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The strategic case for languages in UK higher education

Why language degrees and translation and interpreting programmes are essential for UK competitiveness

*A report compiled by the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, the Chartered Institute of Linguists
and the Association of Translation Companies – January 2026*

Executive summary

The UK is at a critical juncture in language education. Only 2.97% of A-levels taken in 2024 were in languages, teacher recruitment met just 43% of its target, and 28 universities have closed modern languages degrees since 2014. This decline threatens UK economic competitiveness, international engagement, and social cohesion at precisely the moment when these capabilities are most needed.

This report sets out the strategic case for maintaining and strengthening language provision in UK universities, supported by evidence from government reports, economic research, and professional bodies. It demonstrates that:

- Language deficiencies cost the UK economy approximately 3.5% of GDP annually in lost export trade.
- SMEs with language capabilities are 30% more successful in exporting.
- Removing language barriers could increase UK exports by £19 billion annually.
- One-third of UK employers experience recruitment difficulties due to lack of language skills.
- The closure of language degrees at 28 universities risks has created a vicious circle of decline

The report concludes with a call to action, setting out six steps that universities can take to reverse the decline and build the linguistic capabilities essential for the UK's future prosperity.



1. The scale and urgency of the crisis

The collapse in language learning

The Higher Education Policy Institute's 2025 report *The Languages Crisis: Arresting Decline* reveals the extent of the problem:¹

- Only 2.97% of A-levels taken in 2024 were in modern foreign languages, classical subjects, Welsh, and Irish.
- There were more A-level entries for Physical Education than for French, German, and the classical languages combined.
- Language teacher recruitment met just 43% of government target in 2024.
- There was a 20% gap in GCSE language uptake between affluent areas (69%) and disadvantaged areas (46-47%).
- Undergraduate enrolments in language and area studies were down 20% since 2020.
- 28 universities have closed modern languages degrees since 2014, with 17 post-1992 institutions losing provision entirely.

A vicious circle of closures

University course closures create a self-reinforcing decline. When universities close language departments, they reduce the pipeline of qualified language teachers, which further reduces school provision, leading to fewer students with the qualifications to study languages at university. This cycle is particularly harmful in regions where there is limited higher education provision, creating geographic cold spots where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have no local access to language education.

The east of England has been specifically identified as one of three regions with the largest declines in acceptances onto language courses over the past decade. With more than half of UK students studying locally, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly likely to stay close to home, closures in certain parts of the country will have a disproportionate impact on equality of opportunity.

Regional inequality in provision

According to recent reporting, a third of state sixth forms in England now have no pupils studying French, Spanish or German at A-level, compared with only 17% of private schools.² This two-tier system has wider economic implications. Fewer students from comprehensive backgrounds continue languages to university level, meaning that there is a less socially diverse pool of graduates entering the workforce with the linguistic and cultural fluency that international business demands.



2. The economic imperative

The cost of language deficiencies

The UK's £2 billion language services industry employs language and translation graduates in varied roles from translation to multilingual project management, supporting the UK economy and export activities. However, research consistently demonstrates the economic cost of inadequate language skills:

- 3.5% of GDP is lost annually (approximately £48 billion at 2009 values) due to deficient language skills acting as a barrier to UK trade.³
- There is a demonstrated 30% export success advantage for SMEs that invest in language capabilities compared to those that do not.⁴
- There is a £19 billion potential annual increase in UK exports from removing language barriers with Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish-speaking countries.⁵

Research also shows that investing in language learning has a substantial economic return; even under conservative assumptions there is likely to be a 2:1 benefit-to-cost ratio for investment in languages education over 30 years.⁵

The export imperative

Professor James Foreman-Peck's seminal 2014 analysis for UK Trade & Investment (UKTI) showed that poor language skills held back UK trade performance in key markets including Brazil, Russia, India, China, France, Germany, and Japan. His research found that 3.5% of GDP (approximately £48 billion at 2009 values) was lost annually due to deficient language skills acting as a barrier to UK trade.³ Foreman-Peck's findings were revisited in 2022 in a RAND Europe / University of Cambridge report that investigated the potential benefits to the economy of promoting the learning of specific global languages. The authors estimated that *"if the populations in the world who speak Arabic, French, Mandarin, and Spanish could communicate with the UK population without difficulty, then UK exports would increase by £19bn a year."*⁵

More recent research by Aston Business School demonstrated that SMEs with language capabilities are 30% more successful in exporting.⁴ Given that SMEs represent 99.9% of the UK business population, account for around half of all turnover in the private sector, and employ 61% of the total UK workforce this is a significant finding.

Based on this compelling evidence, it is clear that the general lack of language skills has profound implications for the UK's economic performance. It seems that many businesses *"don't know what they don't know"* and are failing to spot and exploit profit opportunities because they lack foreign language capabilities and rely solely on English in their business dealings.

Post-Brexit urgency

The end of free movement has exposed how dependent many UK businesses had become on EU nationals who brought both English fluency and native language skills. Companies that once effortlessly operated across Europe now struggle to recruit for roles requiring bilingual or



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multicultural expertise. A summary prepared for the House of Lords Library noted that one-third of UK employers experience recruitment difficulties because applicants lack foreign language competence, and that this shortfall acts as a brake on UK trade.⁶

Research by Wolfestone Group and Swansea University found that 72% of employers surveyed believe Brexit has made recruitment of candidates with language skills more difficult, with graduate recruiters reporting that candidates in Germany, France and the Nordic countries have become increasingly reluctant to relocate to the UK.¹³ The report warns that companies operating internationally may be less likely to establish or remain in the UK due to the nation's lack of language skills, while UK-based companies may struggle to compete internationally if they cannot recruit employees with the language capabilities they need.

The UK's departure from the European Union's Erasmus programme compounded the problem. With more than half of UK students who study abroad doing so through Erasmus, the scheme provided a critical pathway for language degrees and the promotion of languages at a time of continuing decline. The replacement Turing scheme did not offer the same reciprocal arrangements, and the recent announcement that the UK will rejoin the Erasmus+ programme from January 2027 currently only secures participation for one year.

In a post-Brexit Britain, where employing staff from outside the UK is no longer an option for many companies, being able to recruit graduates from UK universities with high-quality language skills is absolutely critical for UK businesses' continued access to skilled, multilingual staff and outsourced language services.



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3. Beyond economic value: cultural, diplomatic and social benefits

Cultural exchange and soft power

Language capabilities are essential for cultural exchange, diplomatic relations, and the UK's ability to project itself effectively on the global stage. The British Academy's work on languages and the joint statement from the British Academy, Royal Society, Academy of Medical Sciences, and Royal Academy of Engineering emphasise how important it is for the UK to nurture the skilled linguists who are needed to forge wider commercial and other links beyond our borders.⁷

As the British Council's report *Languages for the Future* notes: "But all should recognise that the UK's language deficit remains a threat to our overall international competitiveness, influence and standing in the world, as well as to our citizens' ability to play a meaningful role in the global economy and in an increasingly networked world. We have now reached a critical juncture where investment in upgrading the UK's language skills, which give unparalleled access to cultural knowledge and understanding, will pay important dividends."⁸

Research and innovation

The HEPI report warns that the collapse of language education will have concerning knock-on effects for research. Mandarin continues to gain importance as a scientific language, making the decline in provision for strategically significant languages particularly concerning for international research collaboration.¹ The British Academy warns that the language deficit constrains the country's ability to participate in global research and innovation.⁹

Social cohesion and inclusion

One in five pupils in England are bilingual to some degree, yet there is inadequate infrastructure to recognise and develop these existing language skills. Enhancing multilingualism by providing centralised support and streamlining pathways for qualification entries for languages spoken at home and taught in supplementary schools would both support social inclusion and address skills shortages.



4. Why AI strengthens rather than weakens the case for language education

The limits of machine translation

Despite claims that AI has made language skills obsolete, recent research demonstrates the opposite. In a 2025 YouGov survey, only 4% of respondents said they would consider learning a foreign language to improve their employment prospects, suggesting widespread misunderstanding about AI's limitations.² However, communication is rarely just about words. It requires understanding of sincerity, empathy, trust, cultural nuance, humour and diplomacy. An AI tool may translate a presentation flawlessly, but it is the human communicator who interprets cultural difference and builds relationships.

A growing body of academic research has demonstrated that AI-generated translations currently perform unequally across different languages, suffer from algorithmic bias, and lack cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, AI tools are mostly limited to virtual communication. For SMEs, which often operate with limited resources and potential linguistic deficiencies, it remains imperative to adopt a broad-based and long-term approach towards the development of language capacities.

The evolving role of language professionals

The language services market exceeded \$70 billion in 2024 and is projected to reach \$96 billion by 2030, demonstrating that technology has not reduced demand. Professional translators increasingly work as post-editors, quality assessors and language technology specialists. They need to understand how AI works, where it fails, and how to use it effectively. Universities that teach both translation theory and AI literacy prepare graduates for this hybrid professional reality.

Skills that AI cannot replace

As the Higher Education Policy Institute's report¹ observes: the skills and intellectual values of a linguistic mindset are even more important in an age of rapid technological change. Close and critical analysis, oracy, cultural adaptability, creative problem-solving, precision and clarity of expression are exactly what AI tools struggle to replicate. These capabilities enhance graduates' employability across all sectors, not just language-specific careers. As noted in letters from the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) to various universities considering the closure of language departments: "*The additional skills fostered through language learning, such as improved literacy in the student's native language as well as increased mental agility, creative originality and problem-solving ability enhance a student's employability and their economic value to their future workplace.*"



5. Government recognition of the problem

The curriculum and assessment review 2025

In November 2025, the government responded to Professor Becky Francis's Curriculum and Assessment Review with measures that acknowledge the crisis in language learning:

- Removal of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) measure, which had failed to encourage language uptake
- Changes to Progress 8 to encourage greater breadth of GCSE subjects including languages
- Languages to have equal status to humanities and arts GCSEs
- Exploring a new language qualification that banks progress and motivates pupils to want to continue studying

The final revised curriculum is to be published in spring 2027 for implementation in September 2028, demonstrating that government recognises the need for action.¹⁰

Call for a national languages strategy

In July 2020, the British Academy, working with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK, published *Towards a National Languages Strategy: Education and Skills*.¹¹ The strategy called for urgent, concerted and coordinated action at all levels from primary schools through to university and beyond to address the inadequate, longstanding and worsening supply of language skills. Key recommendations included:

- Higher education funding to cover the full costs of provision for language degrees
- Targeted government funding to prevent the loss of strategically important languages
- Support for staff and student mobility schemes
- Strengthening infrastructure and coordination across education sectors



6. The vital role of universities

Breaking the vicious cycle

Universities must recognise their position at the centre of a complex educational ecosystem. Language graduates become teachers, feeding the pipeline of future university applicants. They become translators and interpreters, supporting UK businesses and public services. They enter diverse careers where their linguistic and intercultural capabilities provide competitive advantage.

The Higher Education Policy Institute's report¹ warns that higher education institutions should be conscious of the vicious circle created by the loss of high-level language expertise when making decisions about curriculum reviews and cuts. Regional universities have a particular responsibility given that more than half of UK students study locally, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds especially likely to stay close to home.

As argued in a letter from the ITI to the University of Aberdeen: *"Unless Scottish universities commit to ensuring a pipeline of language graduates there will be consequential shortages of skilled and capable linguists who can take up teaching roles in the country's secondary schools, leading to an inevitable, and highly damaging, decline in language capacity, which will in turn impoverish Scotland's intellectual and economic prospects."* The same principle applies across the UK.

Adapting provision to changing needs

Several institutions have recognised the challenge of declining numbers of students with prior language learning and have introduced a fresh approach by allowing students to begin French or German degrees without prior qualifications. As the Higher Education Policy Institute notes: *"This indicates that higher education institutions are increasingly adapting to the lack of prior language-learning experience in schools: insisting on prior experience and qualifications risks becoming exclusionary as well as impractical."*¹

Institution-wide language provision (IWLP), or language learning outside of a main degree programme, offers another model. However, five IWLP programmes have closed since 2020, with a further eight under threat. These closures represent a lost opportunity to extend language learning across the student population and undermine the acquisition of linguistic capability as a positive attribute for graduates.

The international student dimension

Translation and interpreting programmes consistently attract strong cohorts of international students, particularly from China, the Middle East, and European nations.

These students:

- bring cultural diversity and language combinations in high demand;
- often remain in the UK post-graduation, contributing to the economy;
- provide universities with a stable and proven recruitment pathway; and
- support international partnerships and institutional global strategies.



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For universities managing international recruitment challenges, language programmes offer a distinctive proposition that attracts students seeking clear professional pathways in a global economy.

Marketing and recruitment

One challenge facing language departments is the inadequate marketing of the opportunities to potential students. Despite strong evidence of employability and skills development, many young people do not understand the value of language study and may not even be fully aware of the breadth and variety of language courses that are available. Universities should invest in effectively communicating the benefits to prospective students, emphasising:

- strong graduate employment outcomes across diverse sectors;
- development of highly valued transferable skills;
- international opportunities through study abroad and exchange programmes;
- clear career pathways in teaching, translation, interpreting, international business, diplomacy and beyond; and
- the distinctive advantage that language skills provide in an AI-augmented economy.

Effective marketing requires collaboration between language departments, careers services, and universities' recruitment teams. It should draw on evidence from the British Academy's 'Born Global' research on employer needs¹² and alumni success stories.

Partnerships with professional associations

Universities with strong connections to professional associations such as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI), the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL), and the Association of Translation Companies (ATC) benefit from enhanced credibility, placement opportunities, and input into curriculum development. These partnerships demonstrate the practical value of qualifications and support graduate employment outcomes.



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7. Call to action

The evidence is clear and compelling. Language deficiencies impose significant economic costs, limit UK competitiveness, restrict young people's opportunities and weaken social cohesion. Universities sit at the heart of the solution.

We therefore call on universities to take decisive action by:

- recognising that language provision is a strategic investment, not a peripheral activity;
- understanding the vicious circle created by the loss of provision, and particularly the regional impact, and working to ensure equality of opportunity for students across the UK;
- driving innovation in course programme design, incorporating AI literacy and responding to evolving professional needs;
- investing in effective marketing that communicates the value of language skills to prospective students;
- building strong partnerships with professional associations and employers in the language services sector; and
- supporting institution-wide language provision to extend linguistic capability across the student population.

The challenge is urgent, but solutions exist. With coordinated action across universities and professional associations, the UK can reverse the decline and build the linguistic capabilities essential for future prosperity.

About the contributing organisations

Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI)

The Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI) is the only dedicated membership body in the UK for practising translators and interpreters and is also a strong voice for the profession at Government level. It is a company limited by guarantee with volunteer-led governance.

Association of Translation Companies (ATC)

The Association of Translation Companies (ATC) is a trade body representing language service companies in the UK's £2 billion language services industry, with 250 member companies supporting the UK economy and export activities through translation and interpreting.

Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL)

The Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) is the leading professional body for linguists worldwide, supporting language professionals across all sectors and setting standards for professional practice.



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