



REPORT OF THE LANGUAGES ROUNDTABLE

(UCC, 21 SEPTEMBER 2015)

The Irish Humanities Alliance (IHA) and One Voice for Languages (OVFL) invited higher education academics and career services to participate in the *Languages Roundtable on Higher Education*, on Monday 21 September in UCC. There were over thirty participants, representing the university and Institute of Technology (IOT) sectors.

The aim of the event was to identify common positions regarding the forthcoming Department of Education and Skills' Foreign Languages Strategy, and to draft a position paper that could be utilised for advocacy and policy purposes.

The importance of a national languages strategy has long been recognized by the DES and has prompted vital collaborative work with the Council of Europe in developing a Language Education Policy Profile. The need for such a national languages strategy has also been reinforced, and given urgency, following the recent recommendations by the Task Group on Reform of University Selection and Entry regarding the place of languages in university matriculation. The forthcoming strategy must play a key role in delivering sustainability in language learning at all levels, with robust pathways between levels.

Above all, the need to advocate for languages on the basis of their intrinsic significance as well as their vital cultural and social roles in globalized societies is a matter of durable strategic importance, and these priorities form the basis of the recommendations made here. The intrinsic significance of languages is underpinned by the necessity of communication, cross-cultural interaction and understanding, humanistic education and, in a European context, the imperatives of participating in the EU in the widest sense. The recent decision in Ulster University to discontinue provision in modern languages amply testifies to the strategic stakes at issue.

The format for the day was four roundtable sessions focusing on: Skills Shortages; Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ([CEFR](#)); Employability of Languages Graduates; and Recommendations. The recommendations were divided into two categories: policy and public engagement.

Policy Recommendations:

- Each Higher Education Institute (HEI) should have its own Languages Strategy and Policy.
- Ireland needs a National Advisory Group on Languages to carry out research and advise on languages policies. This would be similar to the [Scotland's National Centre for Languages](#).
- Given its complexity, any decision to include the CEFR in the National Languages Strategy should be carefully examined by the National Advisory Group on Languages. This should be

done with the assistance of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to ensure quality assurance, and ideally it should begin with a research pilot project that can then be rolled out nationally.

- Government agencies such as the Central Statistics Office, SOLAS and the Higher Education Authority should be asked to track data specifically relating to language acquisition and language graduate career pathways. This information should be centralised and made publically available, and should inform further policy-making.
- Any national foreign languages policy needs to begin at primary school level. It is imperative that a third language be compulsory at primary and post primary level, thus sustaining language learning opportunities at all levels, in keeping with Ireland's commitments to the Council of Europe.

Public Engagement Recommendations:

- There is a need for 'Language Champions' and a centralised approach to communications campaigns regarding languages promotion. Again, this could be carried out by the National Advisory Group on Languages.
- Campaigns in Ireland should engage strongly to promote languages on days such as the annual European Day of Languages and International Translation Day. In particular these opportunities should be used to highlight the employment opportunities available to graduates.
- In a transnational age, languages are a fundamental competence for any country operating on a global stage in order to have credibility. Ireland has work to do to match levels of language awareness and language provision already being attained across the EU where plurilingualism is the norm.
- The disciplinary value of languages needs to be identified and articulated to students in HEIs. The IHA will include Modern Language graduate profiles as part of its series on 'What Humanities Graduates Offer' in May 2016.

Summary of the Sessions

First Session

The first session '*Skills Shortages: Implications for Higher Education*' was chaired by Dr Kristin Brogan, Chair of OVFL and IT Tralee Lecturer in German and Intercultural Communication. The questions discussed were:

- How can Higher Education address the skills shortage?
- What is 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?

A National Advisory Group for Languages to establish an evidence base and a centralised approach to promoting languages: There was a sense that the diversity of provision, and varying language competences of graduates, were not understood by policymakers and the general public. Studying

languages mobilizes a wide range of capacities among learners, encompassing language acquisition spanning a number of domains and media, alongside a full intercultural engagement with the social environments in which languages are used (drawing on the study of the history of ideas, philosophy, culture, literature, and social institutions). It is important to make this clear to employers, parents and students. There is also a lack of data regarding language courses, such as who is studying a language, at what level and where. Establishing a national database with this information is recommended, in order to make good policy decisions and to have co-ordinated public relations campaigns for language teaching and learning in Ireland for students, parents, employers and decision makers. A National Advisory Group on Languages should be set up to do this.

Joined-up cross education approach: There can be a lack of joined-up thinking across the different education levels, a strategic gap to which the Council of Europe testified in its earlier engagement with the Government in the [Language Education Policy Profile](#). The situation of languages in higher education cannot be examined without also examining language education at primary and secondary level. Universities can play a role in higher education, especially in relation to teacher training, their own pedagogy and in convincing colleagues in other disciplines of the importance of languages. But secondary schools also have an important influence on students deciding to study a language and comprehending the value of languages. A third language should be compulsory at both primary and secondary level. Only by making subjects compulsory can we ensure equity and access. It is critically important to expand learning opportunities by making a much wider range of languages available within the Irish education system, from primary level upwards.

HEIs: There should be clear pathways for the learner to study language(s) and all aspects of language learning should be integrated together, possibly with the development of tailored postgraduate programmes and other taught qualifications on the basis of skills shortages funding. Each HEI needs to have language policies and a strategic plan, and there should be someone with designated responsibility within the HEI. For example a policy could be that the mission statement of the HEI states that languages will be offered to as many students as possible. Provision of language courses is, of course, related to funding and resources, but there are also a number of things that can be done at a structural level: when a language is an elective, do not pitch it against core electives for example. The opportunity to develop applied language skills (for example the concept of embedded language as in sales and language; marketing and language; entrepreneurship and language) should also be offered to all students, resources permitting. Students themselves also need more access to staff teaching time, but they also need to utilise ERASMUS+ mobility options, applied language learning and time abroad in order to increase competence levels.

Second Session

The second session '*CEFR: Prospects and Challenges*' was chaired by Professor Patrick O'Donovan, Vice Chair of the Irish Humanities Alliance and Head of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, University College Cork. The questions discussed were:

- 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?

CEFR can be used to demonstrate and indicate language competence levels in a standardised manner that is internationally recognised, and it gives students a clear reference system to benchmark themselves. CEFR is currently utilised in different ways by HEIs: for some of the contributors it is already integrated into their language modules and for ERASMUS+ mobility programmes, but the majority of contributors reported gaps in the use of CEFR. This is a strategic issue. It is clear that a national response is required to bring Ireland closer to European standards in this area. Although there was a strong desire to include CEFR as part of the National Languages Strategy, there were serious concerns about optimising it for use in Ireland and systematising accreditation in higher education. In addition there are issues regarding staffing, CPD and resources. Given its complexity any decision to use CEFR should be carefully examined by the National Advisory Group on Languages, with the assistance of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to ensure quality assurance, and ideally it should begin with a research pilot project that can then be rolled out nationally. Implementation of CEFR will need to be tracked and evaluated by the DES to ensure compliance with this comprehensive national approach. However, European partners have already embraced implementing the CEFR and use CEFR teaching material and their expertise and experience can be drawn on by a National Advisory Group to develop this. A public campaign by stakeholders is also needed in order to raise awareness about the CEFR, and employers need to be educated in the use of CEFR when recruiting language graduate.

Third Session

The third session *'Employability of Languages Graduates: Key Competences'* was chaired by Orlaith Tunney, Careers Adviser, Careers Advisory Service, Trinity College Dublin. She gave an overview of employability in the context of language graduates. In doing so she used the definition of employability proposed by Peter Knight and Mantz Yorke: 'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Knight and Yorke, 2003: 5). She also stressed the very practical importance of ensuring language graduates know how to identify and sell their employability skills to employers. Although education is about much more than employability, we also need to listen to what the latest research, and employers, are telling us about language competence requirements, so as to ensure that languages graduates are best placed to seize opportunities in their chosen area of employment.

The questions discussed during the session were:

- *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?*
- *How can we best engage strongly with:*
 - *Employers,*

- *Government,*
- *HEIs, and,*
- *The public?*
- *How can we best cooperate with one another to ensure we advocate strongly?*

Education: Educators want graduates to have the educational foundations and associated skills that will support them throughout their lives and careers, and not just to address short-term policy gaps, ideological shifts or current demands from industry. Education and qualifications should mesh together to ensure employability. It is a strength of languages education that graduates go into diverse areas of employment, and have the excellent communication, resilience, resourcefulness, flexibility and intercultural skills to do so.

Employers: Employers should be invited to play a role on advisory boards, to join partnerships between HEIs and industry and to present at seminars. HEIs should also continue to leverage their Career Development Centres to invite companies to present to students and staff about skills shortages and the competences of language graduates, and should capitalise on the existing GradChances Language Fairs in Dublin and Cork which connect employers seeking employees with languages and students.

Students and graduates: Languages students and languages graduates should be supported within their HEI on the issue of employability, to understand it and to learn how to sell their skill sets and abilities. In particular, the disciplinary value of languages needs to be identified and articulated to students. They should also emphasise their experience in relation to mobility: language acquisition, cultural awareness and surviving placements abroad. HEIs that run pre-placement training noticed Humanities and languages students performed very well, once they knew how to articulate their skills but they required assistance in order to do so. An institutional/national employability policy would support the integration of career related learning into the curriculum to support students in the transition into employment.

Data: There is a need for long term strategic analysis of Ireland's language needs, such as that being published by the British Council's [Languages for the Future](#). There is also a necessity to identify career pathways and to compile statistics on earnings and wages, building on the work of gradireland through [Careers with Languages](#). This information should be made publically available so students and their parents can make informed decisions, and know what opportunities are available.

Communications: Language issues need to be brought into the public domain and 'Language Champions' are needed on the issue of employability. However, it is equally vital to emphasise how important languages are to the state: to operate effectively at a European level and for Ireland to have credibility on the global stage.

Fourth Session

The final session summarised the issues and recommendations of the day, and was chaired by Professor Daniel Carey, MRIA, Chair of the Irish Humanities Alliance and Director of the Moore Institute in NUI Galway. He thanked the participants for their time and contributions, and for the

level of commitment in engaging with the policy and public engagement issues facing Modern Languages in Ireland.