

10 February 2020

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

**Closure of the Languages Programme at the University of Sunderland**

As the Executive Committees of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French, the Society for French Studies and the Association for the Study of Modern & Contemporary France we are writing to express our grave concern at the closure of Modern Languages, History and Politics at the University of Sunderland. We understand that the University has been facing recruitment problems in Modern Languages, but deplore its short-term decision to withdraw its Language programmes instead of developing a long-term strategy for revitalising Modern Languages in the region and beyond, as recommended by the 2019 call for action on languages in the UK, published by the British Academy, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Royal Society.

We are particularly dismayed at the rationale put forward by the Chair of the Board of Governors thatthese programmes ‘do not fit with the curriculum principles of being career-focused and professions-facing.’ Such a statement shows a regrettable misjudgement of the excellent employability prospects enjoyed by Modern Language graduates, their high demand both in the UK job market and abroad, and the wide range of career options open to Modern Linguists, from education, translation/interpreting and journalism to international business, finance, and the civil service, to name only a few key sectors. It also fails to consider the importance of language skills for graduates of other degree programmes – across Humanities and Science disciplines – whose employability is boosted by proficiency in another language. The University’s decision runs counter to the recent Higher Education Institute Policy report ‘A Languages Crisis?’, which recommends that ‘institutions, with official support, should emphasise languages as a core competence and ensure they are available without extra charges to students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and staff [...]. This would help to mitigate language skills shortages in the workforce and academic research’.

The planned closure of Modern Languages at Sunderland would further aggravate the Modern Languages crisis in the UK and send negative signals about the value of languages at a particularly challenging time. Recent government reports and parliamentary debates have stressed 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 UK ‘is currently nowhere near to fulfilling its linguistic potential’, adding that ‘the economic cost of our linguistic underperformance in terms of lost trade and investment has been estimated at up to £48bn a year’.

We urge the University of Sunderland to reconsider the closure of its language programme, which contradicts its declared ambition to ‘develop areas of importance to the regional and national economy’.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Marion Schmid

President of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French

Prof. Judith Still FBA

President of the Society for French Studies

Prof. Chris Tinker

President of the Association for the Study of Modern & Contemporary France