

# Modern Foreign Languages in a Modern Curriculum



**British-German  
Association**



## Contents

Foreword.....	2
Executive Summary.....	4
1. The Curriculum and Assessment Review.....	5
2. Why Language Learning Matters.....	5
3. Languages and the Government’s Educational Missions.....	9
4. The Current Situation of MFL.....	12
5. Measures Taken to Boost MFL.....	16
6. The Case of German.....	17
7. Where Next?.....	21
References.....	23



## Foreword

The [British-German Association](#) is a long-established UK-registered charity with over 650 members. We work to improve the understanding of Germany in the UK. Promoting the teaching of German in British schools is central to our charitable objectives. Our BGA Schools network includes 550 UK secondary schools that teach German.

Up until 2004, all pupils in publicly funded schools had to sit at least one GCSE in a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) – usually French, German or Spanish. Over the 20 years since the end of this mandatory requirement, the number of pupils sitting German or French GCSEs has fallen by over 60%. A further decline in the number of pupils learning German could threaten its future viability as a school subject.

This matters. Language skills equip pupils to deal with a wider range of social situations. They also boost cognitive development. Independent schools, where languages remain widely taught, recognise these advantages. If MFL were to fall off the state-school curriculum, this would reduce opportunities for pupils in publicly funded schools to realise their potential. In short, Modern Foreign Languages should be an essential part of a modern education.

The Government has launched a Curriculum and Assessment Review, led by Professor Becky Francis. The Government has stated that the launch of the Review is an important step in its mission to “break down barriers to opportunity, deliver better life chances and enable more young people to get on”.<sup>1</sup> For the reasons set out above, wider teaching of MFL will be key to delivering these objectives.

Language skills bring economic benefits, both to the pupils who learn them and to the economy as a whole. Language skills, especially German, are in demand from employers. SMEs increase their exports if they use language skills. UK deficiencies in language skills have been shown negatively to affect GDP. So wider language teaching has a direct link to the Government’s aim of “improving the prosperity of our country and the living standards of working people”<sup>2</sup>, as set out in its growth agenda.

We are concerned, therefore, that the terms of reference of the Francis Review make no mention of MFL. In addition, the members of the Review Group are not subject specialists. We have therefore prepared the attached paper, to bring together the evidence for MFL in a modern school curriculum. Our paper is a summary of the evidence, and we make no specific recommendations. Nonetheless, we hope that the factual evidence contained in our paper will inform policy changes that ensure Modern Foreign Languages are more widely taught in state-funded schools.

Peter Barnes  
*Chairman, British-German Association*

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<sup>1</sup> [Department for Education \(2024, July 19\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [UK Government \(2024, July 8\)](#).



**Note on scope and terminology**

Unless stated otherwise, this paper refers to state-funded education in England, excluding independent schools as well as the devolved education systems in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The benefits of learning Modern Foreign Languages apply equally to the independent sector and the devolved nations, but these are outside the scope of the Francis Review.

State-funded schools in England fall into one of two categories. **Maintained schools** (community, foundation and voluntary schools) follow the national curriculum. **Academies** (which, for the purposes of this paper, include free schools) are currently exempt from the national curriculum, but are required to teach a “broad and balanced curriculum”.

**NB: Footnotes include clickable links throughout this paper.**



## Executive Summary

This paper presents a summary of the available research, facts and figures on Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) – encompassing the “big three” languages of French, German and Spanish, alongside lesser taught “other MFL” such as Mandarin and Italian. It is concerning that no mention of languages has been made in the context of the current Curriculum and Assessment Review, details of which are set out in [Section 1](#). This paper therefore aims to demonstrate why languages matter, and why action is needed to protect and strengthen their position in a modern, broadly based curriculum.

The Government seeks to promote child development, core subject skills, communication, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork, and oracy. It argues that improvements in these areas will help to ensure educational equality and good prospects for all. These, in turn, will create economic growth and security. Language learning plays a key role in imparting and developing exactly these types of skills, which the Government has identified as being of fundamental importance in the workplace and the modern world more widely. [Section 2](#) provides an overview of these tangible and real-life benefits of learning a language; [Section 3](#) relates them to the Government’s stated objectives.

Despite the demonstrable and wide-ranging benefits of languages, the number of children and young people studying MFL has declined significantly over the last 20 years. This is due to a combination of factors affecting both pupils’ subject choices and schools’ willingness and ability to teach languages. The current situation of MFL learning in English state-funded education is set out in [Section 4](#).

Previous governments recognised the importance of language learning and regarded its decline as a problem that needed to be tackled. This led to the implementation of various measures to combat the downward trends in provision and uptake. An overview of these measures – and their impact – is provided in [Section 5](#).

Out of the “big three” languages, German has been most severely affected by long-term decline, and there is now a possibility that it will disappear altogether from the curriculum in English state-funded schools. German is not only particularly relevant to the UK’s international and trading relationships, but is in demand across academic, technical and vocational careers. This is widely recognised in the independent sector, putting state-educated pupils at a disadvantage. [Section 6](#) looks at the benefits of learning German, its current situation in English state-funded schools, and specific measures that have been taken to support German.

By way of conclusion, [Section 7](#) sets out in broad terms what steps ought to be taken in the short term to secure the future of MFL, including German, in English state-funded education.



## 1. The Curriculum and Assessment Review

On 18 July 2024, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson tasked Prof Becky Francis with leading a Curriculum and Assessment Review of state-funded education in England at Key Stages 1–5 (ages 5–18).<sup>3</sup>

The aim of the Review is to “refresh”<sup>4</sup> the curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways with a view to providing: strong foundations in reading, writing and maths; a broad education including creative subjects, sports and vocational subjects; and the skills needed for life and work, including digital, oracy and life skills. The Review is also tasked with ensuring that the curriculum reflects “the diversities of society”, and that the assessment system captures the strengths of every learner across a broad spectrum of subjects.<sup>5</sup> The Education Secretary’s initiative forms part of a wider Government strategy aimed at *Breaking down the barriers to opportunity*, as set out before the last election in the Labour Party’s mission statement of the same title.<sup>6</sup>

Prof Francis has now appointed the 11 other members of her Review Group. They are Gary Aubin, Prof Jo-Anne Baird, Prof Nic Beech, Cassie Buchanan OBE, Prof Zongyi Deng, Jon Hutchinson, John Laramy CBE, Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE, Lisa O’Loughlin and Funmilola Stewart, joined by Sir Ian Bauckham CBE as an observer.<sup>7</sup> Together, they have launched a call for evidence, which focuses on a range of topics that are in scope of the Review, and which is set to close on 22 November 2024.<sup>8</sup> An interim report is due to be published in early 2025, followed by the final Review with recommendations in autumn 2025.<sup>9</sup> The Terms of Reference make it clear that any legislative changes resulting from the Review will apply to all state-funded schools, including academies, which are currently exempt from the national curriculum.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Why Language Learning Matters

One of the Government’s aims in commissioning the current review is to create a broader curriculum – but weekly teaching time is limited, and there are other subjects (such as creative subjects and sport) that demand attention. In a world where English is the lingua franca in business, why should students in England learn other languages?

Academic research shows that language learning has intellectual, relational and societal benefits that range across subjects and last a lifetime. In particular, it has been shown to boost cognitive development; help to overcome socio-economic inequalities; have a

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<sup>3</sup> [Secretary of State for Education \(2024\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Department for Education \(2024c\)](#), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> [Labour Party \(2024\)](#).

<sup>7</sup> For biographical details, see [Department for Education \(2024b\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Department for Education \(2024a\)](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Department for Education \(2024c\)](#), 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



positive impact on ageing and health; offer career opportunities for all; support economic growth; and contribute to national security.

### **Cognitive benefits**

There is ample peer-reviewed evidence that learning and speaking another language improves cognitive abilities in children.<sup>11</sup> Research suggests that bilingualism enhances executive function,<sup>12</sup> which is a major predictor of academic success – particularly in maths and reading.<sup>13</sup> Several studies have shown that foreign-language acquisition boosts the development of the first language, with children exposed to a second language outperforming their peers in verbal tasks and reading tests.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, children with bilingual experience show significant advantages in cognitive flexibility<sup>15</sup> and selective attention<sup>16</sup>, which are key to processing complex information and improve learning across the curriculum.<sup>17</sup>

Importantly, these cognitive advantages are independent of socio-economic status, cultural background, and baseline skills. Bilingual children from low socio-economic backgrounds outperform monolingual children on working memory tasks,<sup>18</sup> and show faster learning and stronger skills in maths<sup>19</sup> regardless of cultural and linguistic context.<sup>20</sup> Even the most socially and economically disadvantaged bilinguals show cognitive advantages over those speaking only a single language.<sup>21</sup>

In order to reap these non-linguistic benefits, it is not necessary to become highly skilled in a foreign language. Instead, exposure is key, with studies showing increases in executive function with longer bilingual experience rather than with proficiency.<sup>22</sup> Exposure to a second language also has a long-term effect, as cognitive gains do not wear off entirely even when lapsing back to monolingualism.<sup>23</sup>

### **Communicative and relational benefits**

Exposure to a second language promotes effective communication by enhancing perspective taking, i.e. the ability to understand another speaker's intention.<sup>24</sup> By extension, multilingualism has been linked to "openness" – the ability to appreciate new

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see [Fox, Corretjer & Webb \(2019\)](#).

<sup>12</sup> [Bialystok \(2015\)](#), 118.

<sup>13</sup> [Best, Miller & Naglieri \(2011\)](#), 334.

<sup>14</sup> [Marini, Eliseeva & Fabbro \(2019\)](#), 172; [Steele et al. \(2017\)](#), 302S.

<sup>15</sup> [Marzecová et al. \(2013\)](#), 602.

<sup>16</sup> [Blom et al. \(2017\)](#), 9.

<sup>17</sup> [Yang & Yang \(2016\)](#), 133.

<sup>18</sup> [Blom et al. \(2014\)](#), 115.

<sup>19</sup> [Choi, Jeon & Lippard \(2018\)](#), 75.

<sup>20</sup> [Barac & Bialystok \(2012\)](#), 419.

<sup>21</sup> [Nair, Biedermann & Nickels \(2017\)](#), 1007.

<sup>22</sup> [Bialystok \(2015\)](#), 119.

<sup>23</sup> [Bogulski et al. \(2015\)](#), 566.

<sup>24</sup> [Fan et al. \(2015\)](#), 1090.



ideas and adapt to other cultures and societies.<sup>25</sup> Combined with the increased cognitive flexibility in people with foreign-language skills, this leads to stronger out-group acceptance, making it an important factor in prejudice reduction and promoting social cohesion.<sup>26</sup> Once again, these benefits do not depend on mastery of the language but are gained through exposure.<sup>27</sup>

## Enhanced creativity

Learning a foreign language in a classroom “dramatically increases” the four components of divergent thinking ability – fluency, elaboration, originality, and flexibility – that are markers of enhanced creativity.<sup>28</sup> A variety of studies supports the conclusion that bilingualism is linked to creative thinking, prompting calls for all children to be given the opportunity to develop second- and third-language skills to support their development.<sup>29</sup>

## Long-term health benefits

Speaking more than one language positively impacts lifelong health in two ways. It boosts academic success (as set out above), which in turn is known to predict long-term health and wellbeing.<sup>30</sup> And it protects against neural decline in later years,<sup>31</sup> with cognitive functioning in old age correlated more closely with linguistic skills than even with physical activity.<sup>32</sup> Again, these benefits have been observed across cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>33</sup>

## Employability

Although English is widely used in business, research has shown that other languages are in demand when it comes to trading with large non-English speaking economies both in the EU and beyond.<sup>34</sup> As a result, “businesses value job seekers with foreign language skills as global markets mean that workforces need to be increasingly multilingual”.<sup>35</sup>

A 2014 survey by the British Academy found that 89% of UK SMEs (which then, as now,<sup>36</sup> accounted for 99% of all private sector businesses) saw speaking an additional language as a useful asset for employment.<sup>37</sup> 54% of SMEs agreed that languages were as important as STEM subjects, and almost the same share considered school leavers (51%) and

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<sup>25</sup> [Korzilius et al. \(2011\)](#), 549.

<sup>26</sup> [Mepham & Martinovic \(2018\)](#), 66.

<sup>27</sup> [Fan et al. \(2015\)](#), 1090.

<sup>28</sup> [Ghonsooly & Showqi \(2012\)](#), 164.

<sup>29</sup> [Fürst & Grin \(2018\)](#), 352–353.

<sup>30</sup> [Lê-Scherban et al. \(2014\)](#), 348.

<sup>31</sup> [Del Maschio et al. \(2018\)](#), 124.

<sup>32</sup> [Jhle et al. \(2016\)](#), 1110.

<sup>33</sup> [Bak et al. \(2014\)](#), 962.

<sup>34</sup> [Beadle et al. \(2016\)](#), 244.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>36</sup> [Hutton \(2024\)](#), 4.

<sup>37</sup> [British Academy \(2014\)](#).



graduates (53%) who only speak English to be at a competitive disadvantage when entering the jobs market.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of Brexit, the CBI highlighted the national importance of foreign language skills and the cultural understanding they foster, stating in its 2019 *Education and Skills Survey* report that, “for the government vision of ‘Global Britain’ to be delivered, businesses need people who can communicate with customers and suppliers around the world”.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the British Chambers of Commerce’s 2024 *Youth Skills Manifesto* called for MFL learning at least to GCSE level because language skills “support businesses to understand the culture of overseas markets and to communicate for international trade purposes”.<sup>40</sup>

Language learning and its associated benefits are not an end in themselves, but an important career driver in combination with other relevant skills.<sup>41</sup> In higher education, this is amply demonstrated by the wide choice of joint-honours degrees combining a non-linguistic subject and a language. A September 2024 snapshot survey of the UCAS website showed just over 1,000 such courses offered by over 50 UK universities, ranging from Accountancy and German (University of Aberdeen) to Zoology and a Modern Language (University of Manchester).<sup>42</sup>

However, demand for language skills is not limited to careers requiring a university education. The British Academy’s 2023 report, *Languages Provision in UK Further Education*, found that 90% of responding FE students (whether they were studying a language or not) considered languages “important” or “very important”, citing diversity and inclusion, communication with speakers of other languages, and cultural awareness as the main reasons.<sup>43</sup>

The CBI’s Head of Education and Skills, Robert West, responded to the report by saying:

“Employer demand for foreign language skills has significantly increased over the last few years, but uptake of these subjects at schools and colleges remains way too low. This report shows that reversing this trend is critical to increasing the UK’s global competitiveness and to ensuring young people have the high level of cultural awareness that supports a successful career. That means investing in vocational language training at FE colleges, as well as encouraging more young people to study languages at GCSE and A-level.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> [CBI \(2019\)](#), 26.

<sup>40</sup> [British Chambers of Commerce \(2024\)](#), 8.

<sup>41</sup> [Beadle et al. \(2016\)](#), 249.

<sup>42</sup> Based on a search for university courses involving French, German, Spanish or any Modern Language and a second, non-linguistic subject at <https://www.ucas.com> on 10 September 2024.

<sup>43</sup> [Collen et al. \(2023\)](#), 95–97.

<sup>44</sup> [Bawden \(2023\)](#).



### **Increased exports and GDP**

SMEs making use of language capabilities are 30% more successful in exporting, according to a 2021 report by Aston University.<sup>45</sup> The impact of language skills on the national economy as a whole was scrutinised in a 2013 report to UK Trade & Investment, which estimated that the annual cost to the UK of language deficiencies amounts to 3.5% of GDP<sup>46</sup> (or £94bn in 2023).<sup>47</sup> A 2022 follow-up study focussing on French, Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin showed that the increase in GDP associated with better skills in these four languages is likely to outweigh the necessary investment in language education by a ratio of 2:1.<sup>48</sup>

### **National security**

The use of linguistic and intercultural skills, as gained through language learning, is not limited to the economic sector. They are of vital importance to diplomacy and defence, allowing the UK to build trust with international partners, understand the context in which they operate, and identify threats. The British Academy is among the institutions that have expressed concerns over growing language deficits within the UK and their impact on the Government's ability to maintain diplomatic relations and deliver national security and defence.<sup>49</sup>

## **3. Languages and the Government's Educational Missions**

The following section provides an overview of the Government's key ambitions, as set out in its mission statement *Breaking down the barriers to opportunity*,<sup>50</sup> and shows how language learning contributes to each of them.

### **Child development**

*"Extensive evidence shows the positive impact of high-quality early education on long-term educational, behavioural and social outcomes, and on closing the gap for children in low-income households."*

As illustrated in [Section 2](#), early exposure to languages is a proven way to boost child development, offering cognitive benefits that transcend socio-economic barriers, cultural backgrounds and baseline skills. This makes languages a prime facilitator in giving children the best start in life and breaking the link between background and success. Over the course of a lifetime, language skills improve not only academic prospects and relational faculties, but also health and wellbeing into old age.

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<sup>45</sup> [Tibrewal \(2021\)](#), 6.

<sup>46</sup> [Foreman-Peck & Wang \(2013\)](#), 1.

<sup>47</sup> Based on a GDP of £2,687bn in 2023 according to [Powell \(2024\)](#).

<sup>48</sup> [Ayres-Bennett et al. \(2022\)](#), vii.

<sup>49</sup> [Chen & Breivik \(2013\)](#), 8.

<sup>50</sup> [Labour Party \(2024\)](#).



### **Reading, writing and maths skills**

*“For Labour, high standards in the basics of reading, writing, and maths are essential ... too many children are going through their whole school career without developing core English or maths skills.”*

Engagement with foreign languages improves information-processing and learning across the curriculum. Specifically, language learners show stronger skills in maths and in their first language, outperforming their peers in reading tests and verbal tasks. This makes language provision a key tool to improve outcomes in other core subjects, ensuring high and rising standards for all.

### **Communication, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork**

*“Employers report that too many young people leaving education do not have the basic skills – communication, teamwork, problem solving – needed to thrive in the workplace ... Subjects like music, art, sport or drama, that build confidence and skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving and teamwork, must be available to all our children not just some.”*

Some of the prime benefits of language learning are: effective communication; improved perspective-taking and greater openness (which bolster teamwork); cognitive flexibility and enhanced creativity (which support problem solving). While sport and creative subjects undoubtedly have a role to play in fostering these skills, it is concerning that languages, as obvious facilitating subjects, are not mentioned in the Government’s mission document.

### **Oracy**

*“A significant barrier to young people getting on in life is an inability to speak up, to express their views, to ask for help, to persuade others, to collaborate successfully. These vital speaking skills are becoming even more important in the workplace and yet are not always taught in schools.”*

Language learning, in which oracy plays a more explicit role than in almost any other subject, has the capacity to effect a step change in the acquisition and improvement of speaking skills. Contrary to outdated assumptions, exposure to additional languages helps to boost speaking skills also in pupils’ home language.

### **Good prospects for all**

*“Labour believes every young person should have access to high quality vocational and technical training pathways.”*

Career pathways in which languages complement specific skills exist across the educational spectrum, from academic to vocational and technical training routes. Thus, every young person can benefit from language learning and use linguistic skills to create opportunities for themselves, helping them to achieve and thrive in a wide range of employments.



### **Educational equality**

*“By reforming our childcare and education systems, Labour will boost opportunities for everyone, and our economy, and make sure there is no class ceiling on the ambitions of young people in Britain.”*

Research has demonstrated that the advantages of learning a foreign language apply irrespective of socio-economic background, socio-economic status, or baseline skills. Additionally, their positive effects on cognitive and social development are not dependent on the level of linguistic achievement, but are gained through exposure. This makes MFL one of the great levellers of educational opportunities.

### **Economic growth and national security**

*“Each of Labour’s missions is built on the strong foundations of economic stability, national security, and secure borders.”*

Academic and practical evidence, as cited in [Section 2](#), has highlighted the importance of languages to employers and employees, for trade and export, and for diplomacy and national security. Linguistic and intercultural skills are vital to the Government’s declared efforts to “reset Britain’s relations with Europe”<sup>51</sup> in the area of security and beyond. This makes language learning a curricular asset of strategic national importance.

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<sup>51</sup> [Lammy \(2024, July 7\)](#).



## 4. The Current Situation of MFL

Modern foreign language (MFL) teaching in English state-funded schools is in decline. Over the last 20 years, the number of pupils in England taking modern language GCSEs has dropped by 34%, with rises in Spanish and other MFL masking a steep drop in French, by 56%, and German, by 71% (see Figure 1). The situation is no less concerning at A level. While the number of all modern language A levels sat in England in 2024 is down by 24% against the 2004 figure, the fall in French and German over the same period stands at 47% and 65%, respectively.

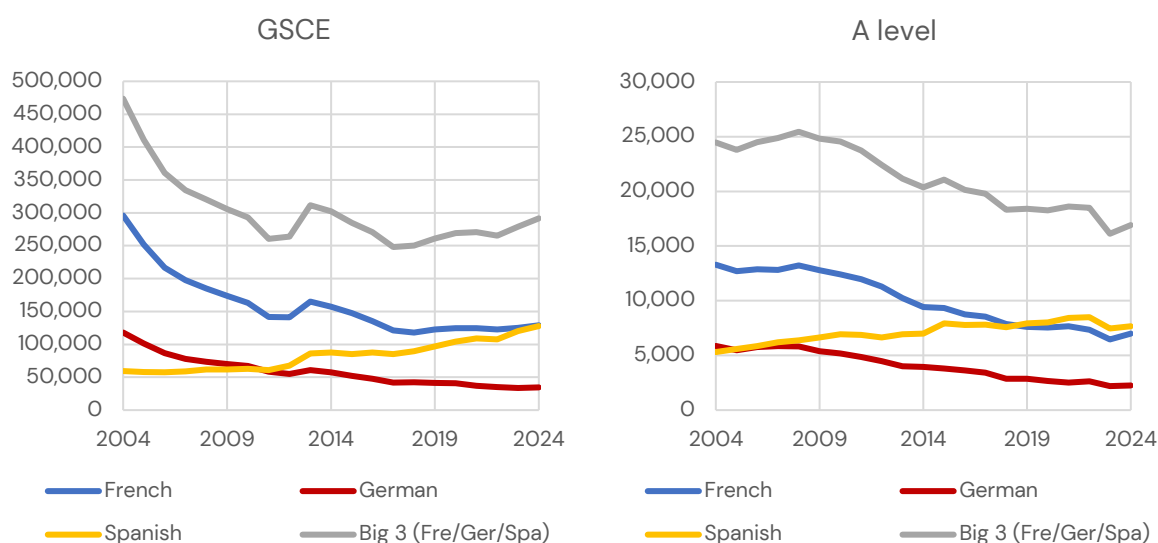


Figure 1: GCSE and A level entries in French, German and Spanish since 2004 (England)<sup>52</sup>

The reasons are to be found on both the “supply” and “demand” sides. Languages have not been a mandatory part of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4 (age 14–16, leading up to GCSEs) since 2004. Additionally, 80% of mainstream state secondary schools in England are now academies,<sup>53</sup> which do not follow the National Curriculum, and this share is set to rise as more schools convert to academy status. Only around 17% of English state-funded secondaries still chose to mandate MFL learning at Key Stage 4 in 2024,<sup>54</sup> so the vast majority of pupils in state-funded education are not required to learn a language beyond age 14. And while most secondaries continue to offer at least one MFL at Key Stage 4, there are several factors that discourage uptake: adverse grading, linear assessment, pupil attitudes, and teacher supply (see below).

<sup>52</sup> [Joint Council for Qualifications \(2024\)](#).

<sup>53</sup> Based on analysis of data from [UK Government \(n.d.\)](#).

<sup>54</sup> Based on responses to [British Council \(2024\)](#), 26; given the profile of responding schools, the true figure is likely to be lower.



### Adverse grading

For many years, modern languages have been among the most difficult GCSE subjects. In other words, the same pupils achieve notably lower grades in MFL exams than in their mandatory English language and maths exams. In 2022, three of the four most adversely graded GCSE subjects were German, French and Spanish (see Figure 2), and grading disadvantages in these subjects continued to be evident in 2023.<sup>55</sup> This is despite adjustments having been made each year since 2022, based on Ofqual recommendations dating back to November 2019.<sup>56</sup> At A level, no adjustments have been made, despite an Ofqual investigation in November 2018 finding German, French and Spanish to be above average difficulty.<sup>57</sup> Pupils aiming to achieve the highest possible grades to support their educational progression will understandably choose more favourably graded subjects.

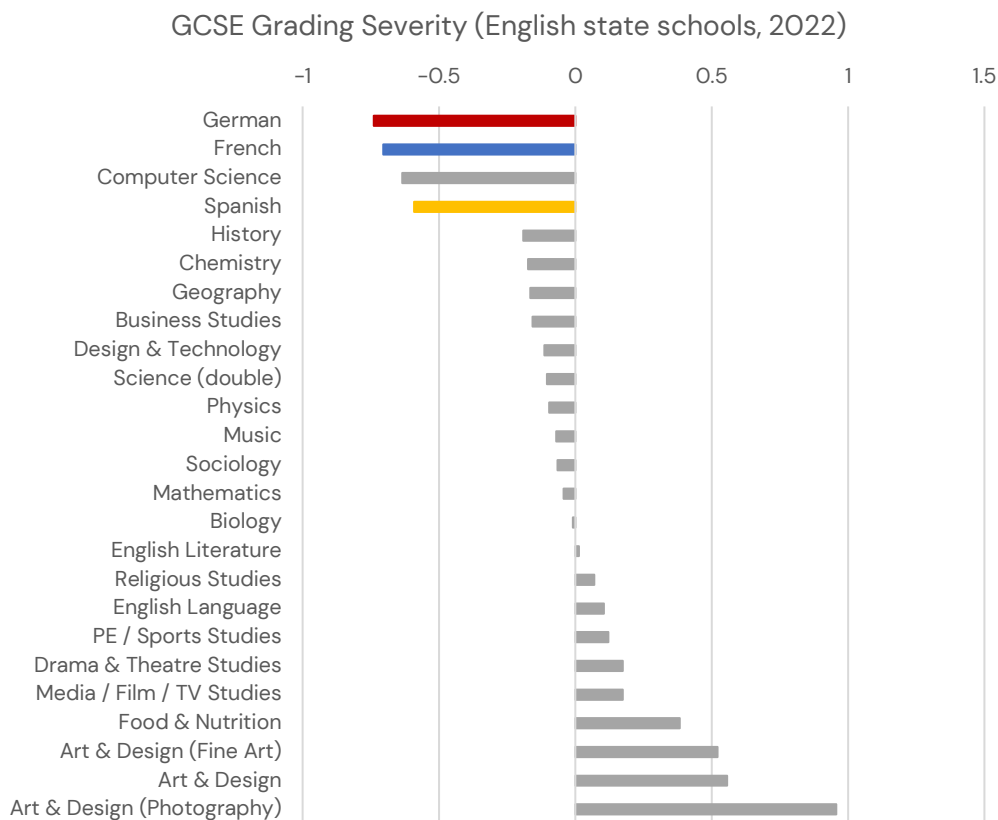


Figure 2: GCSE point score achieved compared to English Language and Mathematics<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> [Thomson \(2024\)](#).

<sup>56</sup> [Ofqual \(2019\)](#).

<sup>57</sup> [Ofqual \(2018\)](#), 9.

<sup>58</sup> For all subjects with at least 20,000 entrants; [Thomson \(2023\)](#).



## **Linear assessment**

Pupils staying in school education post-GCSE continue their chosen subjects either to AS level (assessed after one year) or to full A level (assessed after two years). A level qualifications used to build on AS level, with assessment in the latter contributing to 50% of the final grade. Most pupils took four AS levels, continuing three of them to full A level.

This changed in 2016, when a linear approach with single final exams for both AS and A levels was introduced, making the two qualifications incompatible. Since then, fewer and fewer schools have been offering standalone AS levels. Since languages used to be a popular choice at AS level, this change has led to reduced MFL uptake post-16.<sup>59</sup>

## **Pupil attitudes**

A 2023 survey by the British Council revealed that 86% of pupils do not believe they will use languages in their future careers.<sup>60</sup> Despite clear evidence that language skills positively impact future employability, especially in combination with other relevant skills, this message appears not to be reaching pupils – or indeed career advisers, school principals and academy trust leaders.

Brexit also had an impact on multiple fronts. It fostered a belief – both among pupils and their parents – that language learning in general no longer has value.<sup>61</sup> It made it harder for teachers to promote the usefulness of languages, given the increased barriers to studying and working in the EU.<sup>62</sup> And it reduced opportunities for exposure to languages, due to the UK's withdrawal from the Erasmus programme and additional requirements for pupil exchanges.<sup>63</sup>

## **Teacher supply**

The situation is compounded on the “supply” side by a lack of qualified teachers. In 2023/24, entrants into MFL postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) amounted to just 33% of the official recruitment target, making MFL one of the subjects worst affected by recruitment shortfalls (see Figure 3). 64% of state-funded secondary schools in England reported MFL recruitment challenges in 2023/24.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> [British Council \(2020\)](#), 13–14; [Scott et al. \(2024\)](#), 15.

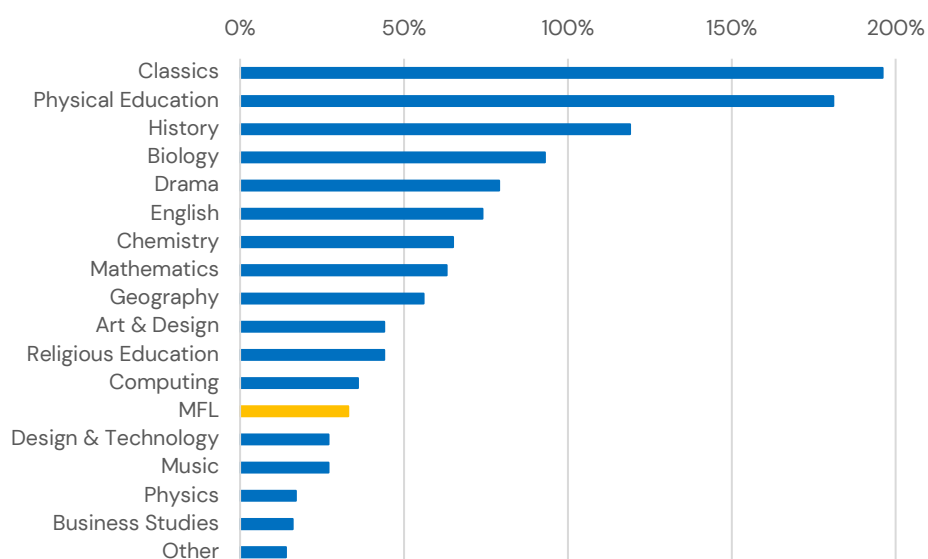
<sup>60</sup> [British Council \(2023\)](#).

<sup>61</sup> [British Council \(2019\)](#), 15; [British Council \(2020\)](#), 16.

<sup>62</sup> [British Council \(2020\)](#), 16.

<sup>63</sup> [British Council \(2019\)](#), 15; [British Council \(2021\)](#), 20.

<sup>64</sup> Based on responses to [British Council \(2024\)](#), 31; given the profile of responding schools, the true figure is likely to be higher.



*Figure 3: Percentage of ITT recruitment target reached by subject (England, 2023/24)<sup>65</sup>*

Those who do become language teachers often do not stay in the profession. A 2018 Government analysis showed that MFL had the second highest “wastage” rate (teachers leaving the profession) of all subjects in 2017, and the second highest increase in wastage over a two-year period.<sup>66</sup> Although no recent data is available, anecdotal evidence suggests that the problem persists.

As a result of staffing issues, over a fifth (20.5%) of teaching hours in German were taught by a teacher with no relevant qualifications in 2023–24. The situation was even worse for French (21.9%) and Spanish (40.1%).<sup>67</sup>

### **Lack of language assistants**

Teacher shortages have coincided with waning support from language assistants – usually native-speaking foreign nationals. Against the backdrop of increased immigration hurdles after Brexit, the share of state-funded schools hosting language assistants decreased from 33% in 2017 to 23% in 2024.<sup>68</sup> (For comparison, the corresponding figures for the independent sector are 73% and 68%, respectively.)

<sup>65</sup> [UK Government \(2023\)](#).

<sup>66</sup> [Department for Education \(2018\)](#), 58–59.

<sup>67</sup> Data from [UK Government \(2024, June 6\)](#).

<sup>68</sup> [British Council \(2017\)](#), 89; [British Council \(2024\)](#), 32.



## 5. Measures Taken to Boost MFL

Recognising the importance of MFL, successive Governments have taken a variety of measures to combat the decline in language learning.

Introduced in 2010, **English Baccalaureate (EBacc) entry** is a school performance measure incentivising the uptake, at GCSE, of a humanity subject (history or geography) and a language, in addition to compulsory maths, English and science. However, its effect on language uptake was short-lived (see Figure 1). While 81.7% of GCSE pupils entered the humanities pillar in 2023, only 44.7% took a language – a reduction on the previous year and part of an overall downward trend since 2013 (see Figure 4). This makes it highly unlikely that the DfE’s target of 90% of pupils entering all five EBacc pillars by 2025 will be achieved.

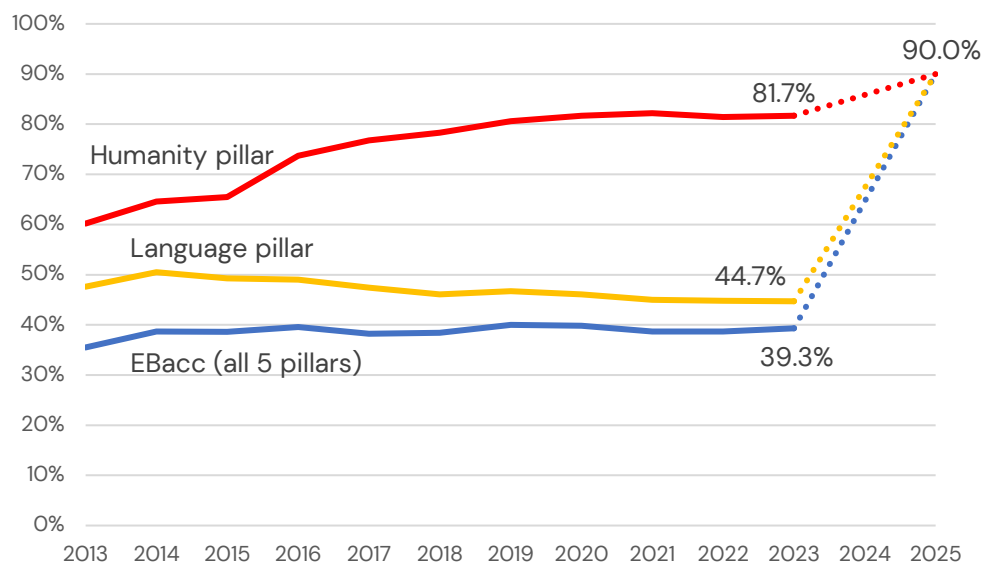


Figure 4: EBacc entry since 2013<sup>69</sup>

In a bid to make language GCSEs more attractive to pupils, the Johnson Government announced changes to the **exam specifications** for French, German and Spanish.<sup>70</sup> Teaching based on the new exam specifications will begin in 2024/25, with first exams in 2026, but the new specifications are unlikely to have a significant impact unless severe grading and pupil attitudes are addressed.

Several measures have been aimed at improving teacher supply. **Bursaries** of £25,000 are available for initial teacher training (ITT) in all languages, and **scholarships** of £27,000 for ITT in French, German and Spanish only.<sup>71</sup> Similar funding offers have been in place for over a decade but have failed to prevent current shortages. Additionally, non-UK language teachers choosing to teach in English schools are eligible for a £10,000 **international**

<sup>69</sup> [UK Government \(2024, February 1\)](#).

<sup>70</sup> [Department for Education \(2022\)](#).

<sup>71</sup> [Department for Education \(2023\)](#).



**relocation payment** to cover their costs, including visa fees and the immigration health surcharge (which did not apply for EU citizens before Brexit).<sup>72</sup> However, they must meet the minimum salary level set out on the Immigration Salary List in order to come and work in the UK (currently £30,000 for a qualified teacher outside London).<sup>73</sup>

**Early-career payments** of £2,000p.a. (or £3,000p.a. in certain “uplift areas” of England) were introduced for language teachers in their second, third or fourth year of teaching, but only for a single cohort who entered ITT in the 2020/21 academic year.<sup>74</sup> A **student loan reimbursement scheme** available to MFL teachers who work in certain local authority areas and who completed their ITT between 2013 and 2021 has been shown to have no significant effect on teacher retention.<sup>75</sup>

In order to tackle the ongoing decline of language learning at a more fundamental level, the Sunak Government, in 2023, launched the £14.9m three-year **Language Hubs** programme, designed to boost the quality of language lessons in English primary and secondary schools.<sup>76</sup> Run by the National Consortium for Languages Education (NCLE), it currently includes 15 secondary school hubs working with up to seven partner schools each.<sup>77</sup> A small rise in the number of modern language GCSEs sat in 2024 against last year’s figure (by 4.7%, from c. 596,500 to c. 624,600) indicates that this has helped to stem the overall decline. However, GCSEs in MFL still account for just 5.9% of all GCSEs taken in England, compared with 9.4% 20 years ago.

## 6. The Case of German

### Why learning German matters

Germany is one of the UK’s most important economic and diplomatic partners, as illustrated by the Foreign Secretary’s and the Prime Minister’s recent visits to Berlin soon after taking office. A shared conviction that “the time has come to take our bilateral relations to the next level”<sup>78</sup> will mean increased opportunities for speakers of German in the UK, as well as an increased need for German-language skills to put these ambitions into practice.

Around 97m people in Europe speak German as their first language, making it the most widely spoken native language in the EU (see Figure 5). Germany, the world’s third largest economy,<sup>79</sup> is the UK’s second largest trading partner – and the largest not to be English-

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<sup>72</sup> [Department for Education \(2024e\)](#).

<sup>73</sup> [UK Visas and Immigration \(2024\)](#).

<sup>74</sup> [Department for Education \(2024d\)](#).

<sup>75</sup> [CFE Research \(2023\)](#), 8.

<sup>76</sup> [Department for Education & British Council \(2023\)](#).

<sup>77</sup> [National Consortium for Languages Education \(2024\)](#).

<sup>78</sup> [Prime Minister’s Office \(2024\)](#).

<sup>79</sup> [World Bank \(2024\)](#).



speaking (see Figure 6). Also in the top 10 of the UK’s trading partners is Switzerland, where over 60% of the population speak German.<sup>80</sup>

Rank	Language	Native Speakers
1	German	97,000,000
2	French	81,000,000
3	Italian	65,000,000
4	Spanish	47,000,000
5	Polish	38,500,000

Figure 5: EU Languages by number of native speakers<sup>81</sup>

Rank	Country	£ billion	% of total trade
1	USA	310.8	17.6%
2	Germany	149.9	8.5%
3	Netherlands	118.6	6.7%
4	France	105.3	6.0%
5	China	90.2	5.1%
6	Ireland	89.3	5.1%
7	Spain	64.1	3.6%
8	Belgium	57.8	3.3%
9	Italy	50.9	2.9%
10	Switzerland	50.8	2.9%

Figure 6: UK top 10 trading partners by size<sup>82</sup>

Of the 25,000 German companies that do business with the UK, 2,500 have a UK subsidiary, employing some 450,000 people.<sup>83</sup> Despite post-Brexit challenges around increased border checks, an April 2024 survey found that 89% of responding German businesses with operations in the UK described their situation as positive or stable, and 91% expected their investment levels to increase or remain unchanged in the medium term.<sup>84</sup> There are growth areas of joint interest in technology, research and innovation,<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> [Swiss Federal Statistical Office \(2024\)](#).

<sup>81</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_languages\\_by\\_number\\_of\\_speakers\\_in\\_Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_number_of_speakers_in_Europe), accessed on 11 September 2024, based on *Ethnologue* (18<sup>th</sup> ed., 2015).

<sup>82</sup> [Department for Business & Trade \(2024\)](#).

<sup>83</sup> [German Industry UK \(2024\)](#).

<sup>84</sup> [German-British Chamber of Industry & Commerce \(2024\)](#), 4–7.

<sup>85</sup> [Prime Minister’s Office \(2024\)](#).



and the UK ranks second in the list of Germany's most important partners for international research collaboration.<sup>86</sup>

All of this creates an environment in which German linguistic and intercultural skills are relevant and important. Surveys have revealed German to be the most useful foreign language in the view of UK employers,<sup>87</sup> and the most in-demand foreign language in UK job ads,<sup>88</sup> where it also ranked as the second highest paid of all foreign languages.<sup>89</sup>

Since German is predominantly spoken in Europe, the steep drop in EU migration since Brexit (into negative net migration since 2021)<sup>90</sup> has impacted UK businesses' ability to hire native German speakers to a greater degree than their recruitment of French or Spanish speakers. The increased demand for UK graduates with German-language skills is illustrated by the number of joint-honours university degrees: of the UCAS-listed courses combining a language and another, non-linguistic subject,<sup>91</sup> 35% involved German.

Independent schools are clearly aware of the career opportunities and wider benefits of learning German: while only 39% of English state-funded schools still offer German at Key Stage 4, the corresponding figure for independent schools in England stands at 74%.<sup>92</sup> German language assistants are employed in 53% of independent schools, but in only 11% of state-funded schools.<sup>93</sup>

A comparative analysis of data for English state-funded schools in 2022–23 shows that schools which offer German at Key Stage 4 outperform those that do not on key indicators such as pupils' Attainment 8 scores (48.5 versus 42.3); Progress 8 measure (+0.12 versus -0.11); and EBacc APS (4.27 versus 3.63).<sup>94</sup> German-teaching schools also have higher shares of pupils who achieve strong EBacc results – grade 5 or above – in English (62% versus 53%) and Maths (52% versus 44%).

Correlation does not imply causation, and it is important to note that schools offering German also have a lower percentage of disadvantaged pupils (21%) than other schools (30%), indicating that their pupils come from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, research by the British Council suggests that schools in areas of social deprivation are less likely to offer a range of languages – and therefore, by implication, German. However, if education equality is to be achieved, the clear opportunities offered by

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<sup>86</sup> [UK Science & Innovation Network \(2024\)](#).

<sup>87</sup> [CBI \(2019\)](#), 27.

<sup>88</sup> [Rodríguez de Céspedes \(2022\)](#); [City Lit \(2024\)](#).

<sup>89</sup> [Mykhalevych \(2024\)](#).

<sup>90</sup> [Office for National Statistics \(2024\)](#).

<sup>91</sup> See footnote 42.

<sup>92</sup> [British Council \(2024\)](#), 23–24.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>94</sup> Based on final Key Stage 4 data downloaded from <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/download-data>; mainstream schools only. With no data on German provision available, schools with at least one GCSE entry in German in 2023 were deemed to be German-teaching by way of approximation.



German should be widely available to pupils in all state-funded schools, regardless of local socio-economic characteristics.

## The current situation of German in English state-funded schools

German has faced the steepest decline of all MFL over the last 20 years (see Figure 1, above) and is now under acute threat. Only 34,700 pupils in England took German GCSEs in 2024, equating to 0.6% of all GCSEs sat in England.<sup>95</sup> A mere 39% of state-funded secondaries in England even offer German at Key Stage 4.<sup>96</sup> At A level, fewer than 2,300 pupils in England sat German exams in 2024 – a share of 0.3% of all A level exams.<sup>97</sup>

The reasons for the plight of German are largely systemic. It is the most **harshly graded** modern language – and indeed the most difficult of all GSCE subjects (see Figure 2, above). It is essentially **no longer offered in English primary schools**, which mostly choose to teach French or Spanish; only 3% of primaries have provision in German at Key Stage 2 (age 7–11).<sup>98</sup> This makes it less likely for pupils to choose German when they move to secondary school. Additionally, 66% of English state-funded secondaries taught only a single language at Key Stage 3 (age 11–14) in 2023 – a **narrowing of the curriculum** that disproportionately affects German.<sup>99</sup>

A further structural disadvantage for German is the **growing number and size of multi-academy trusts** (MATs) operating more than one school. Currently, 89% of all academies (primary and secondary) are part of a MAT; all secondary schools are projected to be MAT academies by 2031 if current trends continue.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, MATs have been growing in size, from an average of 6.25 schools in 2019 to 8.1 schools in 2023. Larger trusts with 10 or more schools accounted for only 16% of all MATs in; by 2023, this figure had increased to 25%. There is ample anecdotal evidence of German being discontinued in MAT schools as trusts move towards a standardised MFL offer across all their schools (usually French, Spanish, or a combination of both). Recent examples include academies in the Northern Education Trust, Astrea Trust, Sandstone Trust, Outwood Trust and Bishop Hogarth Catholic Education Trust. Too often, these decisions are taken despite sufficient pupil numbers and strong exam results in German at the level of individual academies.

As far as pupils' perception of languages post-Brexit is concerned, German is at a disadvantage compared with French and Spanish because it is **almost entirely an EU language**. Since free movement ended on 1 January 2020, opportunities to study and work in German-speaking countries have been subject to new restrictions. UK nationals must now apply for a residence permit in Germany, which requires evidence of German-language proficiency, health insurance cover and sufficient financial means. Holders of

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<sup>95</sup> [Joint Council for Qualifications \(2024\)](#).

<sup>96</sup> Based on responses to [British Council \(2024\)](#), 23; given the profile of responding schools, the true figure is likely to be lower.

<sup>97</sup> [Joint Council for Qualifications \(2024\)](#).

<sup>98</sup> [British Council \(2024\)](#), 9.

<sup>99</sup> [McDonald \(2023\)](#).

<sup>100</sup> [Plaister \(2024\)](#).



many other (non-EU) passports must apply for a visa to enter the EU, even for short stays and travel. At the same time, funding opportunities for exchanges have decreased. These practical barriers have fuelled dismissive attitudes to German and diminished its perceived importance and usefulness.

### Measures taken to boost German

The Language Hubs programme, mentioned at the end of [Section 5](#), includes a dedicated German promotion project, delivered by the **Goethe-Institut** under the brand **GIMAGINE**.<sup>101</sup> Its aim is to increase the uptake of German by supporting teachers, pupils and schools. It offers teaching materials, continuing professional development and workshops for teachers, and coaching and mentoring through specially trained German Expert Mentors (GEMs). Pupils benefit from learning resources, events showcasing career opportunities with German, and youth mobility schemes. GIMAGINE offers targeted support for schools facing short-term recruitment issues by providing class or individual tuition and training for non-specialist teachers. Finally, the programme aims to raise awareness among school and trust leaders of the benefits of learning German.

In addition, bilateral government initiative **UK-German Connection** offers funding and practical support for school exchanges and partnership programmes, aimed both at teaching staff and pupils. On the policy side, the German Embassy convenes a special forum called **Making the Case for German**. It brings together a range of institutions and other stakeholders with the aim of raising awareness of the challenges facing German language learning in the UK.

These initiatives are hugely valuable in encouraging children and their parents that learning German is worthwhile, and in supporting teachers of German. However, enthusiastic pupils, parents and teachers will not be enough by themselves to reverse the decline in German-language teaching. This is partly because, as outlined above, curriculum decisions are increasingly taken by the heads of multi-academy trusts. And it is partly because issues such as adverse grading and teacher shortages cannot be addressed by individual schools. The future of German – and of other Modern Foreign Languages – will therefore depend to a large extent on Government policy decisions. That is why the outcome of the Francis Review is so important.

## 7. Where Next?

Given the diverse range of benefits of language learning (see [Section 2](#)), which are of immediate relevance to the Government's declared missions (see [Section 3](#)), it is concerning that languages education in English state-funded schools is in a state of decline (see [Section 4](#)). Measures taken to reverse this trend (see [Section 5](#)) show that the need for action has been recognised, but the existing measures fall short of

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<sup>101</sup> [British Council \(n.d.\)](#).



addressing some of the root causes. The situation is particularly acute for German (see [Section 6](#)).

In order to secure the future of language teaching in English state-funded schools, and to eliminate the specific disadvantages faced by German, the Government will need to ensure that MFL form part of a broad and rich curriculum; that grading standards for languages are in line with those of other subjects; that school and trust leaders and careers advisors are aware of the clear and lifelong benefits of language learning; and that qualified teachers are available to teach languages.

In this context, the current Curriculum and Assessment Review (see [Section 1](#)) represents a threat as well as an opportunity. If MFL are further sidelined in the curriculum and assessment inequalities between MFL and other subjects persist, the downward trajectory of GCSE and A level pupils choosing a language is likely to gather pace. At the same time, the inclusion of MFL in a broader national curriculum that applies to both maintained schools and academies has the potential to reverse 20 years of decline. The Government's decision to make EBacc language entry a headline performance measure is a welcome step, but more will need to be done to ensure that the benefits and opportunities offered by languages are available to all. For example, a broader range of meaningful, rigorous and high-value pathways in languages, particularly post-16, would help more young people to succeed in MFL, raising standards across the curriculum and helping learners to thrive in their chosen career.

The Review has now launched its call for evidence, which closes on 22 November 2024, and has been tasked with delivering an interim report in early 2025. Time is therefore of the essence. We hope that this paper will provide a valuable factual background, both for interested parties engaging with the Review and for the Review Group itself.



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