

Submission from NUS

Introduction

NUS Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's proposals to enable all young people to learn two languages, in addition to their mother tongue. NUS Scotland believes that language skills are a huge advantage for students, and that supporting more individuals to acquire these skills would bring significant benefits for our society and for Scotland's economy. NUS Scotland has had the privilege of working for a number of years now in the field of internationalising education, through our Scottish Government-funded projects, and this evidence is based on much of that work, and in particular, the findings of our research report *Developing Scotland's Graduates for the Global Economy: From Here to Where?*¹

NUS Scotland believes that learning additional languages is hugely beneficial in itself in broadening horizons, building skills and confidence, and opening up opportunities for individuals. However, we also know from our own research that language skills are increasingly sought after by UK employers when it comes to graduate recruitment. The decline in language learning is holding back both young people and Scotland as a whole. In the CBI's 2010 survey of employer satisfaction with the skills of graduates and school-leavers, foreign language ability ranked last out of twelve skills areas and within the UK over two-thirds of employers were not satisfied with the language skills of young people.²

In the UK, studying languages at university has been shown to lead to higher than average employment prospects: three and a half years after graduation, more languages graduates are in work or study than their peers who studied Law, Architecture, Business or Computer Science, and earning high average wages and this evidence is echoed by a number of US and UK studies suggesting that meaningful wage premiums are enjoyed by those with language abilities.³ With both graduate unemployment and underemployment in Scotland at worrying levels, it has never been more pressing for students to enhance their employability, and pressures on graduates to 'stand out from the crowd' have never been greater.

At present, Scotland lags behind much of the rest of Europe in terms of language skills and this skills shortage does need to be addressed. We firmly believe that by enabling all young people to learn at least two languages early on, we can help make Scottish college and university graduates more employable and support Scotland to emerge stronger in the global economy from the current downturn. Former Treasury economic adviser, James Foreman-Peck, who has calculated the effects of what he calls the 'tax on trade' represented by British relative underinvestment in languages has estimated that this currently equates to at least £7.3 billion, or 0.5% GDP.⁴

¹ For the full version of the report, see <http://www.scotlandgoesglobal.co.uk/research-videos/>

² *Ready to Grow: Business Priorities for Education and Skills – Education Skills Survey 2010* (CBI, 2010) p. 23.

³ *The Economic Case for Language Learning and the Role of Employer Engagement* (Education and Employers Taskforce, 2011), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

However, we also believe that we need to go beyond increasing language learning in primary schools and ensure greater access to, and uptake of, language study later on in education. Our research has shown that a lack of language skills can be a barrier to both studying and working abroad, both of which are incredibly valuable experiences which increase individuals' confidence and employability. Students who are currently beyond primary school age could therefore benefit from an increased number of opportunities to study languages. Providing the opportunity for all young people to learn languages from primary school will also help to create a more level playing field for young people from all backgrounds to access the opportunities that knowledge of additional languages can provide.

In line with the main focus of NUS Scotland's work on this topic, this evidence will look specifically at the role of languages in economic development, and the benefits of language skills to the future careers of Scotland's young people and the future economic success of Scotland.

Project background

The overarching objectives of NUS Scotland's *Developing Scotland's Global Citizens* project, which began in September 2011, are to increase student outward mobility opportunities and encourage greater uptake of study-abroad programmes by Scottish students. Given the increased competition for fewer graduate vacancies, there has been an increased interest in the education sector in the role international experience may play in the employability of students. This is reflected in the widespread support NUS Scotland has received from across the sector, including from the British Council, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Universities Scotland, Scotland's Colleges, sparqs, the Scottish Funding Council, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and Young Scot, with IBM and Scottish Development International (SDI) on the project steering group. The project has four strategic themes: raising the profile of European mobility opportunities; fostering graduate attributes through mobility; supporting the international learning experience at institutional level; and, encouraging a partnership approach across the Scottish educational sector.

The project is currently working in Scottish schools and universities to deliver new training on study-abroad opportunities which was developed in conjunction with the Scottish European Educational Trust (SEET). The training module can be delivered by teachers, university staff, or one of our 'Scotland Goes Global Ambassadors'. Scotland Goes Global Ambassadors are students who have experienced study-abroad opportunities, and the training is designed to open students' minds to the diversity of their local communities, the benefits of studying abroad, and the opportunities which might be available to them. We believe giving young people a global outlook at an early age is really important to their future success and that increasing language learning earlier on in schooling will be an important part of this.

As part of the *Developing Scotland's Global Citizens* project, this academic year we have also launched our *Scotland Goes Global* initiative, the year of study abroad. Employer and sector engagement, a key part of our project work, has allowed us to gain an insight into the important role of language learning as well as international experiences in Scotland's economic development.

Uptake of language learning

NUS Scotland's work with students, academic staff and Scottish-based employers as part of the Scottish Government-funded *Developing Scotland's Global Citizens* project has highlighted the severe lack of linguistic ability among Scottish graduates compared to their bilingual and trilingual European counterparts. At the same time there is considerable evidence of the benefits of language skills for Scottish graduates and the Scottish labour force more widely.

As shown in Figure 1 below, currently the number of school students taking French and German at Standard Grade is falling and this coincides with the decreasing popularity of language learning in universities.⁵ The introduction of *Curriculum for Excellence* supports increased engagement in language learning and international opportunities, but this has not yet brought about an increase in the numbers of pupils choosing to learn languages.

Figure 1.

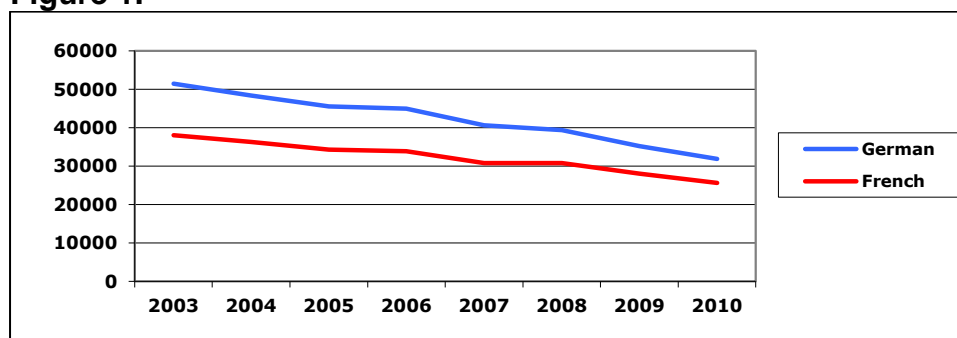


Table 1: SCLIT (2010)

http://www.strath.ac.uk/media/faculties/hass/scilt/statistics/ML_in_S4-S6_Overview.pdf

Increasing language learning in primary schools will increase the opportunities available to students to continue language learning later in their school career and increase their confidence in language learning, both of which could help to boost uptake of languages in secondary and tertiary education. However, we also believe that colleges and universities could increase the range and number of opportunities available to students to learn languages or incorporate language learning into their studies.

Languages and studying abroad

Our research has highlighted that an absence of language skills can be a key barrier preventing students from taking advantage of study abroad opportunities while at college or university, meaning students may miss out on what are extremely valuable experiences for both personal development and improving employability. This language barrier may be a key factor in the comparatively low numbers of Scottish students taking advantage of mobility opportunities.

Despite the fact that Scotland sends a higher percentage of students on Erasmus placements than the rest of the UK, more needs to be done to support Scottish graduates' employability in an increasingly globalised labour market. In terms of both language ability and study abroad experience, Scottish students remain at a disadvantage to their bilingual and trilingual European counterparts. For example, over 30% of German students (24,029) undertook a part of their study abroad in 2009/10 and these figures are expected to rise with a target of 50% set by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). Taken in the wider context, during the academic year 2009/10, 32 countries took

⁵ See http://www.strath.ac.uk/media/faculties/hass/scilt/statistics/ML_in_S4-S6_Overview.pdf

part in the Erasmus programme (the 27 EU Member States, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey). Only two of these countries – Croatia and Romania – had fewer Erasmus students in proportion to their overall graduate numbers in 2009 than the UK.⁶ Last year witnessed an 8% increase in Scottish Erasmus study abroad figures amongst students studying at Scottish HEIs (1,243 students in 2010/11 compared to 1,148 students in 2009/10).⁷ While this increase is welcome it still means that less than 1% of students in Scotland undertake Erasmus study.

Furthermore, the actual number of *Scottish* students that study abroad (as opposed to students in Scotland) may well be fewer still. While last year's figures are not yet available from the University of Edinburgh, between 2005/6 and 2007/8 non-Scottish students made up 82% of their total Erasmus student figures. At the University of St. Andrews, non-Scottish students made up 69% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 67% in the previous academic year. At Heriot-Watt University, non-Scottish students made up 40% of all outgoing Erasmus students in 2010/11 and 43% in 2009/10.

A larger-scale study needs to be undertaken before we can properly assess this issue as the student demographic is considerably different depending on the institution, but out of a total of 1,243 students studying in Scotland who went on Erasmus last year, we can safely say that a significant majority of these were not Scottish but students from the rest of the UK (RUK students) and EU students competent in languages other than their mother tongue.⁸

The main reasons for low student study abroad uptake are well documented and the most recent research findings, by the British Council and YouGov, illustrate the barriers to undertaking international experiences. The second most common response to the students being asked why they had never worked, lived or learnt abroad was that they felt their foreign language skills were not good enough.⁹ This is something commonly echoed by secondary school students in Scotland when asked by our Global Ambassadors why they might not choose to study abroad. Increasing language learning in primary schools could therefore have a beneficial impact on access to these opportunities by boosting the language skills of all young people in Scotland.

Languages, study abroad and employability

Missing out on study abroad opportunities due to concerns around language skills may be damaging to the future employability of Scotland's young people and students. Within the UK, there are clear signs that employers are keen to recruit graduates with study-abroad experience: a report from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in 2010 found that 55% of employers warned of 'shortfalls' in British students' international cultural awareness.¹⁰ In a recent British Council/Think Global survey, 75% of surveyed chief executives and board

⁶ *Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends: the European Union support for student and staff exchanges and university cooperation in 2009/2010* (European Union, 2011), p. 25.

⁷ The biggest number of outgoing students originated from Spain (27,448) followed by France (24,426) and Germany (24,029). The annual growth rate was highest in Cyprus (38.2%), followed by Estonia (31.6%) and Turkey (15.8%). The annual growth rate of outgoing students was above 10% in nine countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Spain, Ireland, Latvia, Sweden, Iceland and Turkey. See *Lifelong Learning Programme: The Erasmus Programme 2009/10 - A Statistical Overview* (European Commission, 2011), p. 12.

⁸ For more on study abroad and its link to graduate employability, see *Developing Scotland's Graduates for the Global Economy: From Here to Where* (NUS Scotland, 2012).

⁹ *Next Generation UK: Research with UK Undergraduates Aged 19-21* (British Council/YouGov 2011), p. 52.

¹⁰ *Ready to Grow: Business Priorities for Education and Skills* (CBI, 2010), p. 23.

level directors of businesses in the UK think we are in danger of being left behind by emerging countries unless young people learn to think more globally, and 74% are worried that many young people's horizons are not broad enough to operate in a globalised and multicultural economy.¹¹ This is symptomatic of the fact that despite attracting very high numbers of international students to Scotland, the process is far from reciprocal.

Equally, students are increasingly seeing value and benefit to the notion of employability, and how it can help to distinguish them within the graduate labour market. Some argue that we are seeing the emergence of an 'economy of experience'¹², centred on students increasingly attempting to make themselves stand out in an ever more competitive field of graduates with similar degrees and results, borne out by the expansion of higher education over the past decade. Despite this, Scottish students remain far less mobile than their European counterparts with lack of languages being a significant deterrent.

Conclusion

NUS Scotland believes there is a clearly identified need to increase awareness, availability and uptake of language learning as part of a quality primary, secondary and tertiary education. Increasing language learning in primary school will support more young people to study languages later in education and can also form part of creating a more global outlook for all of Scotland's young people. We also believe that language learning later in education should be supported and encouraged and increased opportunities should be available to study languages or while at college or university.

We believe that increasing language learning will enhance the employability of young people by equipping them with the skills to compete in an increasingly globalising economy and society. Greater language skills will also help to remove a key barrier which is currently preventing young people in Scotland from taking advantage of opportunities abroad during their time in education.

We believe it's important that Scotland's young people know about the international opportunities that are open to them, and waiting until students enter the doors of a university or college, for many, is leaving it too late. We hope that Curriculum for Excellence will help to create a more international outlook for young people and we believe the experiences of our Scotland Goes Global Ambassadors will help to inspire secondary school students to explore language learning and study abroad opportunities as they choose their future education and careers.

We believe language skills have a crucial role to play in Scotland's future in economic development, a point made clear recently by Jane Gotts, International Director at SCDI, when speaking recently about our *Scotland Goes Global* initiative:

"Building a sustainable world economy depends on how we support the next generation of global leaders. Scotland must adopt a global outlook and encourage Scottish students and graduates to 'think globally, act locally'. The 'Scotland Goes Global' initiative is fundamental in helping Scotland compete in a global marketplace alongside playing a crucial role in helping Scotland build its international reputation for excellence".

¹¹ *The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy* (British Council/Think Global, 2011), p. 4.

¹² *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy* (OUP, 2004), p. 220.

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