

25 May 2020

Dear Madam/Sir,

**Save the British Council**

As the Executive Committee of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French, we are writing to express our grave concern at the threats currently faced by the British Council. With the closure of the majority of schools and test centres as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the British Council has had its income source cut almost completely, yet the response from government so far has been slow and insufficient.

Since its foundation in 1934, the British Council has been instrumental in the development of close cultural relations between the UK and other countries, a mission that is more vital than ever in the context of Brexit and the current pandemic. It assists in the teaching of English in over 50 countries with almost 4 million people taking an English exam with the British Council in the past 12 months. Just as importantly, its flagship language assistantship scheme facilitates bi-lateral exchanges, enabling UK Modern Languages students to obtain teaching placements on their compulsory year abroad, while young people from other countries come to work as language assistants in UK schools. The language assistantship scheme is fully embedded in UK Modern Languages programmes and central to the attractiveness of Modern Languages degrees in the UK. Every year, around 2,500 students from the UK benefit from this highly successful scheme, which for many is the first stepping stone to a teaching career after graduation. The paid teaching placements allow students to improve their fluency in another language, strengthen their cvs, develop professional confidence and gain valuable transferable skills that boost their employability. Inversely, the language assistants coming to the UK help students in UK primary and secondary schools to develop language skills and understand other cultures as well as helping to revitalise the skills of UK language teachers and bring languages to life in the local community.

What is more, the British Council plays an important role in the battle against linguistic underperformance in the UK through its publication of an annual Language trends report, designed to gather information about the current situation for language teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools in England. Its latest July 2019 report warned about ‘worrying signs of decline and growing socio-economic division in language teaching in schools’. It also revealed that there has been an overall reduction of 19% in the number of entries for GCSE languages since 2014, with both French and German seeing a decline of 30%. The report concludes that ‘[i]f the UK is to pursue a genuine global future after Brexit, its policymakers and educational organisations will have to work hard to transform the international engagement of its young people. Increasing their familiarity with the languages and cultures of other countries will be an important start’.

As the UK’s international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities, the British Council plays a major role in the country’s positioning in a post Brexit, post Covid-19 world. We urge Dominic Raab as Foreign Secretary and head of the British Council’s sponsoring department to intervene and provide additional funding to ensure the British Council’s continued mission to ‘make a positive contribution to the countries [it] work[s] with’ and ‘[i]n doing so, [to] improve the UK’s international standing, prosperity and security’.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Marion Schmid

President of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French