

# **Speech for Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning and Skills**

**SCILT National Conference Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2011**

## Introduction

Thank you, Sarah, for your words of welcome and for your kind invitation to your annual conference.

I am delighted to be here to talk you about the importance that Scottish Ministers place on modern languages, both for the opportunities that language learning offers our young people and for the Scottish Government's overall purpose. This is to create a more successful Scotland with opportunities for all to flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth.

However, before I do any of that, I should put on record my own personal enthusiasm for the subject of languages.

As I don't need to tell this audience, multilingualism among children and young people, is viewed as a norm in many parts of Europe, in a way that is almost difficult to believe in Scotland.

I was in Luxembourg a while ago and was astounded to see that every nursery school there seems to advertise that they are capable of operating in five languages – Luxemburgish, French, German, English and the main immigrant language in that country – Portuguese.

And in Friesland in the Netherlands, I know of at least one school where children are expected to be fluent in Frisian, Dutch and English by the age of eight.

We need to capture some of the understanding that our European neighbours have, which is that languages have locked up inside them whole cultures, literatures and ways of seeing the world, as well as many practical and economic advantages. The more access to them Scotland's young people have, the better.

Given my remit for skills I am particularly pleased to see the range of speakers and panellists here today – business people, employers, colleges and universities, Consuls and cultural organisations.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution made to the promotion of languages in Scotland by Consuls, such as Herr Moessinger, Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany.

## **Main points**

My own passion for languages is shared by my ministerial colleagues. When making his first speech in Parliament after his re-election as First Minister, Alex Salmond spoke about the “Voices of Scotland” that go to make up what Scotland is today.

He talked about the range of languages spoken by Scotland’s MSPs – such as Italian, Urdu and Arabic – how these are the voices of 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland and how proud we all are to have these languages spoken alongside Scotland’s traditional languages of English, Gaelic and Scots.

You will also be aware, from your conference last year, that Mr Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, has a strong interest in language learning.

This is reflected in our manifesto commitment to introduce a new norm for language learning in Scotland based on the European 1 + 2 model – that is, we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their own mother tongue.

Now I know that this is an ambitious aim. That is why we are looking to deliver this over the lifetime of two Parliaments.

But ambition is at the heart of what we want for our young people. It is vital that our young people leave education with the skills and experience to allow them to compete on an equal footing with their peers in other countries.

To give one example of where our young people can be at a disadvantage, the media recently reported on how our young people were missing out on opportunities to gain employment with the European Union because of a lack of language proficiency.

Michael Shackleton, Head of the European Parliament's PR operation in Britain, warned that only five per cent of posts in the European Parliament and Commission are held by British workers, despite the UK accounting for 12 per cent of the EU's population.

Therefore, as part of our commitment to boosting language learning in Scotland we are looking to develop a plan which, over time, will equip our young people with knowledge of two other languages.

Of course, the European model of 1 + 2, on which we are looking to base our plan, is one that is challenging even for many European countries who can identify proficiency in English as vital to giving their young people opportunities to succeed in a globalised marketplace.

It is even more challenging for a country like Scotland where there is no common agreement on any particular language being one that young people should learn. However, we want to develop a model for Scotland that meets Scotland's circumstances.

One which includes experience of language learning not just in terms of European languages, but also acknowledges the diversity of languages that we find across modern Scotland – the Voices of Scotland that I referred to earlier.

One area where we have the potential to achieve this aim is in the Gaelic medium education sector. In Gaelic medium schools and units, many young people are also learning a third language, something which it is conceptually easy for a bilingual child to do, and is devoid of much of the self-consciousness that monoglots have when learning another language.

In Gaelic medium education, attainment has been shown to be very good and young people going through this sector are also finding opportunities in employment and in further and higher education to use and develop their language skills.

In pursuing 1+2 languages it is important that we maintain the momentum with Gaelic medium education.

We should recognise the place of language in its widest form, whether that be classes learning Mandarin, or indeed the place which I would like to see the Scots Language develop within a Scottish studies stream in the curriculum for excellence.

I see all this as fully in accord with the spirit and intent of the European 1 plus 2 model.

As European resolutions have said, it is about Member States working within their own framework of compulsory schooling to fulfil the dual aim of maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity while promoting multilingualism.

The key point is to give our young people the chance to experience language learning in a variety of ways and contexts.

Of course there is a key question in all of this as to what level of proficiency can we reasonably expect young people to attain in learning an additional two languages.

It is our view that we should be able to deliver a new norm for language learning that would allow young people to attain at a particular level in one language while enabling them to experience other languages, whether through international education or global school partnerships and cultural exchange.

The question of proficiency is one that we want to explore with you as professionals, with SCILT, HMIE and other key stakeholders and, importantly, also with learners and parents.

If we are to succeed in improving Scotland's performance in languages we need to develop a plan that everyone feels that they own and that they can deliver.

At this point, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that there is a lot of work ahead for everyone involved in language learning and teaching. I know from the report of the Modern Languages Excellence Group, published in March of this year, that we face a number of challenges when it comes to language learning in schools.

I'd like to thank Sarah, in particular, for her chairing of this group and all the group members who contributed to the recommendations in the report.

Among the challenges we face are:

- How do we build the capacity and the confidence of teachers in primary schools to deliver quality language teaching and learning?
- How do we ensure that there is better partnership between secondary schools and their associated primaries so that there is both continuity and variety of language options?
- How do we identify best practice and ensure that this is shared across all our schools?
- How we can better promote and expand the Gaelic medium sector in Scotland and learn from it?
- And how do we combine the best of what language specialists have to offer with language learning in a variety of innovative and engaging ways?

Part of the answer to these challenges is, of course, effective CPD – something that SCILT already does extremely well as was acknowledged in the Donaldson Review of Teacher Education.

In our response to the Donaldson report the Scottish Government has asked the new education agency, which comes into being on 1 July, to work with SCILT and other key stakeholders to build on their ideas of high quality professional learning opportunities that support subject and other specialist responsibilities, and that meet the range of teachers' needs.

We need to develop a coherent approach that can be built on at each key stage of a young person's learning from primary (and indeed in some cases pupils will be combining their home language with English from nursery), through pupil's broad general education in early secondary, and beyond to national qualifications.

Indeed, as Minister with an interest in skills, I would want to see any languages plan articulate what our colleges and universities are doing by way of language teaching and learning.

I know that there are big challenges in all of this, particularly at a time of financial constraints. That is why we are looking to a plan that can be reasonably delivered over time.

I know from the Modern Languages Group report that there are some excellent examples of new and innovative practice.

These include examples, such as Kirkintilloch High School where a Transition Project was developed to allow teachers to proceed with confidence towards providing a smooth articulation for primary pupils as they entered secondary school.

A collaborative approach by both primary and secondary practitioners has allowed them to arrive at a shared understanding of the outcomes and proficiency expected at the second level in Modern Language skills (by the end of Primary 7); and to share ideas and practice which will enable young people to achieve these standards through learning experiences which promote the principles of Curriculum for Excellence.

It is striking that one of the most meaningful benefits both to teachers and to pupils has been the opportunity to “sit down and talk” – very simple but highly effective.

I know that time in the curriculum is another concern – and that language teaching has to fight for its place in a busy curriculum.

However, with careful planning it is possible to offer a range of languages at different levels, as schools like Bishopbriggs Academy have shown.

As we know language learning also lends itself very easily and naturally to cross curricular activities. Languages have a unique contribution to make to both International Education and to Literacy.

Again, the Excellence Group report has given us examples such as Anderson High School in Shetland, Glenrothes High School in Fife and Mid Calder Primary in West Lothian.

All of these examples are encouraging and I know that teachers across Scotland will be using the advantages afforded by Curriculum for Excellence to develop new and innovative approaches to learning and teaching with their pupils.

So, we have high ambitions for Scotland's young people when it comes to experiencing and developing knowledge of languages. The big question is how do we deliver this ?

And this , needless to say, is where you come in.

As a new Minister I recognise the profession and the language communities that you represent, along with the range of stakeholders with an interest in languages, are the ones who can provide and deliver the answers.

We want to see buy-in from the profession. We want to see buy-in from parents and learners. We want to see buy-in from employers and colleges and universities.

We need the message about the benefits of languages for young people and for Scotland to be widely communicated – after all the languages community will welcome and already be convinced of the need to raise the bar.

But we need to be able to promote the message that English is not enough. That Scotland's young people can benefit from engaging with languages – both in terms of their own development and their life and work skills. And crucially, because speaking another language lets you think about things in a completely new way conceptually.

As a Gaelic learner who has discovered that there is a language in which there is no single word for yes or no, where things don't become plural till there's three of them, where both nouns and verbs start with different sounds depending on grammatical context, and where all clauses generally begin with a verb, I am more than willing to say that a new language gives you a new way of looking at things.

In conclusion, we want to boost Scotland's performance in languages and to enhance the opportunities for our young people to develop the confidence and skills that they will need to make their way in an increasingly globalised world.

We want to engage with the profession, stakeholders and parents and learners in developing a languages plan that encourages cultural and linguistic diversity while promoting multilingualism.

I believe that SCILT has a key role to play in all of this through working with the new education agency and stakeholders to help shape our languages plan, contributing to the ongoing work on national qualifications and assessment standards and in developing and delivering high quality CPD to teachers across authorities.

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to talk to you and I hope that your discussions today will contribute to the dialogue that we need to develop our thinking and how we take this further.

Thank you.

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