

'Language capital': reframing formal language-learning in Scotland.

| Fiona Barclay | 3rd June 2025 | Opinion Piece

In this article, Fiona Barclay considers the longstanding deficit in the social value associated with languages. She argues that this deficit has contributed to the sustained decline in the take-up of formal language-learning in Scotland, and proposes three avenues through which public perceptions of languages could be improved.

'The prospects of Modern Studies [MFL] depend on the esteem of the public. All classes and almost all sections of the public have rated them below their true value'. [Stanley Leathes' statement](#), made over a hundred years ago in 1918, highlights the enduring challenge of altering public perceptions of languages. [Tinsley and Board \(2017\)](#) argue that the social value associated with languages – what we might term 'languages capital' – directly impacts take-up of formal language-learning: 'There is a widespread under-appreciation of the value of languages other than English which goes hand in hand with UK citizens' generally poor record when it comes to learning new languages.'

The form that 'language capital' takes is complex but shapes every stage of the language-learning lifecycle. Decisions to study subjects are influenced by the confluence of social discourses around concepts such as 'usefulness' and 'prestige', to which policymakers, the media, employers, parents and careers advisors all contribute. The dominance of global English has affected take-up of languages other than English across the Anglophone world, leading in the UK for calls to [develop a national languages strategy](#). Yet within the UK nations, devolved policies create local conditions. This piece focuses on Scotland, where the devolved school curriculum, absence of university fees, and the Scottish Government's ambitious [1+2 languages policy](#) have created a specific context for language-learning. Modelled on a [European approach](#) in which learners begin to learn a second language (L2) at age 5, and a third language (L3) aged 9, the Scottish Government's policy was implemented 2012-22 with investment of £37m. It aimed to develop confident global citizens benefiting from ten years of language-learning and by 2023, around 99% of primary schools provided full or partial entitlement to L2 from age 5. Yet despite its high profile and investment, the

policy has not translated into a higher uptake of languages in upper secondary. In 2004, Level 5 (GCSE equivalent) languages represented 8.9% of all examination entries but by 2024, Scottish Qualifications Authority data shows that that had fallen to 4.8%. In practical terms that has meant a slide from 24,509 entries to 15,680.

How to reconcile the emphasis placed on language-learning by the Scottish Government with the continuing decline in take-up? The British Council's first [Language Trends Scotland \(2025\)](#) report points to a lack of training in languages for primary teachers as a factor impeding learner progression and self-efficacy, and to inconsistent delivery in secondary, where [39% of schools](#) do not implement the government's guidance of pupil entitlement to languages until age 14. Multi-level classes, in which one teacher delivers to pupils following up to four separate national qualifications, are also highlighted as an issue. Consequently, amidst consistent and sustained public discourse in support of STEM subjects, the signal that pupils receive from schools is that languages matter less than other subjects.

These signals can have gendered effects: the feminisation of languages has long been a cause for concern, and now [emerging research](#) suggests a self-reinforcing phenomenon whereby feminised subjects become less prestigious, leading to a general perception that fields dominated by boys are intrinsically better. Boys' reluctance to study languages may therefore be connected with the loss of disciplinary prestige, with boys choosing more highly regarded subjects. In contrast, the dominance of English ensures there is no gender gap in Europe, where competence in English is regarded as a core skill.

How might we address a challenge as profound as social change? In Scotland, there are three opportunities. Firstly, the Curriculum Improvement Cycle starting in spring 2025 offers the opportunity to ensure greater consistency of contact hours, and introduce a new focus on the spontaneous production of language that would enhance the learner experience and support intrinsic motivation.

Secondly, despite a consensus among many employers that 'Business English is enough', languages have allies among key figures in Scotland's business sectors. Their experience supports academic research that finds that businesses who trade using only English are [unaware of the barriers posed by culture and language](#) and [export 30% less](#) than companies making use of linguistic and intercultural skills. With economic

growth stubbornly elusive, academics must work with languages alumni in senior positions and those industry leaders who understand the value of languages to sensitise businesses to the economic benefits that languages could bring. Employer demand would contribute to an increase in society's 'language capital', to which learners, parents and careers advisors would respond.

Finally, universities should recognise their own role in shaping the macroenvironment and consider measures to strengthen languages that lie within their purview. Here Ireland offers a striking contrast to the UK nations. As the only predominantly Anglophone country that has increased voluntary uptake of international languages – [73.6% of learners now take a language to Leaving Certificate](#) –, Ireland demonstrates how non-fiscal structural factors at policy level can effectively scaffold strategic subjects. Most Irish and Scottish students remain in their home countries, retained by their distinctive education systems and low/no university fees. This creates a relatively hermetic system of limited size that supports collaborative, sector-wide approaches. Ireland's decision to prioritise Further Maths is one such example, where uptake has substantially increased since the subject was assigned an upweighted number of university entrance points. As an explanation for the high uptake of languages, however, researchers point to Ireland's [National Universities' language admissions requirement](#) for most undergraduate degrees as the guarantor of language learning. Learners prefer to keep their university choices open by studying a language, while schools respond by featuring languages prominently in their subject choices, ensuring the learner pipeline from school to university and beyond to teacher education. Scotland could adopt this approach, aided by the existence of two language qualifications at Level 5 (GCSE equivalent). While the first, National 5, is the standard academic qualification, Scotland also offers an alternative, ungraded (pass/fail), teacher-assessed qualification at the same level. Known as '[Modern Languages for Life and Work](#)' and available in ten languages, its focus on applied cultural and employability skills and coursework-only format makes it more accessible to learners who make a late decision to apply to university, while the flexibility of the Scottish curriculum allows for additional subjects in the final year of school.

Through recruitment practices, such as those outlined above, that openly value languages, universities can create the cultural 'languages capital' that spills into the rest of society. In doing so, they would make a public statement to which schools, parents and teachers would respond, taking an important step towards creative

solutions to problems that have plagued the status of language-learning for more than a century.

About the author

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