



**Discussion document for the Irish Humanities Alliance (IHA) and One Voice for Languages (OVFL)
Roundtable**

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Introduction: In a globalized world, our capacity to understand and engage with other cultures depends crucially on the kinds of competence which the specialized study of languages is designed to inculcate. For this reason too, an increasing range of employers and economic sectors, private and public, seek graduates with these competences, thus consolidating the role of higher education among all of the partners who support language learning. At the same time, these very processes of globalization present challenges, notable among them the issue of the sustainability of languages, the risks of disenfranchisement that flow from increasing dependence on English, and the issue of continuing to support language provision in a period of dramatic cuts in public funding to education at all levels. With European Day of Languages 2015 on the horizon, this workshop is intended to provide a statement on how strategic directions and practices can and should inform public policy, and on how in turn policy can be translated into practice. It is hoped to issue a public statement on EDL 2015 on the basis of the workshop.

The aim of the roundtable is to identify common positions amongst Higher Education academics regarding the forthcoming Department of Education and Skills (DES) Foreign Languages Strategy, and draft a position paper that can be utilised for advocacy and policy purposes. The importance of a national languages strategy is increasingly important in the context of the recent recommendations by the Task Group on Reform of University Selection and Entry regarding fundamental changes to language matriculation requirements and those of the NUI in particular. The need to advocate for languages on the basis of their intrinsic importance and their vital cultural and social roles in globalized societies is also increasingly important in light of the issue of sustainability and of funding pressures both in Ireland and in the UK, to which the proposed closure of the Modern Languages Department in Ulster University testify all too clearly.¹

This document will inform our roundtable discussion on languages policy, including the issues of skills and employability, and provide an overview to the most recent languages policy publications, prior to the event. It will also serve as the background material to the roundtable report and policy statement. However, the most important element of the roundtable will be the active and informed participation of languages academics and educators. In order to facilitate this, the questions and sub themes to be addressed are included in the discussion document.

¹ For further information: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-34123574>

Context:

The recent initiative by the DES in formulating a National Strategy for Foreign Languages emphasises the importance of languages in Irish society and the attempt to make multilingualism the norm in Ireland.² Apart from increased employability and wider career choices, language skills also contribute to the development of cognitive skills and an increased cultural awareness of one's own, and other cultures. Employers are looking for transferable skills in new employees; graduates who study a language can offer these. If the study of a language is combined with a stay abroad graduates can also show that they are mobile and flexible to adapt to new circumstances, another skill that is valued by employers.

The current background paper by the NCCA quotes the NCCA 2003 discussion paper and 1987 Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages*, still relevant today.³ The original paper was authored by Professor David Little of the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College, Dublin and summarises the benefits of languages:

Language is

- *the chief means by which we think*
- *all language activities, in whatever language, are exercises in thinking*
- *the vehicle through which knowledge is acquired and organised*
- *the chief means of interpersonal communication*
- *a central factor in the growth of the learner's personality*
- *one of the chief means by which societies and cultures define and organise themselves and by which culture is transmitted within and across societies and cultures.*⁴

As lecturers our role is to educate students, and all of the factors highlighted here assist them to find employment after they have completed their courses.

Employability:

Languages play a crucial role in the employability of students. The recent survey in the *Morgan McKinley June Irish Employment Monitor Results* stated the following, which was already strongly voiced by the Forfás expert group during 2012:

- *Dutch, German and Nordic languages were the most in demand this month - employers increasingly require professionals with more than one language.*
- *The requirement for professionals with more than one language has been the highest ever recorded by the Morgan McKinley Employment Monitor. These roles are across all sectors but primarily in IT, Customer Service and Sales.*⁵⁶

² For further information: <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Foreign-Languages-Strategy/>

³ D. Little, *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum: a discussion paper* (Dublin, NCCA, 2003), Available online from: <http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Publications/Languagesdiscussionpaper.pdf>

⁴ Curriculum and Examinations Board, *Report of the Board of Studies for Languages* (Dublin 1987), p. 2

⁵ Morgan McKinley, *Morgan McKinley June Irish Employment Monitor Results* (Dublin, 2015) Available online from: <http://www.morganmckinley.ie/article/june-employment-monitor-31-more-professional-opportunities-available-between-january-june>

There is clearly a demand for language graduates and this is also reflected by IDA Ireland. The IDA's perspective on Languages and employability can be summarised as follows:

A certain amount of jobs by multinationals in Ireland require native speakers and in some business environments English might be sufficient; for example in the Netherlands. Companies in Ireland will employ staff from target language countries as native speakers guarantee fluency and cultural awareness about the target country, but these employees are often not staying in Ireland. This is not a phenomenon particular to Ireland as it is the case in many countries.

But there are plenty of jobs in Ireland that require some language acquisition combined with cultural knowledge that could be filled by Irish graduates.

The language most in demand at the moment is German, but this is not matched by the dominance of French at secondary schools. The demand for German can be explained by the importance and size of its economy (This does not exclude that Mandarin might be in demand in the future). Graduates with German will increase their employability in Ireland because German Native Speakers are less mobile, for economic reasons, than, for example, Spanish speakers. There are many positions that require a language skill that cannot be filled by companies in Ireland. Native language German speakers are less mobile relative to demand in all markets because of the strength of the German economy, but this is not particular to Ireland.⁷

The OVFL's discussion paper also highlights the issue of employability:

A national strategy from the Institutes of Higher Education to help raise awareness of the benefits and importance of learning languages would be very important as Ireland is often overly monolingual in its approach and overly focused on English speaking markets. Angela Byrne (Enterprise Ireland) has pointed out that Europe represents a much better emigration package for young Irish people. This type of approach would benefit not only students' career opportunities but also their personal and cultural development.⁸

The same paper states clearly that: "furthermore, as mentioned previously in relation to the entire educational system, **all HEIs and Institutes of Further Education should be required to have a language policy.** Without policy, decision makers (e.g. in the IoTs) may decide not to offer language courses in Business and Tourism departments [...]"⁹

The current DES consultation on a National Strategy for Foreign Languages also includes the importance of languages for employability and their findings are as follows:

⁶ Forfás and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally* (Dublin, Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2012)

⁷ IDA Ireland Strategic Policy Department interview

⁸ OVFL, *OVFL Submission to DES Consultation on a Foreign Languages in Education Strategy* (Dublin, OVFL, 2015), p22. Available online from:

http://www.onevoiceforlanguages.com/uploads/2/4/6/7/24671559/ovfl_response_to_des_consultation_on_language_policy_07_11_2014.pdf

⁹ OVFL, p19

- *The need for a strategy covering all languages, not just 'foreign' languages*
- *The need to raise awareness in society at large of the benefits of varied language capacity for intercultural understanding and positive citizenship*
- *The need to raise awareness of the competitive advantage in terms of job opportunities to be had from language competence and cultural awareness*
- *The desirability of an early start (primary or early childhood) in learning foreign languages*
- *The critical importance of teacher education initial and continuing and of language proficiency at point of entry to initial teacher education programmes*
- *The need to diversify the range of languages on offer to meet the real and emerging needs in business and society*
- *The role of employers and higher/further education in supporting multilingualism*
- *The importance of the languages of migrants, seen as an asset rather than a hindrance, and the need to support migrant languages.¹⁰*

¹⁰ NCCA, *Background Paper And Brief For The Review Of Junior Cycle Modern Languages* (Dublin, NCCA, 2015), p. 30. Available online from: <http://juniorcycle.ie/Curriculum/Consultation>

Summary of recent reports:

The learning of foreign languages is important as various national and international reports have consistently stated.

The *National Employer Survey (2015)* confirmed that approximately a quarter (25 per cent) of all employers indicated that they had a specific requirement for foreign language proficiency skills in their organisation.¹¹ It featured the data below about specific languages required by employers:

Language	Indigenous employers	Foreign employers
French	63%	80%
German	57%	83%
Spanish	48%	61%
Chinese	43%	12%
Italian	24%	66%
Russian	17%	39%
Portuguese	13%	46%

A recent conference in June 2015 at Regent's Institute of Languages & Culture, UK, emphasised that “Not only do languages enrich a student’s perspective; businesses consistently stress the value of graduates with language skills.”¹² The conference’s conclusion illustrated that transferable skills are required by language graduates and that employers are looking for these competences.

The *National Skills Bulletin (2015)* states the shortage of language skills in the ICT sector and in the Sales and Customer Service sector. Communication skills, cultural awareness and foreign languages are also required in the context of international trade:

*Sales and marketing skills are particularly important in Ireland’s efforts to increase the global market share for its exports. In this context, foreign language skills are becoming a requirement for an increasing number of companies, with German, French and Spanish being most frequently cited as a requirement by both indigenous and multinational companies; Chinese is somewhat more relevant for the indigenous sector, while other EU languages and Russian for multinational companies.*¹³

The Expert Group report *Key Skills for Enterprises to Trade Internationally (2012)* investigated the required skills by industry in Ireland to enable enterprises to complete successfully in overseas markets. Language proficiency and cultural awareness were some of the key findings of the report:

Foreign language capability and cultural awareness are essential for enterprise to compete in an increasingly global marketplace. An improved supply of domestic foreign language capability would act as a major boost to enterprises achieving their export potential and enhance Ireland’s proposition for foreign direct investment. A National Foreign Language Education Policy needs to be developed with a 10 year horizon vision, to provide an integrated and coherent approach to foreign language teaching in all learning contexts. This would include scaling up the supply of foreign language skills (number, range, proficiency)

¹¹ HEA, SOLAS and QQI, *National Employer Survey* (Dublin, 2015), p 43. Available online from: <http://www.onevoiceforlanguages.com/uploads/2/4/6/7/24671559/national-employer-survey-employers-further-higher-education.pdf>; p.43

¹² For more information: <https://careerhub.regents.ac.uk/Form.aspx?id=146073>

¹³ SOLAS, *National Skills Bulletin* (Dublin, SOLAS, 2015), p 12 and 134. Available online from: <http://www.skillsireland.ie/Publications/2015/National-Skills-Bulletin-2015-FINAL-ONLINE.pdf>

*being taught at third level for German, French, Spanish, Italian and for emerging market languages including Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Arabic (the latter at relatively low numbers). [...] The contextualisation of language teaching at third level in terms of its value to students in business and science departments would be valuable especially for managers, engineers and sales/marketing personnel.*¹⁴

Other relevant Irish reports and initiatives that highlight the importance of language skills are:

- EIL Intercultural Learning 2014 report [Winning Abroad: Ireland's struggle with Foreign Languages](#)
- Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS [National Skills Bulletin 2015](#)
- GradIreland's [Language Fair](#)
- Irish Software Association and ICT report 2011 [The Global Technology Hub - How Ireland enables success for international and indigenous technology companies](#)
- Royal Irish Academy 2011 [National Language Strategy](#)

There are also many European reports that deal with the importance of language skills. In an international context there is the EU Commission website with various relevant reports: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/index_en.htm.

- Thematic Working Group's report on [Languages in Education and Training \(2012-2014\)](#) highlights the importance of CLIL/CALL
- The [EU BAROMETER report \(2012\)](#) states that foreign language skills improved in Ireland to 40 per cent, but 60 per cent have no language skills.
- The [Languages for Jobs \(2011\)](#) report strongly recommends the cooperation between SMEs and education and looking at language skills in order to obtain employment.
- The [Languages means Business \(2007\)](#) report stated that SMEs and multinationals need languages and cultural knowledge for their business and can increase their sales by 25 per cent.
- The [Pimlico study \(2011\)](#) confirmed the same.

Between 2004 and 2007, the Languages Policy Division of the Council of Europe provided Ireland with assistance in carrying out analysis of Ireland's language education policies and the process produced the in-depth [Language Education Policy Profile \(2005-2007\)](#).

¹⁴ Forfás and the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, *Key Skills for Enterprise to Trade Internationally* (Dublin, Forfás, 2012), p. 12

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

The Council of Europe also developed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in 2001.¹⁵ It is widely used as a framework for language learning, teaching and assessment in Europe and beyond. There are six Common Reference Levels which grade the development levels (**A1** Breakthrough, **A2** Waystage, **B1** Threshold, **B2** Vantage, **C1** Effective Operational Proficiency and **C2** Mastery) in relation to skills (e.g. listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing). CEFR has not been comprehensively or systematically adopted in Ireland, although doing so would allow for consistent benchmarking and assessment of language competence. The 2003 NCCA discussion paper by Professor David Little strongly advocated its adoption in Ireland:

*The importance of this innovation cannot be exaggerated. For the first time we have a set of tools that can be used simultaneously by (i) curriculum developers, course designers and textbook authors, (ii) teachers and learners, and (iii) examination boards and other language test providers. In other words, the Common Reference Levels offer a means of integrating curriculum, teaching and assessment as never before.*¹⁶

Its potential use was also raised in the majority of submissions to the DES consultation on a National Foreign Languages Framework. However, it was not entirely clear how the Framework might work in practice at all relevant levels of education, nor how best it might be integrated with the European Language Portfolio.¹⁷

¹⁵ Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); and http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp

¹⁶ D Little, p. 28

¹⁷ See <http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/>

Proposed Discussion Topics and Questions for the IHA and OVFL Roundtable

Session One - Skills Shortages: Implications for Higher Education

- *How can Higher Education address the skills shortage?*
- *What are the Action Points required in the short term? And in the longer term?*
- *What is needed in a National Languages Strategy to address these issues?*
- *What can your HEI do?*

Session Two - CEFR: Prospects and Challenges

- *How should CEFR be utilised within the Higher Education system?*
- *What are the challenges, and what is required to implement the CEFR?*
- *What HEI and state supports are required?*
- *What can we learn from European partners with regard to the use of the CEFR for linguistic and intercultural competences?*

Session Three - Employability of Languages Graduates

- *How can we best engage strongly with:*
 - *Government,*
 - *HEIs, and,*
 - *the public? (Action Points required)*
- *How can we best cooperate with one another to ensure we advocate strongly?*
- *What should we do to ensure students can articulate their skills sets and competences?*
- *How do we articulate the importance and value of intercultural competences?*