

Scottish Government Parliament Reception

Anne MacColl – Speaking notes 24/09/15

Languages – a world of opportunity

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, (my name is Anne MacColl and I am Associate Director at the University of Stirling.)

I am delighted to get the opportunity to talk to you about my favourite subject this evening – languages and the opportunity that they hold:

- **For our international connectivity,**
- **For our global confidence, and**
- **Critically, to enhance the skills of our young people.**
- Now in my previous role as CEO of SDI I had the privilege of travelling the world, visiting more than 30 countries, listening and appreciating hundreds of languages and the cultures that go with them as part of SDI's efforts to secure inward investment and new exports for Scotland.
- In my current role within the quite wonderful University of Stirling, the international journey continues for me
- The importance of language and the connections it makes and the confidence it gives us to reach out to others is really plain to see. In the University of Stirling we have welcomed 13,000 students at the start of this new term, 23% of which come from overseas with a mix of 115 different nationalities. That means dozens of languages being spoken day in day out on the University campus.
- Two nights ago for example I attended a session for new PhD students. There were eight students at my table and of the 7 who came from overseas – China, Malaysia, Italy, Spain they all spoke at least two languages and were able to converse freely to each other in a mix of languages. That's just one small group of students.

- So what would it take for us to equip many more of our Scottish young people to access more language skills to enable a much better interface with fellow students, with the business world, and with their global travels?
- It is clear to me that language skills are a key enabler for us all.

I have three things to get across to you over the next few minutes:

FIRSTLY, it is that languages help to grow and internationalise our economy

- Scotland's export figures from the 2015 Global connections survey show our exports have increased by 20% since 2010.
- Scotland exported £74.1bn pounds worth of goods and services last year – that's a lot of exports for the size of our country. But here's the thing – 63% of these exports go from Scotland to the rest of the UK, our near English speaking neighbours!

So - if we enabled more language skills for our young people and business community, we could access many more international markets more effectively, and therefore set the bar much higher for exports such as food and drink, business services and electronic products, into new and growing markets across Asia. South America and Africa.

SECONDLY, Language skills heighten our understanding and adaptability to the world around us.

- Put simply, they enhance Scotland's connections with the rest of the world.
- Recent surveys by the British Chambers of Commerce and CBI found that one in five firms (21%) are concerned that weaknesses in foreign language proficiency are losing them business.
- **AND** - Nearly three quarters (72%) of businesses say they value foreign language skills **over every other skill** among their employees, particularly in helping build relations with clients .

- So we need to encourage take up of foreign languages both in the school and in the work place to help shift the dial on internationalisation for the Scottish economy.

My THIRD reason is very simple – it is a fact that acquiring new language skills seriously increases your brain power!

- And evidence is well documented. A Swedish MRI study at Lund University in Sweden demonstrated that bilingualism had a visible effect on brain growth.
- A study in Toronto by neuroscientist Ellen Bialystok showed that students who study foreign languages scored better on standardized tests than their monolingual peers, particularly in the categories of maths, reading, and vocabulary.
- In addition, a study conducted around a similar time by Researchers from University College London has shown that learning other languages altered grey matter – the area of the brain which processes information – in the same way exercise builds muscles.

So there you have it in a nutshell:

Language learning – and by this I mean learning ANY language - helps in three interlinked but very productive ways:

- It helps **grow our economy through diversified exports** and international trade
- It heightens our **understanding, tolerance and adaptability** of the world around us
AND
- It **increases our brain power** which helps learning in many different areas of study.

As a vibrant and globally competitive country, Scotland is doing well. And it would do even better by positioning language learning at the heart of our schools, universities and business communities.
Thank you very much.

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