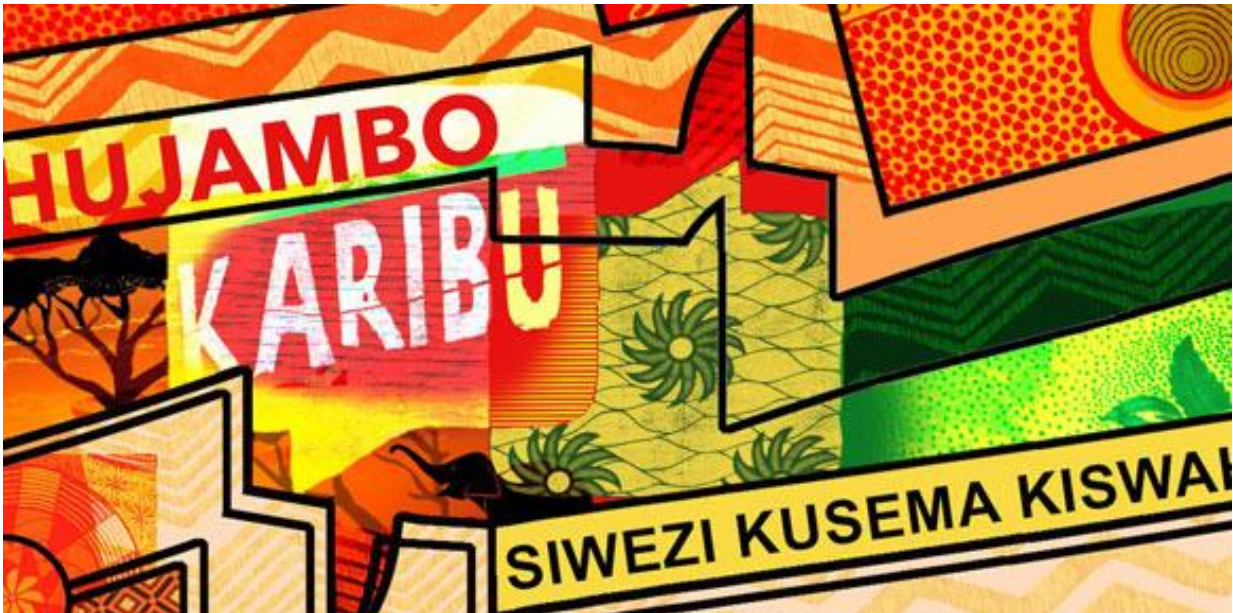


# Urgent action needed to close UK languages gap

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The UK Government needs to urgently adopt a new, comprehensive languages strategy if it is to keep pace with its international competitors and reduce a skills deficit that has wide-reaching economic, political, and military effects.

The findings are included in a new report, *The Value of Languages*, published by the University of Cambridge this week, after wide-ranging

consultation with government bodies and agencies including the MoD, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, GCHQ, and the Department for Education.

The report argues for the full contribution of languages to the UK economy and society to be realised across government, rather than falling solely under the remit of the Department for Education, thereby allowing a centralised approach in how [language](#) impacts the UK in almost every sphere of 21st-century life.

Recent independent research, highlighted within the report, indicates the language deficit could be costing the UK economy billions of pounds per year.

The Value of Languages draws on discussions at a workshop held in Cambridge, co-chaired by Professor Wendy Ayres-Bennett of the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, and Baroness Coussins, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Languages. The workshop was attended by representatives from across government and is likely to inform future policy decisions in this area.

Professor Ayres-Bennett said: "It is vital that we communicate clearly and simply the value of languages for the health of the nation. English is necessary, but not sufficient. We cannot leave language policy to the Department for Education alone.

"We need a more coordinated cross-government approach which recognises the value of languages to key issues of our time including security and defence, diplomacy and [international relations](#), and social cohesion and peace-building. Our report aims to raise awareness of the current deficiencies in UK language policy, put forward proposals to address them, and illustrate the strategic value of languages to the UK."

The report also suggests:

- Education policy for languages must be grounded in national priorities and promote a cultural shift in the attitude towards languages.
- Language policy must be underpinned by organisational cultural change. The report highlights how cultural change is being achieved, for example, in the military with language skills being valued and rewarded financially. Military personnel are encouraged to take examinations to record their language skills, regardless of whether they are language learners or speakers of community or heritage languages.
- Champions for languages both within and outside government are vital.

"Whereas the STEM subjects are specifically highlighted under the responsibilities for the Minister of State for Universities and Science, and there is a Chief Government Scientist, languages lack high-level champions within parliament and Whitehall," added Ayres-Bennett. "Modern languages also need media champions. Figures such as Simon Schama for history or Brian Cox for physics and astronomy have helped bring the importance of these subjects to the public's attention."

Imminent or immediate problems for government to address include the decline of languages and language learning in the UK from schools through to higher education, where language departments and degree courses are closing; business lost to UK companies through lack of [language skills](#); and an erosion of the UK's 'soft power' in conflict and matters of national security, which are currently limited by a shortage of speakers of strategically important languages

The report finds that the UK is also under-represented internationally, for instance in the EU civil service or in the translating and interpreting

departments of the UN – and that the community and heritage languages spoken in the UK are often undervalued.

"A UK strategy for languages would mean that UK businesses can participate fully in the global market place using the language and communication skills of their workforce," said Professor Ayres-Bennett.

"It would also mean that the UK is able to maximise its role and authority in foreign policy through language and diplomacy. Educational attainment in a wide range of languages brings with it personal cognitive benefits as well as the 'cultural agility' vital to international relations and development, as well as enhancing the cultural capital and [social cohesion](#) of the different communities of the UK."

The report cites a number of case studies illustrating the value of languages. For example, a Spanish linguist recruited to GCHQ was from her first day able to use her 'street language' acquired during her year abroad and her knowledge of certain Latin American countries to translate communications related to an international drugs cartel looking to transport cocaine into the UK. Comparing her analysis with those developed by two of her language community colleagues in Russian and Urdu, she was able to create a clear intelligence picture of the likely methods and dates of the imminent drugs importation. Meetings with Law Enforcement agents eventually led to the seizure of large quantities of cocaine and lengthy jail terms for the key players.

Policy workshops and briefings will be a key element of a new £4m research project on multilingualism led by Professor Ayres-Bennett at the University of Cambridge, and funded under the AHRC's Open World Research Initiative.

**More information:** The full report can be seen here:  
[www.publicpolicy.cam.ac.uk/res ... t/value-of-languages](http://www.publicpolicy.cam.ac.uk/res ... t/value-of-languages)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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