

# Enhancing Employability through Language Skills and Intercultural Learning



**Summary report**  
8<sup>th</sup> June 2016, Edinburgh

## Context

The OU in Scotland Languages team has been closely involved with the languages agenda in Scotland for nearly 21 years now and aims to engage with all aspects of policy debates and action around languages. This event was run to further that agenda with specific regard to the College sector, supporting the SFC strategic priority relating to growing the number of college leavers/ graduates with practical foreign language skills.

## Overview of the event

The event brought together colleagues from college, public and private sectors to highlight the importance of language learning and intercultural knowledge for employability and the world of work. Recognising the benefits of language learning to individuals, business, trade and society as a whole, the aims were to:

- Demonstrate the importance of language skills and intercultural awareness in the workplace;
- Illustrate the value to learners of engaging with language and intercultural skills;
- Explore practical ways of introducing language learning in the college curriculum.

The event was hosted by The Open University in Scotland in collaboration with SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages. It was promoted by the College Development Network (CDN) as part of *The College Development Network Emporium 2016: Inspiring Ideas 2016*, a fortnight of thought-provoking and practical workshops, seminars and activities across Scotland. The CDN Emporium explored 'Developing the Workforce' as a theme.

Representatives from trade and cultural bodies, employers, lecturers and students within colleges, tutors from the Scotland OU Languages team, Scottish government and the Scottish Funding Council attended. They took the opportunity to discuss key issues facing businesses and employers around language skills and to kick-start future collaboration and solutions within the college sector which would bolster language skills.

Margaret Nicolson, Senior Lecturer and Languages Staff Tutor at The Open University in Scotland opened the event and talked about the need to think about language and intercultural skills in the same way as we think about IT skills: something

that we all need to different levels and for different purposes at different times in our lives. She cited examples of multilingualism as an everyday norm for many and that this should be an aim for the Scottish population too, given the multilingual nature of our society. She then introduced the keynote speakers:

Roddy Gow OBE, Chairman and Founder of Asia Scotland Institute, emphasised the rich history of Scotland working globally and challenged the audience on the need to equip the workforce in language learning and intercultural awareness in order to maintain Scotland's competitiveness abroad.

Gail Leslie and Lauren Morrison from City of Glasgow College spoke eloquently about their joy of learning languages, the benefits it had brought them personally and their future plans to use languages to meet their career aspirations. They highlighted too few opportunities within the college sector to learn language skills.



Magdalena Rozmyslowska, Consumer CRM Manager with Visit Scotland highlighted that the visitor economy is worth £11.6 billion to Scotland and nationally support 270,000 jobs. She stressed the opportunities and drivers for language skills for both employees working for Visit Scotland and those connected with and working within the broader tourism industry.

## Round table discussions

Attendees were able to contribute to a series of round table discussions where speakers from China-Britain Business Council, Clansmen Dynamics, Asia Scotland Institute, SCILT, City of Glasgow College and The Open University led discussion with practical examples from experience. They all demonstrated the crucial

importance of language skills and intercultural awareness in the workplace and across the workforce in a modern Scotland within a global marketplace.

Margaret Nicolson led a plenary question and answer session with business and education representatives addressing a selection of questions raised from the discussions.

### Feedback and issues identified

The discussions highlighted the concerns around the decline in language teaching and learning in some areas over a period of years. This is true within the campus university sector broadly, although not within the OUIs where, conversely, there has been a year on year increase in language registrations with nearly 1000 in the current academic year. The decline in provision and uptake of languages is arguably worse in the college sector with only City of Glasgow and Edinburgh College with any substantial language curriculum offer. To an extent, there are also challenges in the school sector, although SCILT and UCMLS are active in promoting languages and language learning to schools since the emergence of the Scottish Government 1 + 2 policy.

Funding language learning is difficult, especially within the college sector, where there are limited resources to fund any learning that is not part of an accredited programme. Language learning can be incorporated into a few college programmes but the scope of this is fairly limited and will always be at the expense of more subject specific content.

Cross sectoral bodies such as UCMLS, which draws together universities and also SCILT are already active in planning and implementing initiatives for the school and university sector to promote languages visibility, but currently does not extend to the college sector, where, arguably the need is greater.

The benefits for the learner were clearly articulated by both employers and students, but there appears to be a gap in how this is communicated in the college sector in particular.

### Opportunities

There are obvious gaps in language provision and intercultural learning in the school, college and university sector. In addition, unions and certain employers/sectors have highlighted a need for improved language skills among the workforce.

Formal accredited learning is not the only solution and The Open University has particular expertise and a wide range of resources in on-line informal and non-accredited learning. Using a blended learning model, and utilising a tutor pool across

Scotland, there are opportunities to provide low cost tailored sessions for industry or the education sector.

Similarly, there are models that have been utilised by the university sector to enhance language learning and offer accredited language learning to students at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

UCMLS and SCILT are actively working to promote language learning and is keen to extend their activity to the college sector, working collaboratively across sectors to promote languages as a key skill for employability and to increase uptake of languages within the college sector.

### Areas to prioritise and next steps

There is potential for a high profile group involving business, politics and education to champion the languages agenda for Scotland. This should have the support of the Scottish Government and would primarily have a focus of raising funds for language development work to benefit learners in all sectors.

SCILT have the potential to facilitate a new College sector languages strategy group with representatives from each college and other interested parties invited to participate. This group would work collaboratively with the aim of promoting languages as a key skill for employability for learners within the college sector.

The Open University already offers accredited language modules to school pupils in S6 through the Young Applicants in Schools Scheme, and there are options to extend this provision to more schools and potentially to S5. In addition, if funding permits, there is potential to extend this option to college learners too.

The Open University will seek to 'package' its range of language learning resources, both formal and informal learning and to actively promote these within the school, college and university sector and more widely to the third, public and private sectors as appropriate.

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