
DCMS inquiry on minority languages: A response by The British Academy and UCML convened Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education

March 2023

This submission is made on behalf of The British Academy and University Council of Modern Languages convened Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education (SCLHE), and reflects the expertise and position of Committee members. Membership of the Committee consists of language experts from across higher education, government, and the languages community, including academics, representatives from research councils and international members.

The Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education was established on the recommendation of *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills* (2020).¹ It takes a strategic oversight of provision of all languages in higher education, including the UK's minority languages; our goal of ensuring that 'the UK has buoyant numbers studying languages and graduating with language degrees in order to meet the national need for in-depth linguistic and cultural expertise'² has particular relevance to this enquiry.

(The lead drafter of this response was Prof. Michelle Macleod, Professor of Gaelic at the University of Aberdeen, where she also teaches Irish and language policy. She has published widely on aspects of Gaelic language and culture and recently has been working on subjects relating to adult language acquisition and community language planning. In addition to her academic publications, Prof. Macleod has worked alongside various language organisations in Scotland. She is a member of the SCLHE and was one of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Future of Language Research Fellows looking specifically at the research needs of the UK's indigenous languages.)

1) What are the key factors determining whether an indigenous minority language thrives?

The fundamental requirement needed to ensure minority languages thrive is simply a community of speakers who have the opportunity to use their language across a range of sociolinguistic

¹ The British Academy, AHRC, ASCL, British Council, UUK (2020), *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*, p.14

² Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education, *Terms of Reference* (internal document).

domains. There is no specific number or percentage of a population required to determine whether a minority language community is thriving. For most indigenous minority languages in the UK, growing or maintaining a community of speakers following centuries of decline is the biggest priority. Though it is outside of the parameters of this inquiry, it is important to note (i) British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) are minority languages in the UK and that BSL has been recognised through legislation in England³ and Scotland;⁴ (ii) the numerous other minority languages (in addition to indigenous ones) which are used and/or learned in home, community, or out-of-school settings.⁵ The Committee notes the tendency internationally for language policy to adopt an increasingly inclusive approach, reflecting the interrelationships of languages in multilingual societies.

Theoretically, increases in speaker numbers can be generated by a number of methods. Each of these pathways requires very focussed policy intervention and each pathway has the potential to contribute to vitality:

- Supported intergenerational transmission in the home
- Early learning immersive pre-school opportunities
- Additive and/or intensive learning at primary schools (generally through language immersion education)
- Continued immersion education at secondary school level
- Opportunities to learn the minority language at secondary schools
- Opportunities to study the language either as a beginner or as a competent speaker in Higher and Further Education settings
- Opportunities to access learning pathways as an adult outside formal education circles

The importance of languages and language education, including minority language education, is a global issue. In a joint statement on *The Importance of Languages in Global Context: An International Call to Action*, issued in 2020 by the British Academy, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Australian Academy of the Humanities and The Royal Society of Canada, it is noted:

“Languages are vital resources to be cherished and nurtured, including the languages of minority and indigenous populations who should be supported in their efforts to transmit their languages across generations, safeguard their traditional knowledge systems, and be protected from discrimination on the basis of language. This support should include the preservation and further development of cultural materials as well as continuing access to education across a range of languages. Such efforts are critical to creating truly multilingual societies as well as necessary to meaningful cross-cultural communication.”⁶

In the UK, universities have a crucial role to play in supporting minority language vitality. It is currently possible to study elements of most of the UK’s indigenous minority languages at university, and certain universities offer full degrees in Gaelic, Irish and Welsh. Study of minority languages in the Higher Education (HE) sector is an excellent way of both increasing speaker numbers and supporting other language promotion activities. For example, it is often possible to combine language study with other subjects⁷ necessary to support minority language communities, e.g., sociology, law, media, education etc.

³ See [British Sign Language Act 2022](#)

⁴ See [British Sign Language \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#)

⁵ See <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/language-zones/home-heritage-community-languages/>

⁶ The British Academy, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, The Royal Society of Canada (2020), *The Importance of Languages in Global Context: An International Call to Action*, p.2.

⁷ For more information, see The British Academy and UCML (2022), *Languages Learning in Higher Education: Granular Trends*. This report analyses UCAS admissions data for UK undergraduate language degrees from 2012-2021 and includes analysis of how students are studying languages in combination with other subject groups e.g. in combination with social sciences or arts/humanities.

Student enrolment for Initial Teacher Education degrees (for teaching through the minority language) and graduate teaching qualifications is struggling to keep pace with the demand for newly qualified teachers for Gaelic, Irish and Welsh.⁸ As a consequence it is important to support recruitment and facilitate multiple access points to learning and training to meet demand.

For Further Education, recent research from Queen's University Belfast and The British Academy demonstrates the challenges around provision for all languages in this sector. There was, however, indication of good practice in some of the indigenous languages which should be supported as an important means of growing speaker numbers.⁹

Creating and supporting different pathways for language learners is not enough in itself to ensure that language vitality is achieved. Minority language speakers need to be encouraged to use their language. For a minority language community to thrive, there needs to be focussed policy and investment. This could include:

- Opportunities for children and young people to use the language socially
- Opportunities to use the language in the relevant community or network
- Access to creative and cultural industries
- Employment opportunities

Universities have an important role in supporting our understanding of minority language communities by conducting action research into the different language communities, working in collaboration with policy makers, languages stakeholders, and the broader education system, and measuring and interpreting sociolinguistic data.

In addition, universities occupy a critical space in the dissemination of knowledge, through teaching and research activities, about the rich cultural heritage of the UK's minority languages. Language and culture cannot generally be separated but in the case of a minority language existing alongside a dominant majority language in the same political state, the minority culture can often be overlooked. For a language to thrive, its culture (its literature, art, song, history, folklore, etc) must also be facilitated to thrive. The *Mother Tongue, Other Tongue* initiative - co-ordinated by SCILT (Scotland's National Centre for Languages) at Strathclyde University - is a multilingual poetry project celebrating cultural diversity and the many languages spoken in schools in the UK, and is a real-world example of the role universities can play in supporting minority languages to thrive.¹⁰

2) What lessons can be learned from countries whose populations achieve widespread fluency in both a majority and indigenous minority language?

There are a number of examples of language communities which have achieved widespread fluency in both their minority and majority languages. Research shows that acquisition of a minority language does not interfere with acquisition of the majority language. In fact, there is evidence, including from the Gaelic medium education system, which shows, for example, that the academic attainments of school children learning through the minority language can be higher than those of their monolingually educated peers.¹¹

Generally, education is the key to achieving fluency in both the minority and majority language with learning opportunities being available at all stages. For example, in the case of the Basque

⁸ See e.g. McLeod, W. (2020), *Gaelic in Scotland: Policies, Movements, Ideologies*, Edinburgh University Press. pp 298-315; [Warning of crisis in Gaelic teacher recruitment > SCILT](#); [2020-IME-Sector-Development-Plan.pdf](#); [welsh-in-education-workforce-plan.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

⁹ The British Academy and Queen's University Belfast (2023), [Languages Provision in UK Further Education](#)

¹⁰ See [MTOT \(scilt.org.uk\)](#)

¹¹ O'Hanlon, F., Paterson, L., & McLeod, W. (2012). The attainment of pupils in Gaelic-medium primary education in Scotland. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 16(6), 707-729

language it has been possible for teachers in employment to take time out of their work and be paid to learn the language so that it will be possible for them to return to their employment as a fluent speaker of Basque.¹² Similarly, in Catalan speaking regions, school children regularly access their learning in Catalan, Spanish and one other language.¹³ Looking within the UK, examples of success can be found in Wales via Welsh medium education and other schemes which promote the learning of Welsh more widely.^{14,15} Indeed, in many countries both within the UK and internationally, indigenous minority languages are celebrated as national intangible treasures and this elevated status encourages more engagement with the minority language.

If the UK is to increase the status and uptake of minority languages as part of a broader commitment to encourage more language learning, the UK Government, in collaboration with devolved jurisdictions as applicable, could promote the creation of strategies which prioritise learning the minority language with multiple education access points. To do so, the Government may wish to take note of the existing body of evidence on language promotion and acquisition strategies, including: The British Academy *et al.*'s *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*, the Welsh Government's *Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers*, the *National Gaelic Language Plan* prepared by Bòrd na Gàidhlig (the principal public body in Scotland responsible for promoting Gaelic development), the Scottish Government's *Scots Language Policy*, Cornwall Council's *Cornish Language Strategy 2015-25* and the 2022 Advisory Panels' *Recommendations for an Irish Language Strategy* and *Recommendations for an Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage & Culture Strategy* prepared as part of the *New Decade New Approach* for the Northern Ireland Executive, alongside its *Líofa (fluent) scheme*. As with our response to Question 1, whilst British Sign Language is outside the parameters of this inquiry, the Government may wish to note the Scottish Government's *British Sign Language National Plan*.

In addition, the Government could demonstrate that it values language acquisition and minority languages by encouraging active participation across departments in international initiatives which support indigenous minority languages such as International Mother Tongue Day.¹⁶ Alternatively, the Government could consider a UK approach to establishing a similar event to the Canadian National Indigenous Languages Day¹⁷ or promote existing celebrations such as the Eisteddfod and Urdd Eisteddfod, for Welsh¹⁸ and Seachtain na Gaeilge¹⁹ and Seachdain na Gàidhlig²⁰ for Irish and Gaelic, respectively. Government initiatives in celebrating the UK's minority languages would be an important act of bringing status to these languages.

3) What should be the criteria for judging whether a minority language should receive official status?

It is the opinion of members of the Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education that official language status generally implies that a language can be used in its jurisdiction for most purposes (education, dealing with government, accessing broadcasting and entertainment, etc.).

The Committee does not believe that official status should be associated with numbers of speakers but rather be a recognition of a language's cultural and historical place and a commitment to encouraging usage within a jurisdiction. While it is the Committee's opinion that decisions on whether a minority language receives official status may be best made by the relevant devolved jurisdiction, there is a need also for a centralised, national overview to ensure a degree of

¹² Zalbiede, Mikel Full article: *Bilingual Education in the Basque Autonomous Community: Achievements and Challenges* (tandfonline.com)

¹³ Trilingual Primary Education in Europe, Mercator, 2011, Opmaak 1 (mercator-research.eu)

¹⁴ For more information on Welsh schemes, see hwb.gov.wales and <https://learnwelsh.cymru/education-workforce/#information>

¹⁵ For more information, see <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/welsh/courses/welsh-for-all>

¹⁶ For more information, see <https://www.unesco.org/en/days/mother-language>

¹⁷ For more information, see <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/culture/canadian-identity-society.html>

¹⁸ For more information, see <https://www.urdd.cymru/en/eisteddfod/> and <https://eisteddfod.wales/business/background>

¹⁹ For more information, see Seachtain na Gaeilge

²⁰ For more information, see Seachdain na Gàidhlig

consistency and alignment with external frameworks (such as the [European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages](#)) and that this should be considered alongside other language policy initiatives (on language education, community languages, BSL, etc.) reflecting the society's multilingual reality.

The Committee believes that official status reflects a commitment to offering services across the widest level of public services; this could go alongside initiatives which will support and facilitate a language community to take up the active offer of using their minority language across a range of places.

Official status by itself will not guarantee a language's vitality but it could support other legal and policy apparatus, and be supported by grass-root demand.

4) What should be the role of the UK Government in supporting and developing indigenous minority languages?

The UK Government has an opportunity to play a key role in supporting the indigenous minority languages of these islands through existing frameworks and partnerships, as well as through potentially innovative activities.

Research into minority language communities, education and planning is vital for supporting the strategic ambitions of the UK, including the Government's levelling up agenda and intention to be a 'Global Britain' and a 'Science and Research Superpower'. Higher education funding councils (e.g., those within UKRI) and Higher Education funding bodies (Research England, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Scottish Funding Council, Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland) are well placed to support research investigating minority language challenges, as well as contribute to the implementation of successful language policies which will support the sustainability of their teaching and research across the higher education sector and in broader society. This is evident in the findings submitted to the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of their Future of Languages Research Fellowship.²¹

More broadly, minority language broadcasting, currently a reserved power of the Westminster Government, is an essential tool in supporting the vitality of a minority language through: creating opportunities of language usage and supporting learning; normalising language use; supporting the creative industries to grow in the relevant minority language and raising the profile of the language. In addition to traditional broadcast media, new digital media platforms are becoming particularly important for young speakers of minority languages.

The UK Government could have a coordinating role in working with devolved and local governments to promote the status of minority languages in the UK. Their role as an integral part of the UK's cultural tapestry could be recognised by including representations of their intangible heritage at high profile national events; promoting the UK internationally as a multilingual country; and by increasing visibility in placenames, public signage and in government publications. Bringing together policy makers and stakeholders who work in minority languages across the UK would allow for the exchange of ideas and experiences about how to better recognise, celebrate, and improve engagement with the indigenous minority languages of the UK and its people.

²¹ See Macleod, Michelle (forthcoming) "The Research Needs of the UK's Indigenous Languages" in [LANGUAGES, SOCIETY AND POLICY - HOME | LSP \(lspjournal.com\)](#). While the full report from the Future of Languages Research Fellowship was submitted confidentially to the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2022, this forthcoming article will provide an overview of many of the findings from the research.