter to:
CEO and Board of UUK
The Russell Group
University Alliance
University think-tank million +
HEFCE
Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
UCAS

Cc :
British Chambers of Commerce,
CBI
National Centre for Universities and Business
All Party Parliamentary Group on Languages
British Academy
Association for Language Learning
Independent Schools Modern Languages
Association

The University Council of Modern Languages, as the overarching representative body for all language disciplines in UK universities is calling on all UK universities to make a GCSE A*-C grade or equivalent in a modern foreign language a pre-requisite for admission to undergraduate programmes in any discipline. We are writing to ask for your support in making this happen.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Languages, supported by UCML, is launching its 'Manifesto for Languages' today, addressing all the political parties in the run-up to the forthcoming general election. Our call to you is therefore part of a wider national campaign to address a fundamental national problem.

The Government has signalled that the study of languages should be a core part of our education system. From September 2014 the National Curriculum makes the study of a language a statutory requirement in KS2 in England. The English Baccalaureate performance measure based on 'core academic subjects' already includes a language at GCSE at A*-C grade. Meanwhile Scotland is embracing a policy to encourage the acquisition of 2 foreign languages. We would wish to see a Standard Credit/National 5 in a language as the equivalent requirement for applicants educated in Scotland.

Numerous studies and reports, by the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Education and Employers Taskforce, the British Council and the British Academy in recent years have highlighted the language skills deficit impacting on trade, the economy, employment, diplomacy and scholarship. As citizens of other countries increasingly privilege the learning of English as a key skill, the premium value of English is diminishing, unless accompanied by knowledge of other languages in addition. Globalisation is driving an ever greater need for a wide set of language skills for all UK citizens, and putting pressure on universities to be producing 'global graduates'. Achieving functional competency in at least one language in addition to mother tongue will equip young people with the capacity to develop additional language skills during tertiary education and throughout their lives. However, in 2013 only 44% of the cohort of pupils in England sat a GCSE in a modern foreign language and this take-up is disproportionately skewed to pupils in independent and selective schools. The result is that increasing numbers of pupils, particularly from less advantaged

backgrounds, are going through education and into the workforce without this essential 21st century skill. We believe that changing university entrance policies could help to drive a change in take-up of languages in the secondary sector. In the meantime (and particularly to address the widening participation imperative) universities could ensure that those without the qualification are given free, accredited language courses at university, to ensure they achieve at least the equivalent level of competence.

We also believe that more young people who speak a language other than English in the home should be encouraged to validate this skill academically by taking a GCSE or equivalent qualification and that qualifications in 'home languages' should equally be recognised by university admissions departments as contributing positively to the educational profile of their applicants.

Universities have it in their power to signal that the current educational profile of their students is not a good enough base from which to equip them to be global graduates and to take up outward mobility options, unless language skills are included. Many universities are investing heavily in providing opportunities for language study alongside other subjects to plug this hole, and should be applauded for this. But what can thus be achieved is often only scratching at the surface of what global graduates need, and such opportunities need to build on prior learning, not simply attempt to rectify the deficit in the statutory sector. Many thousands of students, meanwhile, are investing their own funds, in addition to paying high university fees, to take extra-curricular language classes while at university, cognisant of the fact that they missed out at school.

We believe that a language GCSE should rank alongside English and Maths as key academic subjects as the foundation for all future study and employment and indeed that these should be accompanied by at least one science and one humanities subject, regardless of future career and study choices. We are calling on you to use your influence to help us to achieve this fundamental change in university admissions policies as soon as possible.

Best regards

A handwritten signature in purple ink, reading 'Jocelyn Wyburd'.

Jocelyn Wyburd, Chair, UCML