THE JOY AND VITALITY OF LANGUAGES

This blog was kindly authored by Fiona Devine (Manchester) and Jo Fox (Newcastle), on behalf of the N8 subgroup on Modern Languages.

We are very familiar with the story that languages are **in decline** and share the well-founded concern about the emergence of **regional cold spots** across the country due to declining numbers of students studying modern languages. **HEPI**, **The British Academy** and **Wonkhe** have gathered robust evidence showing that patterns and trends in formal language education are sadly heading in the wrong direction.

As the N8 subgroup on languages, we know that **languages are often unavailable to students in schools and colleges before they make their subject choices at university**. Limited opportunities have suppressed demand. But interest in languages is not limited, and it is important not to forget the joy and vitality of languages too.

We have been getting together regularly to discuss the challenges and opportunities around languages in the North. We think it is important to work in collaboration where we want to and, most especially, where we need to. Without being naive, we have a sense of agency to do something where we can, so we can feel positive and confident about languages and know they have a future.

We can easily forget that, on the ground and every day, languages are very much alive in communities, in the workplace, in classrooms, at festivals and in numerous cultural venues. Even in recent coverage of the World Cup, Jude Bellingham and Anthony Gordon addressed reporters in Spanish. **Gordon recently revealed that he learnt Spanish** specifically because he wanted to play for Barcelona.

Here in the North, where Gordon grew up and later played, there is something quietly remarkable happening. Wherever multilingual environments are created, people flourish in them and, just like Gordon, seize the opportunities created. Without being blind to declining participation in formal language education, there is so much to celebrate, and we really should do so.

Sharing our experiences, we have been heartened by how much is going on. In Durham, students of Arabic are using their linguistic abilities to help the police force translate training materials and to support refugee families navigating everyday life in English. Spanish students give guided tours at the Spanish Gallery in Bishop Auckland in a county-wide partnership with the Auckland Project and the Bowes Museum.

Liverpool's **centenary celebration of Catalan Studies**, complete with a gig at the famous Cavern and students appearing on Catalan television, shows that languages are being celebrated in public, with the public, and by choice. **Sheffield** and **Leeds** City of Languages are doing this at city scale. These events have been hugely popular and showcase the popularity of many different languages

The same is true for those just starting out in life. In Newcastle, many school groups come through **Newcastle University's Language Resource Centre** in any given year, and there is already a waiting list for more. Pupils are asking for something the standard narrative says they do not want. This is why we feel the need to challenge the idea that interest in the languages is limited.

Widening Access work across the North is reaching pupils who might never otherwise consider a language and using new technologies to engage them. In Lancaster, pupils found their voice using French in an **AI-enhanced VR environment**, boosting their individual confidence. This model is now expanding to the London AI Campus, further reaching young people from underserved communities who rarely get this access.

This June, The University of Manchester welcomed nearly 150 Year 10 and 11 students onto campus for our annual LEAF festival for languages education, where they enjoyed workshops on culture and linguistics, joined student-led conversation classes and enjoyed taster sessions in languages less commonly taught in schools. **Students of Japanese volunteered at the fantastic 50th festival run by the Japan Foundation last year**.

These are not isolated heartwarming anecdotes. When you take them together, they form a pattern, a significant programme of work that is quietly but boldly building for a future where multilingualism takes its place at the heart of communities, strengthening social cohesion in ways that make a lasting impact. The real story here is not one of simple decline. It is what happens when many and varied opportunities really exist.

We take our responsibility as anchor institutions in the cities and towns across the region seriously. We want able and ambitious students, irrespective of their background, to come and study languages with us. We are absolutely committed to working together to maintain and enhance – and, yes, celebrate – opportunities as far as we can. And here, collaboration is key.

Reference:

Fiona Devine and Jo Fox, 'The joy and vitality of languages', Higher Education Policy Institute Blog in https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2026/08/13/the-joy-and-vitality-of-languages/, 13 August 2026, [accessed 15 October 2026]