**How fertile is the ground for us to reshape languages in UK HE?**

**Jocelyn Wyburd, Chair of UCML**

I am delighted that UCML[[1]](#footnote-1) is supporting this conference again, as we have done for previous conferences in this series. It is only right that, as the organisation which represents all languages departments, schools, faculties, centres and subject associations across our disciplines, that we should be doing so.

In framing what I wish to say this morning, I will risk mixing my metaphors, from ‘fertile ground’ to exploring the notion of ‘natural selection’. It is appropriate, being in Southampton, that we should consider HE languages in terms of a ship and this quotation from Asa Gray, a C19th botanist:

*“Natural selection is not the wind which propels the vessel, but the rudder which, by friction, now on this side and now on that, shapes the course”*

Let us then explore the ways in which we have done and should put friction on the rudder of our course, rather than allowing ourselves simply to be blown by winds outside of our control. We might look at the titles of the series of HE languages conferences, of which this is the 7th:

* Setting the agenda (2002)
* Navigating the new landscape (2004)
* Crossing frontiers (2006)
* Transitions and Connections (2008)
* Raising the Standard for Languages (2010)
* Language Futures (2012)

And now:

* Reshaping Languages in HE (2014)

These are indeed indicative of a sector which has been seeking to put friction on the rudder! Furthermore, after the Worton Report on languages in HE (2009)[[2]](#footnote-2), UCML developed the *Shaping the future* project to provide toolkits to HEIs to help them to apply their own friction on the rudder. These toolkits, on “identity”, “internationalisation” and “employability” are as relevant today as they were then and can be found on our website[[3]](#footnote-3). Furthermore, UCML and the British Academy, with support from HEFCE led the *Valuing the Year Abroad* project, the report of which is available on the British Academy website[[4]](#footnote-4) and there was a subsequent funding arrangement for the year abroad, in the new fee regime, agreed by HEFCE. Most of us have been actively engaged in the *Routes into Languages* project for many years, and starting last summer we have *Routes 2.0,* funded by HEFCE. *Together* with LLAS, UCML has organised workshops for Heads of Department in a series called *Thriving in difficult times.* And there has been much activity beside.

And yet the numbers of universities offering single/joint honours in the top 4 traditionally offered languages (French, German, Spanish and Italian) have dropped dramatically since 1998[[5]](#footnote-5). We have seen undergraduate Modern Languages entrants to languages degrees drop from over 21,000 in 2002-03 to just over 12,000 in 2012-13[[6]](#footnote-6). Looking at total undergraduate enrolments across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in the same timeframe, Modern Languages have lost market share from 4.6% to 3.1%[[7]](#footnote-7) and we have seen a shift in the balance of these enrolments between Pre- and Post-1992 universities from 66%/34% to 75%/25%[[8]](#footnote-8). This is of major concern in terms of the reduction in diversity of opportunities, types of provision and destination choices.

I’d like to reflect on the theme of natural selection within the context of HE as a ‘market’. Natural selection is defined in simple terms as follows: the individuals and species best adapted to their current surroundings survive and propagate their traits to their offspring, while others struggle for survival and die out. Is the concept of a market (whether in HE or not) similar to natural selection? i.e. do only the programmes which are best suited to the current market conditions survive and thrive? And if so, how do we adapt to current market conditions and/or influence the market?

If the market for language degrees comes predominantly from A level languages entrants, then we should look at these trends[[9]](#footnote-9). While there has been significant decline since 2002 in French (-27.8%) and German (-39.5%), there has been an increase in Spanish (+37.3%) and in ‘other languages’ when taken together (+64.5%). The overall decline in this period (-3.8%) is therefore smaller than the discourse in the public domain would suggest (although it is worth noting that the decline started earlier than 2002!). Does the increase in A level numbers in ‘other’ languages signal that we should be catering more for these other languages, and possibly less than for the traditional ones? Or is it a reflection of increased multiculturalism (pupils validating and accrediting home and heritage languages, for example) without the accompanying motivation to continue to study those languages at university? We still need to ask ourselves if there is a market we are not tapping, given that the overall decline is still relatively small.

We have so far focussed on entrants and enrolments to languages degrees. However, there is one area in which there is increasing take-up of languages in Higher Education: on institution wide language programmes (IWLPs). These are variously taken as ‘free choice’ option for credit or as extra curricular courses. Accurate date is hard to obtain, except by surveys which are dependent on robust institutional responses. However the survey conducted in late 2013 by AULC, supported by UCML and the Higher Education Academy (HEA)[[10]](#footnote-10) elicited responses from 64 universities revealing a total of 53,971 enrolments on language courses, of which c. 38% are ‘non UK’ students. Even with this undoubtedly incomplete data, we believe numbers have doubled in a decade and these certain exceed the numbers enrolled on language degrees. The vast majority of respondents indicated stable or increasing numbers year on year, while there is also evidence of growing demand for languages like German, Chinese and Arabic[[11]](#footnote-11).

We could interpret this success story of IWLPs as indicating that the ground really is fertile for languages in HE, as I really believe it now is. This could be as a result of the extensive campaigning and outreach programmes universities have been engaged with in recent years (including of course *Routes into Languages).* The publication of reports and statements on the importance of languages by the British Academy[[12]](#footnote-12), British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI and many other bodies[[13]](#footnote-13) in recent years have also raised the profile. There has been increased press coverage of the need for languages, not least through the British Academy/Guardian initiative [[14]](#footnote-14). Increasing numbers of universities are also developing internationalisation strategies and language policies, encouraging take up and promoting the concept of the global graduate[[15]](#footnote-15). And there is also undoubtedly increasing peer pressure on UK students to compete with EU/International students who are flocking to IWLPs to learn a 3rd/4th/5th language.

There are also, however, risks associated with the success of IWLPs, including the increasing polarisation (as the trends cited above suggest) of perceptions of the value of ‘functional language skills’ versus ‘language-based studies’, with a shift to the former and away from the latter. There is perhaps increased awareness of the availability of the former which means that students can choose other subjects, knowing they can still have some language skills on the side. In the past, perhaps some of these would have come to language degrees as the only way to develop their linguistic and cross-cultural interests and competences. And there is evidence of decisions being taken in some universities to close language degrees in favour of IWLP provision only, as ticking what they may feel is the necessary ‘languages’ box, for pragmatic or financial reasons. Is there therefore a clear understanding of what language degrees actually offer, beyond functional language skills?

I would suggest that this level of understanding is extremely patchy, in relation to employers, parents, teachers and prospective students, let alone within our own universities. Some examples of perceptions I think we all as a community need to counter include:

*the (languages) A level curriculum still has too much emphasis on literary texts and not enough on functional language skills - something young people find a big turn-off“. And the "19th century" approach continues into higher education.* [Guardian, 21/06/2014]

Although UCML immediately wrote to the Guardian to counter this, it was not published. We did however post it on our Facebook site. There are many ways in which this is clearly untrue, both about A levels and about language degrees.

*“Employers don’t want a graduate who has spent 3 years reading medieval French literature”* [Chair of the Board of a major global company, Nov 2014]

I would argue that we need to do more to articulate what graduates who have studied literary based degrees actually bring to employers in terms of functional language skills, high level skills of textual analysis as well as experience of living in another country. After all, they are happy to employ graduates of English degrees for all of their high level skills, so why is there this particularly narrow perception of the value of a languages degree. Furthermore, are employers aware of the range of studies available in languages degrees? They are not all solely literary in nature, as valuable as this is.

*Employers think a Chinese studies degree is only about learning the language, without any study of contemporary China”* [UCML East Asian studies representative report, 2014]

Here we have the opposite impression, which is that we only concentrate on language, without developing a wide range of knowledge of relevant countries and their cultures, and this too needs countering.

How do we do this? We all need to engage with consultations on new curricula, as UCML has done with regard to reformed GCSEs. We have a new opportunity coming in the next week or so to engage with the reformed A levels[[16]](#footnote-16). Clearly not everyone will be happy with the new A levels, in spite of considerable consultation having taken place. Regardless of any reservations, as a sector I believe we have to champion these as they will be the new qualifications which many of us will depend on as a route into languages degrees. We will need to be giving very positive messages to stakeholders including language teachers and prospective A level pupils, through our outreach activities including *Routes.*

I also believe that all of us need to be engaging with press coverage of languages issues. Increasingly it is easy to post comments and responses to press reports online. We all need to look at countering misconceptions, reinforcing positive messages about the importance of language skills and studies, and engaging with some of the sceptical responses which are there. UCML will try to do so as often as possible, but more voices need to be heard.

In addition to A levels, next week sees the launch of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Languages ‘Manifesto Campaign’ [[17]](#footnote-17) aimed at all political parties in the run-up to the 2015 election. UCML will launch its own campaign aimed at universities, asking for a language GCSE to be included in entry requirements for any subject[[18]](#footnote-18). We ask all of you to engage with these campaigns and raise awareness as widely as possible. We have a window of opportunity coming up to champion languages very publicly.

I believe we all also need to re-examine what we are saying about our degree programmes on our websites and in our prospectuses. To what extent do we assume people know what a degree in French or Chinese studies is? To what extent do we clarify this upfront, to combat the misperceptions out there? And I believe we need to engage with our own careers services to clarify what a languages graduate can bring to employers, and through our careers services engage more with the employers they deal with all the time to clarify the messages.

In order to achieve greater clarity and to communicate better about what we offer in HE languages, we need to ask ourselves a number of questions.

* Do we re-brand our current provision or re-design it? Of course much redesigning is already taking place, but have we also thought of re-branding to clarify what language study at university is actually about?
* How do we present what a language-based degree actually is?
* How difficult is this to do, in any one university, and/or across the sector? There are after all so many options, so many transferable skills, we are so interdisciplinary.
* Do we need a common branding across the sector? Should we all adopt the notion of the *transnational graduate* or the *global graduate* as part of this exercise?
* Should we be increasing the numbers of joint degrees with other subjects, as many of us have done already? And how do these work to provide not just separate strands but a coherent whole?
* Should we be maximising interdisciplinary collaboration in undergraduate programme design and pathways? Including for example with Philosophy, English, History, Sociology, Anthropology etc departments?
* Should we seek to take greater ownership and credit for students **with** languages alongside students **in** languages?

Much of the above has focussed on the issue of undergraduate studies. However, we also need to be securing the future of postgraduate studies and research in our disciplines. This could include taking greater ownership at postgraduate level of candidates who are graduates **with** as well as **in/of** languages at BA level, adopting them into language disciplines, welcoming them onto M level programmes and engaging in (joint) doctoral supervision. We need in my view to maximise our interdisciplinary strengths, stepping outside traditional departmental boundaries, both in research terms and in the teaching and supervision of postgraduate students. We also need to enable this to happen by foregrounding language training for postgraduate Historians, Sociologists, Theologians, Philosophers, students of Politics, social Scientists etc, in order to enable this cross-over to take place.

Finally, we need to look at how to work more collaboratively between universities. We have the fantastic example of *Routes,* which is now a collaborative outreach programme involving some 80 universities, which are also simultaneously in competition with each other. Recent discussions, supported by UCML to foster bids to the HEFCE Catalyst Fund have involved some 50-60 universities, and we very much hope that transformative projects of benefit to the sector as a whole will emerge and be funded as a result. Could we, for example, as one of the Catalyst bids is proposing, engage in collaborative delivery of some modules, in order to sustain a range of provision in individual institutions? We also have the Doctoral Training Partnerships, funded through the AHRC last year, which are providing opportunities to collaborate in the allocation of doctoral studentships and in training (including language training) for doctoral students. The AHRC has funded numerous collaborative skills programmes, including relating to language-based studies and language training which many of us have been involved with across institutional boundaries. The AHRC has also recently launched the new collaborative *Open World Research Initiative* about which you will hear more during this conference. This is another major opportunity for transformation of HE languages, in research terms and to make a positive impact on understanding of what we do. Events such as this conference are also massively important in enabling us to share ideas in order to strengthen the ‘market’ for all of us, and I hope all of you here will take maximum advantage of that opportunity over the next 2 days.

I’d like to round up with a quotation from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Alice meets the Cheshire cat and asks:

*`Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'   
`That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.   
`I don't much care where--' said Alice.   
`Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.   
`--so long as I get SOMEWHERE,' Alice added as an explanation.   
`Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, `if you only walk long enough.'*

By being here today, you are ensuring that we will go somewhere. What we can’t do is stand still. However, it is always helpful to know where we want to go. And, returning to the ‘natural selection’ vessel with which I opened this talk: we must all exert pressure on the rudder, to shape the course taken by our vessels, and to steer us in the right direction.

I wish you all a fantastically fruitful conference. Thank you.

1. <http://www.ucml.ac.uk> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2009/200941/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.ucml.ac.uk/shapingthefuture> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Valuing_The_Year_Abroad.cfm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Powerpoint slides for graph [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.ucml.ac.uk/news/210 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Powerpoing slides for graphs [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Languages\_Publications.cfm [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.ucml.ac.uk/shapingthefuture/employability [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.theguardian.com/education/series/the-case-for-language-learning+languages [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See for example afternoon powerpoint slides and notes on the afternoon session on influencing university policy from the UCML plenary meeting in January 2014: http://www.ucml.ac.uk/events/17-01-14.html [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Since giving this talk, consultations have been announced (16/07/2014) on the ALCAB content specifications for the new MFL A levels: <http://alcab.org.uk/2014/07/16/publication-of-the-reports-of-alcabs-three-panels-reviewing-the-content-of-a-levels-in-classical-and-modern-languages-geography-and-mathematics/> including by the DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/gcse-and-a-level-reform> and by Ofqual on the assessment methods for the new MFL A levels (15/07/2014): <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/developing-new-qualifications-for-2016/> Deadlines for these are 19th and 22nd September 2014 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Launched 14/07/2014: <http://blog.britishcouncil.org/appg-modernlanguages/> ; reached c. 19.5million people in 2 days [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See <http://www.ucml.ac.uk/news/232> and coverage of both campaigns in the THE <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/university-role-crucial-for-languages-recovery/2014480.article> [↑](#footnote-ref-18)