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# Advancing language policy: a comprehensive analysis of languages provision in UK further education

Min-Chen Liu, Ian Collen, Leanne Henderson, Aisling O'Boyle, Jennifer Roberts | 10th December 2024 | Policy Papers

- Our research on evidence-based trends in the provision of languages in the Further Education (FE) sector in the UK over the last 20 years produced several alarming findings with regard to equality of access to the provision of language education.
- We analysed a variety of primary and secondary sources, including a rapid systematic literature review, National Statistics on languages uptake, surveys of staff and students in FE settings and interviews with key stakeholders to obtain a comprehensive picture of the current state of language education in FE.
- We identified a lack of pathways, a relatively restricted choice in languages, with significant variations and consistent provision often limited to French and Spanish, a low priority given to languages by FE leadership teams, and an absence of connection between languages and other FE programmes.
- These findings reveal regional inequalities across the UK manifesting shortages labelled 'cold spots' for language learning.
- To ensure fairness and the advancement of societal well-being for all, we point to five policy interventions for language provision in FE:
  - develop a unifying voice for languages in FE, drawing on the expertise of language organisations across regions to plan and action change
  - implement mechanisms to incentivise collaboration across institutions and cooperation between sectors
  - expand language qualifications at FE to better reflect the UK's linguistic diversity and address identified skills gaps
  - ensure systematic data on language education in FE is available to inform evidence-based policymaking
  - secure investment to support the revitalisation of languages in the FE sector.

## Introduction

The 2022 '[Towards a National Languages Strategy](#)' detailed the strategic importance of languages for the future of the UK. The report brought attention to a declining demand for languages and the knock-on impacts of a languages skills shortage which would be unable to meet future UK needs. It also identified a number of actions and measurable outcomes, dependent upon a holistic and comprehensive approach through a UK Languages strategy. Taking an inclusive position that quality education for all children, youth and adults is fundamental to sustainable societies, the report recognised the importance of language education in all sectors, including, among the medium and long-term actions, a [recommendation to integrate languages in vocational and technical qualifications](#). [In addition](#), 'Towards a National Languages Strategy' also highlighted a dearth of accessible data and evidence on the provision and uptake of language learning in Further Education. To uncover the evidence and identify longitudinal trends in provision and uptake in this sector, the 'Languages Provision in the UK Further Education' research was conducted. This paper draws upon that research (Collen et al. 2023) to discuss a number of policy-relevant concerns and offer what we consider to be realistic and manageable policy recommendations for languages in the UK.

Further Education (FE), in the United Kingdom offers a range of opportunities that go beyond secondary and Higher Education, providing wider education opportunities to individuals from different age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. With education in the UK a devolved matter, governments in each of the four jurisdictions (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) are responsible for their FE offering. Typically, FE qualifications are designed to equip students with job-specific skills for transition into the workplace or to boost their employability. Often these are designed in close partnership with industry, commerce, and employers. FE has long been recognised as a pillar of the education system which strengthens social inclusion and offers educational opportunities for all.

The pattern of uptake in educational provision at FE differs across the four jurisdictions of the UK. Part-time courses offer a more flexible schedule and are perceived as more attractive to FE students than full-time ones. In terms of funding, full-time versus part-time pathways, backgrounds of learners and geographical spread, there are variations across jurisdictions. Participants in our research (Collen et al. 2023) report that Further Education has witnessed historic underfunding across the UK, with some evidence of official interventions such as college and government funding to support efforts to improve the situation in Scotland and Wales. It is possible to argue that severe underinvestment in FE over the last number of decades has resulted in limited offerings. This has led

to an increasing number of geographic 'cold spots' for languages, where a significant reduction of provision has been observed. An analysis of trends and challenges for the FE sector's uptake in languages over the past two decades shows an alarming educational context for languages (Collen et al., 2023). These include a lack of clear pathways for progression; few College Lecturers offering languages other than the 'traditional' options such as French and Spanish; low value attributed to language learning by leadership teams; and little visible connection between language learning in school and lifelong learning. Despite the well-known advantages of learning languages, there seems to be a disjunct between how languages are valued and how language education is made accessible in FE environments (Collen et al., 2023).

## Key Research Findings

Our research investigating trends in language education in the FE sector over the last 20 years included a systematic literature review and the secondary analysis of National Statistics on language learning. It also included primary research in which we administered online surveys to staff and students in FE colleges and conducted in-depth interviews with students, staff and key stakeholders across all four jurisdictions.

The results of the systematic literature review show how language education research has developed in the FE sector in the UK over the past twenty years. Lamentably, it is a depressing demonstration of just how little attention has been paid to this crucial area on research agendas. From the small number of research publications (n=9) in language education in FE, the review identified evidence of research on management and structural concerns, deficiencies in teaching and training, obstacles related to student motivation, and factors influencing course-level retention (see Atherton & Barnes, 2012; Baker et al., 2011; Diamantatou & Hawes, 2015; Gibson & Shutt, 2002; Zhang & Li, 2010). Overall, this systematic review highlights the need to increase volume and consistency of research in this area in order to obtain accurate and up-to-date evidence on language education across UK FE sectors.

From the analysis of secondary sources, we see declines in participation in languages at FE in each jurisdiction, other than a very small increase in 2015 in Scotland; more work would need to be done to understand why Scotland saw this small increase in language entries in FE. A historical lack of appropriate funding for these areas and unclear pathways within the education systems for students who wish to continue to develop their language skills through vocational qualifications may have contributed to this decline. Further to our investigation of these sources, it is important to highlight the limitations of the current publicly available statistics for reporting FE enrolments. While there are insights to be gained from what is currently available, it is, for example, not always possible to

identify whether students are studying modern languages, ancient languages or culture, or courses in language or literature. Moving forward, a more detailed data capture on enrolment and qualifications would offer greater possibilities for more accurate and attuned policy decisions.

We also identified a number of geographical areas which do not offer any languages programmes, particularly in educationally lower performing regions with lower-than-average Higher Education entry requirements; broadly consistent with Muradás-Taylor and Taylor's (2024) findings for cold spots for languages in Higher Education, we observed FE cold spots in the north, east and southwest of England, as well as in parts of Northern Ireland. There are significant variations in the offering that a potential FE student may encounter at their local FE college. Some colleges provide comprehensive coverage of a range of languages which can be studied at different levels while other colleges offer relatively fewer languages and with limited opportunities for progression. Moreover, limited language courses available close to students' homes create substantial additional barriers for students who are therefore constrained from participating in and having access to multilingual opportunities. On the upside, there are some FE colleges which display a wide range of levels which a student may progress through, allowing for incremental language development for students who will almost exclusively be studying these courses on a part-time and/or online basis. Whilst online provides a flexible study experience, our research did find that some teachers and students preferred the social connection of face-to-face. It is clear that online is the future, but there remains work to be done to develop the capacity of teachers to deliver a learning-rich and connected online environment.

Findings from the staff and student survey communicate the perceptions and attitudes of those engaged in current FE education. One key observation is the lack of direction and appreciation for languages in FE settings throughout the UK. The absence of any choice of language diversity other than French and Spanish (both commonly studied languages and A level choices) is considered a difficulty and significant frustration. Where available, the variety of languages offered at Entry level is very positively evaluated and the student survey evidenced a diverse sample of FE students with a wide range of ages across the lifespan and included both full-time and part-time students. Over 85% of students across the four jurisdictions report that languages are important to the future of the UK. Staff who completed the survey identified several challenges to their languages provision. The two most frequently mentioned challenges reported are a lack of college-wide promotion of languages as a careers option and languages as a low priority for senior management. With a sense of commodification of languages, staff considered they were having to engage in demand and supply matters without protection or 'enclaving' from educational leaders (see Appadurai, 1986; Wei and Kelly-Holmes, 2022). Other challenges to languages provision included dominance of global English, lack of opportunities for learners to practise their language outside the classroom, and the

way external exams are marked and graded. In relation to options for global mobility and integration of language courses into vocational programmes, staff consider that options were very restricted, and students were mostly unaware of any related opportunities.

The results from in-depth interviews are consistent with the survey findings of staff as well as students. After two decades or more where language courses in FE have been subject to constraints and funding difficulties, with resulting precarious job stability and limited choices associated with neoliberal managerial perspectives on student recruitment, stakeholders are steadfast in the value that language education in FE settings can offer to economic, social, and cultural life in the UK. Interviews with participants, who had between 7 years and 30+ years of engagement and experience related to language education, evidenced FE institutions' considerable flexibility and responsiveness to: their local communities, changes in populations, and diverse learning needs. Interviewees were united in their observation that not all languages are perceived as equal. The values attributed to different languages and the learning of different languages seems to wax and wane. For stakeholders with decades of experience, there were changes over time in the symbolism, utility, and kudos of languages. Our interviews with stakeholders revealed pressures associated with course viability in an increasingly fraught financial climate have led to a dearth of availability of courses and thus a cap on progression opportunities from school to FE and from FE to HE, life-long learning and the workplace. For some interviewees their attitudes towards assessment, qualifications, and proficiency reflected changes they wanted to see in how they gain recognition and certification for the ways they actually use languages. They were unanimous in reporting the potential for developments in online language learning that they see for a positive future.

## Opportunities for Policy Intervention

It is clear from our research that policy interventions are required to improve language provision in the FE sector across the UK. We point to five key recommendations:

### *Develop a unifying voice for languages in FE*

According to our research findings it seems essential to have a separate Strategic Committee for Languages in FE within the UK government, drawing on the expertise of language organizations across regions to plan and action change. Led by groups like the Association of Colleges, Colleges Scotland, Colegau Cymru and NI Colleges with support from representation across the languages, education, and skills communities, it would be a powerful committee to represent language provision in FE. Drawing inspiration from the model of the Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education, it could provide strategic oversight, offer a unifying voice for FE and improve

dialogue and learning across jurisdictions to improve the capacity of the sector to address goals contributing to improving national linguistic capacity. This could help address the currently fragmented and patchy provision. Through planning, collaboration with stakeholders and engagement with policymakers this committee could bring about improvements and work towards bridging existing gaps in language education.

### *Fostering and incentivising collaboration among colleges and across sectors*

Enhancing collaboration, among schools, colleges and universities and implementing mechanisms to incentivise collaboration across institutions and cooperation between sectors is crucial for establishing transitions and educational pathways in language learning. By employing proven strategies such as School College Partnerships, Area Learning Communities and Institution Wide Language Programmes, skill levels could be linked to ensure sustainable language provision. These strategies allow schools, colleges and universities to work together on curriculum design and to share resources. Collaborations and bolstered partnerships would facilitate language education approaches that help students advance in their learning path while ensuring accessible and equitable opportunities to improve their language skills. This joint effort will enrich offerings and broaden language learning possibilities throughout the entire education system.

### *Enhancing and expanding qualifications in FE*

A full-scale review of language qualifications in FE is needed to tackle the narrowness of focus on particular languages, to network the fragmented nature of provision across the UK and to expand language qualifications to better reflect the UK's linguistic diversity. Current FE focused certification neglects vocational languages that are crucial for areas like travel, hospitality, and business and commerce. Given the UK's rich linguistic diversity, strategic investment in languages, beyond French and Spanish, is likely to enhance employment opportunities. This review should focus on expanding the range of language courses offered and aligning them with vocational needs: [with particular emphasis on technical and further education opportunities](#) which contribute to the [UK's future capacity in language skills](#). Key considerations include ensuring progression pathways from Level 2 to higher qualifications, evaluating the relevance and popularity of vocational language certifications to meet job market demands, and developing customised curricula, exams, and educational materials for FE language learners. Additionally, improving the way qualifications are reported by increasing fine-grained data on language enrolments and achievements will provide a clearer understanding of language qualifications and provision in FE.



## *Promoting evidence-based policymaking in languages*

The dearth of systematic data on language education in FE severely hampers evidence-based policymaking, therefore enhancing the collection and access to reliable data is essential. The absence of organised data on language learning in FE prevents evaluations of language uptake and assessments of economic, societal and cultural impacts of language education, and fails to recognise the profiles and professionalism of FE lecturers and teaching assistants. More in-depth and longer-term research would enhance the evidence base on which education policy is made. Specifically, there is a critical need for increased understanding of what constitutes effective language learning across the lifespan in FE settings, encompassing not only award-bearing courses but also those perceived as 'leisure' activities. Reliable data on language enrolment, student achievements, and programme efficacy can assist policymakers in making informed decisions, while research into areas such as skills gaps and obstacles to access will offer insights for shaping policies.

## *Investing in languages to ensure a positive future in the UK*

It is likely that unless a redress to the decades of low investment is secured for FE, the challenges and inequalities of access to language education will remain. FE language lecturers are right to be frustrated that two decades of low investment have continued, in the light of the extensive evidence about the [economic benefits and importance of languages](#) in terms of UK trade and investment matters. FE lecturers know from their own experience the positive impact that language education has on workforce development, global mobility, social engagement and community cohesion. Investment to provide equality of access to languages provision in FE across the UK needs to be a priority for both the UK government and the UK research councils. Only then will there be the significant potential to bring about solutions to very real-world problems.

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