

23 April 2021

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

**Proposed closure of the Department of History, Languages and Translation**

As the Executive Committee of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French+, we are writing to express our grave concern at the proposed closure of the Department of History, Languages and Translation at Aston University. The proposed closure would put at least 24 jobs at risk of redundancy, damage the University’s service to students, business and the wider community, and seriously undermine its mission of inclusion and social mobility.

We are particularly dismayed by the rationale put forward by the University that it wants to ‘sharpen its offering’ by solely focussing on Health, Engineering and Business. Such a statement shows a regrettable misjudgement of the pivotal importance of the Humanities for other academic disciplines and of the essentially transdisciplinary nature of teaching and research in which Aston excels. The Department of History, Languages and Translation (HLT) makes a crucial contribution to the strategic areas the University has singled out as its future focus: it is indispensable for the delivery of the successful ‘BSc International Business and Modern Languages’ and the ‘MA in Translation for Business and International Organisations’ (in a recent review, the latter was commended for being an ‘industry-leading course’ in terms of ‘civic responsibility, community engagement and strong community of practice’); HLT staff are currently involved in a project funded by Birmingham City Council and the British Academy, which will improve public health in minority communities in Birmingham, as well as in an AHRC-funded project, which explores the public reception of alternative medicine. Thus, the proposed cuts would not only result in a drastically reduced offer for future generations of students, but, paradoxically, would weaken the strategic areas the University wants to enhance.

The Department of History, Languages and Translation is playing a major role in the University’s contribution to widening participation and community engagement. Over the last five years, the Department’s flagship ‘Route into languages’ outreach programme has reached more than 15,000 students in 455 schools in the West Midlands. Members of HLT were instrumental in the launch of ‘Learning Through Languages UK’ – a consortium of universities, cultural associations and teachers that aims to increase the uptake in languages and raise achievement levels in schools through bilingual education – and, since the start of the pandemic, have organised summer schools and seminars to facilitate teacher training. The Department has also worked towards a re-launch of its Languages for All programmes, with the aim of strengthening its popular Arabic provision, and branching out into community languages such as Urdu or Punjabi. Plans to stop all activities led by the Department would severely damage Aston’s mission of inclusion, community engagement and social mobility. They would further reduce access for disadvantaged communities, with disastrous consequences for local communities and the wider region.

We would like to remind Aston University of recent government reports and parliamentary debates, which all stress the crucial importance of Modern Languages for the future of the UK in a global context. The HEFCE Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England has warned of the dangers of the UK becoming one of the most monolingual countries in the world with severe consequences for its economy, international competitiveness, reputation, and community cohesion. The British Academy, likewise, has repeatedly warned of the detrimental effects of a reduction in Modern Language provision, stressing its importance as a vehicle of social mobility, prosperity, cultural richness and health. In their 2019 call for action, the four National Academies warn that the ‘economic cost of the UK’s linguistic underperformance in terms of lost trade and investment has been estimated at 3.5% of GDP.’

In light of the Department of History, Languages and Translation’s strategic importance to Aston’s key values, the excellent teaching provided by the Department,

not to forget its high-profile research and community projects, the University’s proposed restructuring seems not only incomprehensible, but unjustifiable. We urge Aston University to reconsider the planned closure of this internationally respected, dynamic Department, which contradicts the University’s declared mission to ‘work across disciplines’ and to ‘provide opportunities for education and professional development to all’.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Marion Schmid

President of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French+

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