

AFLS response to DfES consultation document: Language Learning

A Summary

The AFLS response noted with satisfaction the consultation document's (green paper) guiding ambitions on several points, the main cogent of which are:

- all primary school pupils will be able to study a language by 2012;
- the creation of specialist language colleges (200 by 2005)
- more opportunity to learn languages for young people and adults in FE, HE and work-based training.
- greater recognition for competence in foreign languages

AFLS expressed misgivings with regard to implementation, arguing against the principle of optionality (giving primary school children or their parents? the choice of whether they want to study a language at Key Stage 2).

- choice diminishes the perceived importance of languages in a multilingual and multicultural society
 - it would impede continuity between primary and secondary education
 - no clear indication as to how the teachers are to be found/trained, bearing in mind that previous attempts to introduce foreign languages into primary schools foundered for lack of qualified staff

While the consultation document defines the problems facing foreign language teaching at Key Stage 4, the proposals put forward, although undoubtedly well intentioned may well result in further falls in numbers of students taking languages after the age of 16. AFLS argues that:

- the possibility of opting out of any language teaching at 14 sends all the wrong signals regarding the importance of languages in the curriculum
 - the right signals are that languages are important in the job market for a wide range of professions
 - the 'languages for all' has not been a success but perhaps needs more time
 - GCSE demotivates students by encouraging rote learning about mundane topics

and points to the highly undesirable knock-on effects for HE.

The full can be found at:

<http://www.unl.ac.uk/sals/afls/news.htm>

Joint funding bodies review of research assessment: invitation to contribute (November 2002)

Response of the AFLS (Association for French Language Studies)

This response has been co-ordinated by the Research Committee of the AFLS, with input from various other members of AFLS based in the UK. The Association for French Language Studies was founded over twenty years ago and its aims are to promote research and teaching in H.E relating to the French language. Most of our members are concerned with *both* research into aspects of the French language (including its acquisition as a second language) *and* practical French language teaching, though some are more involved with one than the other. AFLS produces the *Journal of French Language Studies* (published by CUP) and the *Cahiers AFLS*. Between 1992 and 2001, it also produced fourteen edited volumes in the series *Current Issues in University Language Teaching*, co-published by CILT (the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research). Among its other activities, the AFLS organises annual international conferences (in France, Belgium and Quebec, as well as the UK), which draw participants from many different countries and have further enhanced the international reputation of French Language Studies in the UK.

We are very much in general agreement with the response submitted by the AUPHF, but feel that an additional response from AFLS is appropriate, given that certain issues affect our members in a distinctive manner. AFLS membership includes a number of Professors and Heads of Department, but the vast majority of our members are not members of AUPHF. Many of our members belong to Departments that were entered under European Studies, rather than French. Given also the serious decline in the number of students taking French (and other languages) at school, it is particularly important to examine the position of French and the other Modern Languages in the broader national context.

1. The representation of French Language Studies on RAE panels

Notwithstanding the possibility of using advisers external to the RAE Panels, French Language Studies has been gravely under-represented and insufficiently visible on the French and European Studies panels. This situation is increasingly viewed as unacceptable by our members. FLS covers a vast range, applying to

French the methods and concepts from virtually every linguistic sub-discipline. It is far more difficult for a specialist in one of these sub-disciplines to make an informed judgement of work in a very different area, than it is for a specialist in French literature of one century to do the same for a different period. To give just one specific example, the concepts, data and methods used in Syntax are *radically* different from those used in Phonetics.

This problem could be rectified more easily if there were a more fluid approach to the assessment exercise, with appropriate and properly resourced small sub-panels set up to deal with particular areas of expertise, instead of the rigid 5-yearly panel that has existed hitherto. As suggested in 18 (a) of the Invitation to Contribute, there is indeed a case for the funding councils and the RAE to adopt similar assessment processes to those already in use by the research councils. One beneficial effect of this could be the involvement of a broader and more representative cross-section of experts in the assessment of research. There would of course have to be some mechanism for ensuring the comparability of judgements across and within disciplines.

2. The need to enhance the profile of language teaching and of associated pedagogic research

One unintended, but highly damaging, side-effect of the dominance of the RAE has been that both the production of language teaching materials and associated pedagogic research have been downgraded in recent years, since they have been considered not to constitute research proper. A number of excellent academics in French, whose specialisms have been in language teaching and pedagogic research, have been demoralised by being excluded from the RAE, some to the extent of retiring or withdrawing from the profession. Those who have remained have often had to shift their focus into other areas in order to be entered for the RAE. And yet innovative language teaching, materials production and pedagogic research are all vital to the health of French (and other Modern Languages) in Higher Education. It is already extremely disturbing that many French Departments or Sections in UK universities have no specialist in French Language Studies - a situation that would be regarded as unthinkable in Modern Languages Departments in continental Europe. Innovative language teaching in H.E is also needed to ensure continuing improvements in the teaching of Modern Languages in schools and further education.

We would suggest two ways forward, in addition to enhancing the representation of French Language Studies on the relevant RAE panel(s). First, the status of pedagogic work in language teaching should be reviewed again. There is a good case for considering that at least some of this work, such as an advanced reference grammar, is at least equal in status to, for example, an annotated edition of a well-known novel or play intended for undergraduates, or a textbook on aspects of contemporary France. In any case, well in advance of the next RAE, there must be clear guidelines as to what types of pedagogic materials and research will be given serious consideration on their merits, rather than being dismissed out of hand. Second, we would favour a move to consider teaching alongside research 'in the round' (as suggested in paragraph 15 of the AUPHF document).

3. A single panel for Modern Languages

Most of our members work in Departments that were entered for either French or European Studies in recent RAEs, and it has been pointed out (for example, in the AUPHF document) that various discrepancies arose between these two panels, and between French and other language panels. These discrepancies apparently included the treatment of pedagogic research and materials and the 'flagging' of strong research areas. We consider that there is a clear case for a single Modern Languages panel in future RAEs. More unites than divides researchers in the various Modern Languages, and to be combined under one panel would promote solidarity and give the field greater public recognition at a time when this is sorely needed in the UK. In order to ensure adequate coverage, the panel would draw on sub-panels (with adequate non-UK representation) providing subject expertise. European Studies should arguably be reserved for Departments that specialise in political, economic, legal or social aspects of Europe.

4. Mode of assessment and the evaluation of excellence

We are in broad agreement with the AUPHF document: expert review, together with some quantitative indicators, seems the most appropriate mode of assessment. However, it is crucial that the criteria for 'excellence' should be made more transparent and include at least some objective elements. Crude citation metrics are clearly unsuitable for Modern Languages. In the sciences, the sheer bulk of citations provides some safeguard against abusive practices (such as the casual citation of one's colleagues or friends), but this bulk does not exist in Modern Languages. What should really count is the extent to which a piece of

research has had a positive impact in the field, as demonstrated, for example, by other researchers making extensive use of it in their own work. Submissions to future RAEs could include documentary evidence of this kind of impact. Reviews of a book are, of course, subject to various types of influence and can at best offer only an informed guess as to the impact a book will have. On the other hand, extracts from the published work of other scholars who have made extensive use of the findings in the same book would provide a good indication of the book's actual impact. This provides another argument in favour of lengthening the period that is assessed in any RAE, since the *actual* impact of research can be judged only once the work has been circulated and read.

A closely related issue is the distinction between 'national' and 'international' excellence. It is perhaps curious that the vast majority of RAE panels have included only academics based in the UK, and there is at least a danger that 'international' excellence has become a category predominantly decided nationally, i.e. internally within the UK. This anomaly should be rectified in future exercises by, for example, (i) more frequent use of overseas expert advisers to panels (for Modern Languages, of course, these would not necessarily come from the United States); and (ii) the systematic use of documentary evidence concerning the actual impact of the work internationally (as demonstrated, for example, by extensive reference to the work).

Aidan Coveney, Chair of the Research Committee of the AFLS

Summary of AUPHF response

- The response begins by noting the dynamism and interdisciplinarity of French Studies.
- Despite good RAE ratings, there is a feeling that French has been disadvantaged by the RAE process, *inter alia* but perhaps particularly colleagues working in language and linguistics.
- Several issues surrounding fairness, feedback and transparency are raised.
- The RAE process is seen by some as contributing to the climate of 'disenchantment' within the discipline.
- The 5 year cycle can prove to be unhelpful. It tends to cause print bottlenecks every few years and to exert a negative influence on career developments. A longer interval, say 7 or 8 years with overlap would help take into account the changing personal and professional circumstances

which limit research productivity as well as encouraging the undertaking of major projects which might be not finished within a quinquennial cycle

- New forms of assessment. The response pleads for a staggered, periodic model based on a genuinely representative peer review.
- Any model that fails to take account of the complementarity of good teaching and good research is to be deplored.

For a full version: <http://www.bris.ac.uk/auphf/>

L’AFLS a besoin de vos collègues
Invitez-les à faire partie de l’AFLS

Cher...

L’AVENIR DU FRANÇAIS EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE, C’EST VOUS!

Dans un contexte national maussade, il serait à désespérer de l’avenir du français en Grande-Bretagne sans vous, enseignant et chercheur. La vitalité du français dans notre pays dépend de votre enthousiasme, de votre créativité et de votre talent !

Face aux pressions et demandes croissantes pourtant, il est impossible de faire face et le succès de votre recherche et de votre enseignement doit reposer sur une communauté académique étroitement liée. Voilà pourquoi, l’Association for French Language Studies (AFLS) a besoin de vous !

L’AVENIR DU FRANÇAIS EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE, C’EST L’AFLS !

L’AFLS offre depuis plus de vingt ans aux enseignants et chercheurs de l’enseignement supérieur un réseau intellectuel et humain sans pareil et s’implique dans les débats qui vous préoccupent: représentation à l’AUPHF et au Subject Centre, prise de position dans les débats actuels (RAE, green paper...) ! Pourquoi encore tarder à en faire partie ? L’affiliation à notre dynamique communauté vous offre :

- un **abonnement au Journal of French Language Studies (JFLS)** publié par CUP : un journal de renommée internationale qu’il ne faut plus présenter !

- **Les Cahiers**, qui deux fois par an, vous offrent des articles pédagogiques de qualité (peer-reviewed) et vous tiennent au courant de la vie et des engagements de l’association ;

- notre **Research Inventory** pour favoriser les collaborations entre universitaires dans les mondes francophone et anglosaxon ;

- des **tarifs préférentiels pour notre conférence annuelle**, organisée en alternance dans un pays francophone et en Grande-Bretagne (2000 : Québec, 2001 : Louvain-la-Neuve, 2002 : Saint-Andrews, 2003 : Tours ; 2004 : Birmingham)

- la **priorité pour nos ateliers** organisés régulièrement tout au long de l’année ;

- un soutien intellectuel et financier pour vos étudiants de troisième cycle, grâce aux **journées de formation** et aux **bourses**.

Mais faites-vous une idée par vous-même en visitant notre site internet !

L’AVENIR DU FRANÇAIS EN GRANDE-BRETAGNE, C’EST NOUS !

Nous espérons de tout cœur vous accueillir dans notre association en 2003 !

Avec nos salutations collégiales cordiales !

Au nom du Comité de l’AFLS,

Dr Emmanuelle Labeau

Publicity Officer

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