

MHRA

Modern Humanities Research Association

Professor Malcolm Cook
Chairman

The Editor
The Times Higher Education Supplement

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Dear Sir,

I read with interest that "the Government is demanding early notice of university plans to axe 'strategically important' subjects" as nearly a quarter of physics departments were found to be in "a vulnerable state". Does the Government also want early notice of university plans to axe other strategically important subjects - such as, for example, modern foreign languages?

This week, the British Academy reported that it favoured a return to compulsory foreign language study at GCSE level or at least that schools give strong incentives to 14 to 16 year olds to do so.

Onora O'Neill, president of the academy, said that this was crucial "since otherwise schools will not have the complement of staff to teach any languages to a reasonable standard". The academy also believes that longer-term measures are needed to incentivise foreign-language study and to improve teaching and learning opportunities.

The Modern Humanities Research Association has long been critical of the Government's policy on language learning in schools which has, naturally, led to a serious decline in language learning at degree level in universities. The figures are alarming. Vice-chancellors managing autonomous institutions are, naturally, more interested in the bottom line than about the national wellbeing of "strategically important" subjects. The Government might be alarmed by large-scale closure of departments of physics, chemistry and mathematics. It should be similarly alarmed at the closure of modern-language departments and the effects this will have on research and on the economic competitiveness of the UK in international markets.

We now have to hope that this Government, which has seen the need for linguists in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, will reconsider its policy on language teaching, just as it is now seeing sense about national provision of subjects such as physics and chemistry.

Yours sincerely

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