



Association for  
German Studies in  
Great Britain and Ireland



14 November, 2023

FAO: Professor George Boyne, Principal and Vice Chancellor, University of Aberdeen

Dear Professor Boyne

As President of the Association for German Studies of Great Britain and Ireland (AGS) and Chair of Women in German Studies (WIGS), we are writing on behalf of our members to express our concern about the proposed closure of Modern Languages degree programmes at your university. We are, of course, aware of the multiple financial pressures on the HE sector in Scotland, but it is clear that they require creative, positive responses to the needs of students, employers and society more broadly. Degree programmes that are closed in response to short term pressures are hard or impossible to reinstate in the long term: once they are gone, they are gone. We would therefore like to offer our strong and public support for the Modern Languages programmes at Aberdeen, and for the excellent teachers and researchers who run them, and would be happy to contribute to any process that seeks to establish a long-term and sustainable future for them.

The profile and reputation of Aberdeen as one of Scotland's Ancient Universities rests to a great extent on the internationalism of its teaching and scholarship and the pursuit of excellence in all areas of endeavour. The university's own strategic vision acknowledges the necessity for thinking across borders, diversity and openness. Full Modern Languages programmes bring a specific set of qualities to the university community that cannot be reproduced in cross-department courses in language instruction, as important as these are: scholars engage in cross-disciplinary research and students gain perspectives and skills that are unique, complementing those that can be gained from other disciplines. Simply reducing Modern Language study to the acquisition of vaguely defined 'language skills' is a damagingly reductive view of learning and scholarship in this area. Modern Languages programmes that include 'content' modules focused on culture and history are by their nature truly interdisciplinary programmes that bring together the best of the humanities and, as stated in the QAA benchmark: "help students to understand the diversity and complexity of the world both past and present, how different perspectives on the world are articulated, and where common ground for resolving global issues might be found."

We note that colleagues in Modern Languages make indispensable contributions to interdisciplinary postgraduate teaching at Aberdeen: the MLitt in Film and Visual Culture and the MLitt in Literatures, Environments and Places, as well as to the MSc in Cultural and Creative Communication and the MSc Translating and Interpreting Studies. Such programmes are either made undeliverable or, at best, are significantly impoverished in the absence of the specific expertise brought by Modern Languages scholars and the specific skills and interests of students with a Modern Languages background. The

loss of Modern Languages programmes thus has broader repercussions across an institution, both in the interdisciplinary intellectual contribution that these colleagues and students make to them and in the potential loss of future income at a time when Scottish institutions are increasingly reliant on postgraduate fees. This problem requires the kind of long-term vision and collaborative work that we have seen at other institutions in Scotland when confronted with similar circumstances.

One of the signatories to this letter (Prof Peter Davies) has been External Examiner for the pre-Honours German programme at Aberdeen. He would like to stress how impressed he always was with the innovative teaching across the board, the stimulating work produced by the students, and the extraordinary commitment of colleagues to creating and sustaining a sense of community amongst the students.

We note that the closing of Modern Languages programmes at Aberdeen does a disservice to the needs of the community in Scotland and works against the stated ambitions of Scottish governments since devolution. It is becoming ever harder to study a Modern Language to a high level beyond the Central Belt, making it ever harder to match the needs of businesses and organisations that employ Modern Languages graduates or to recruit locally trained graduate language teachers to support the language-learning ambitions of the Curriculum for Excellence. The recent British Academy report [‘Languages Learning in Higher Education: Granular Trends’](#) warns of emerging ‘cold spots’ - areas where language degree courses do not exist – in the UK. This has implications for Widening Participation, since students from WP backgrounds are less likely to be able to afford to travel long distances to go to university, and further underlines the importance of Aberdeen for language provision in Scotland.

Studying a language subject to graduate level is a rich, creative and intellectually demanding process, and aside from the knowledge they gain and the skills they develop, graduates in Modern Languages have language skills well beyond those that they could attain on lower-level ‘language for credit’ courses. The excellent employment prospects of Modern Languages graduates are a sign of how employers value the skills they gain.

For all these reasons, short-termist responses to specific conditions cause long-term damage. In similar circumstances in recent years, other equivalent Scottish universities, have, in consultation with staff, found creative and sustainable solutions to immediate financial pressures; these Modern Languages departments are now flourishing, and are contributing in new ways to innovative, interdisciplinary teaching and research across these institutions. There is [concrete evidence](#) that regional mentoring and student ambassador programmes can boost languages uptake; perhaps, instead of cutting the language department, Aberdeen should be looking at implementing some of the British Academy’s [‘easy-to-implement initiatives’](#) that can boost uptake in languages and strengthen the pipeline of language study’. We would therefore encourage you to show confidence in your Modern Languages colleagues and their commitment, creativity and understanding of the context in which they teach and research, and to work together with them in developing a sustainable future for these irreplaceable disciplines.

With best wishes,

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