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Language matters

The supply of and demand for
UK born and educated academic
researchers with skills in
languages other than English

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Prepared for the British Academy

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Summary

This study for the British Academy investigates evidence for the role of language skills in academic research in the humanities and social sciences in UK universities. This follows on from the British Academy's earlier work on the state of language learning in primary and secondary education in the UK, and its concerns about declining abilities of UK born and educated individuals to use language skills. The particular focus of this study is on evidence about UK born and educated researchers with skills in languages other than English. We investigated four questions:

1. What is the demand for language skills for academic research¹ in UK universities?

- 1.1 What are the levels of reliance on language skills?
 - High - a significant or substantial amount of research requires a language other than English
 - Medium - some research may require skills in other languages; most can be conducted in English
 - Low - research is usually conducted in English; skills in other languages may be needed for participation in research activities abroad
- 1.2 What languages?
- 1.3 How do research areas (or departments) differ?
- 1.4 How do different universities (Russell Group/other) differ?
- 1.5 Has this changed over time?

2. What is the supply of language skills for academic research in UK universities?

- 2.1 Is it high or low in comparison to the supply of researchers with those language skills from other countries?
- 2.2 What languages?
- 2.3 What level of skills?
- 2.4 Has this changed over time?

3. Is there a mismatch between supply and demand?

- 3.1 Is there oversupply and/or undersupply?

¹ Throughout this report we use the term “research” to mean postgraduate research in the humanities and social sciences in UK universities.

- 3.2 If so, for which languages?
- 3.3 Is the gap getting bigger or smaller?

4. If there is a mismatch, what are the reasons and the consequences?

- 4.1 What are the reasons?
- 4.2 What are the consequences for academic quality?
- 4.3 What are the consequences for academic job/career prospects?

Findings from this study

This study was tasked with exploring the evidence on language skills for university research in the humanities and social sciences, and analysing that evidence rigorously in order to inform reliable interpretations. The relationship between use of languages and research is influenced by very many interacting factors, some of which exist outside the universities. Within the time and resources available, this study has therefore begun to identify several relevant lines of enquiry and has generated new quantitative and qualitative evidence. We used four main sources of evidence: a selective literature review (see References); a survey of heads of all 5* and 5 Research Assessment Exercise 2001-rated² UK humanities and social sciences departments (Chapter 1 and Appendix A give details of our methods and response rate); individual interviews with senior academics and others (see Appendix B); and four case studies (see Chapter 4).

The evidence we found and analysed enables some aspects of the four questions to be answered with confidence. For the other aspects, the evidence we studied is mixed, patchy, or otherwise not yet sufficient to reach a confident answer. We therefore indicate below which lines of enquiry it would be important to pursue further, in order to strengthen the evidence base available to answer the full set of questions.

Main findings

This study has generated a number of important findings about the relationship between skills in languages other than English and postgraduate research in the humanities and social sciences in the UK. Table 1 below lists a summary of these findings, indicating for each one the strength of evidence that we have found to support it. That is followed by Table 2 below, in which we have provided an approximate (and tentative) fit of the strongly evidenced findings to the organisations who have responsibilities for/or interests in those issues. The intention is that the British Academy uses the table as it deems appropriate, in taking forward the Language Matters discussions with those organisations and other interested organisations.

² The results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise were published on 18 December 2008, too late for this study.

Table 1 Main findings from the study, with indicator of evidence

	Main findings <i>Note: “research” here means postgraduate research in the humanities and social sciences undertaken in UK universities</i>	Evidence
1.1	<p>Is the demand for language skills for academic research in UK universities high or low?</p> <p>There is mixed evidence about the level of demand for researchers with language skills other than English.</p> <p>A survey of heads of 5*/5 departments mainly shows that there is no evidence for a changing demand in language skills in research; where there is such evidence, it is greater for increasing demand than for decreasing demand.</p>	<p>Needs further investigation</p> <p>Needs further investigation</p>
1.2	<p>For what languages is there demand for language skills for academic research in UK universities?</p> <p>The languages in the greatest demand across the greatest range of subjects and areas of study are (as well as English) the major modern European languages: German, French, Spanish, Italian (and to a lesser extent Russian).</p> <p>In some fields of research an indicator of demand for researchers with languages is the existence of continuing opportunities to undertake research using non-European languages such as Chinese, Arabic, and other Asian and Middle Eastern languages.</p> <p>There is some evidence of growth in demand for an increasingly diverse range of languages courses at university language centres.</p>	<p>Strong</p> <p>Strong</p> <p>Needs further investigation</p>
1.3	<p>Does the demand for language skills for academic research in UK universities differ between departments?</p> <p>There is strong evidence that research in language departments is highly reliant on language skills. The language dependency of research in non-language departments is also relatively high.</p>	<p>Strong</p>
1.4	<p>Does the demand for language skills for academic research in UK universities differ between types of universities?</p> <p>Survey results suggest that there is no strong difference in the reliance on language skills for research between Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities. There is some evidence that language departments in non-Russell Group universities experience difficulty in recruiting research students.</p>	<p>Needs further investigation</p>
1.5	<p>Has the demand for language skills for academic research in UK universities changed over time?</p> <p>An indicator of demand for (and supply of) researchers with</p>	<p>Needs further</p>

	language skills in some fields (which does not take account of the nationality and place of education of the researcher) is an apparent increase over time in the amount and proportion of PhD research in some fields that need languages other than English.	investigation
2.1	<p>Is the supply of language skills for academic research in UK universities high or low in comparison to the supply of researchers with those language skills from other countries?</p> <p>The supply of UK born and educated university researchers possessing the competence to engage with research materials in languages other than English is low. Supply is positively associated with researchers whose UK secondary school education included languages. The supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with language skills necessary for undertaking research is high.</p>	Strong
2.2	<p>For what level of skills is there supply of language skills for academic research in UK universities?</p> <p>The supply of UK born and educated researchers with the required level of reading and speaking skills in languages other than English is small. The supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with the required level of reading and speaking skills is high. The supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with the required level of writing skills in English is mixed.</p>	Strong
2.3	<p>For what languages is there supply of language skills for academic research in UK universities?</p> <p>The supply of UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills is insufficient. The supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills including English is sufficient.</p> <p>Evidence for the supply of researchers to undertake research using other European languages, and Asian and Middle Eastern languages is mixed.</p>	Strong Needs further investigation
2.4	<p>Has the supply of language skills for academic research in UK universities changed over time?</p> <p>The trends are (a) a decreasing supply of UK born and educated researchers with language skills and (b) an increasing supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with language skills; (c) a continuing supply of researchers using other European languages, and Asian and middle eastern languages.</p> <p>Another indicator of (demand for and) supply of researchers with language skills in some fields (which does not take account of the nationality and place of education of the researcher) is an apparent increase over time in the amount and proportion of PhD research in</p>	Strong Needs further investigation

	some fields that need languages other than English.	
3	Mismatch between demand and supply:	
3.1	Is there oversupply/undersupply of language skills for research?	
3.2	If so, for which languages?	
3.3	Is the gap getting bigger or smaller?	
	<p>These are the central questions of the study. There is consistent evidence that the overall supply of UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills is insufficient to meet the overall demand, and declining.</p> <p>This undersupply affects research in many non-language disciplines as well as research in language disciplines.</p> <p>There is consistent evidence that the overall supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills is sufficient to meet the overall demand.</p> <p>The mismatch between demand for and supply of researchers with language skills may differ between universities, with Russell Group universities relatively more able to attract researchers with the required language skills.</p>	<p>Strong</p> <p>Strong</p> <p>Strong</p> <p>Needs further investigation</p>
4.1	<p>If there is a mismatch, what are the reasons?</p> <p>There are three main reasons for the undersupply of UK born and educated researchers with language skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language teaching and learning in schools • dominance of English • socio-economic status of students 	Strong
4.1	<p>Other reasons may also contribute to the undersupply of UK born and educated researchers with language skills, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pressure to complete research studies within a time limit (reducing time available to develop language skills); • language teaching and learning in universities • research funding availability and terms and conditions • value placed on language learning and language courses relative to other subjects 	Needs further investigation
4.2	<p>If there is a mismatch, what are the consequences for academic quality?</p> <p>A consequence for UK born and educated researchers not possessing language skills is to restrict the research to (a) reliance on the available English translations of the relevant primary and secondary sources in other languages; and/or to (b) selection of research topics that avoid the need for non-English language material.</p>	Needs further investigation

	<p>A consequence of non-UK born and educated researchers increasingly undertaking research is to restrict the quality of the research if they have (a) significantly less familiarity with the British social/historical/cultural contexts relevant to the research and (b) less facility in writing in English.</p> <p>On the other hand, a culturally and linguistically diverse research community is perceived as intellectually stimulating for students and researchers.</p>	<p>Needs further investigation</p> <p>Needs further investigation</p>
4.2	A consequence over time of UK born and educated researchers working in more [language-]restricted research areas may be to limit their contribution to and influence over scholarly developments in some fields.	Needs further investigation
4.2	A consequence of research training that avoids use of research materials in languages other than English, e.g. for courses badged “international”, may be that UK born and educated researchers increasingly see language skills as unnecessary.	Needs further investigation
4.3	<p>If there is a mismatch, what are the consequences for academic job/career prospects?</p> <p>If it is correct that (a) increasingly PhD research in some fields needs language skills and (b) increasingly UK born and educated researchers lack these skills, a consequence may be that UK born and educated researchers are becoming a declining proportion of the PhDs awarded in those fields.</p>	Needs further investigation
4.3	A consequence for UK born and educated researchers who lack language skills other than English is that they are less able to participate in international research projects as researchers and/or supervisors; or to engage in other international research activities (such as conferences and publication in other languages)	Strong
4.3	A consequence of an undersupply of UK born and educated researchers equipped to undertake language-dependant research, together with an adequate supply of well-qualified researchers from elsewhere, is that the UK born and educated researchers will find it increasingly hard to compete for research posts and research funding, both in UK universities and elsewhere.	Strong
4.3	A consequence for UK born and educated researchers with limited language skills seeking work in other professional sectors (such as school teaching, international institutions and commercial professional services) may be that they or their potential employers need to invest in significant further language training for them.	Needs further investigation

4.3	Some senior academics suspect that a possible consequence of fewer UK born and educated researchers with language skills is the widening gap and opportunities between groups of a different socio-economic status, as British researchers with necessary language skills are recruited mainly from independent schools and study predominantly at Russell Group universities	Needs further investigation
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We have attempted in Table 2 below, an approximate (and tentative) fit of the strongly evidenced main findings to the organisations who have responsibilities for/or interests in those issues. The intention is that the British Academy uses the table as it deems appropriate, in taking forward the Language Matters discussions with those organisations and other interested organisations.

Table 2 Main findings for interested organisations

[DIUS: Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills; RC: Research Councils UK; UUK: Universities UK]

		Main findings with strong evidence thus far
		<i>Note: “research” here means postgraduate research in the humanities and social sciences undertaken in UK universities</i>
DIUS	1.2	The languages for research in the greatest demand across the greatest range of subjects and areas of study are (other than English) the major European languages: German, French, Spanish, Italian (and to a lesser extent Russian).
RC	1.2	An indicator of demand for researchers with language skills in some fields is the continuing opportunities to undertake research using non-European languages such as Chinese, Arabic, and other Asian and middle eastern languages.
DIUS	2.1	The supply of UK born and educated researchers possessing language skills other than English necessary for undertaking research on a wide range of topics and areas of study is declining.
DIUS UUK	2.1	The supply of UK born and educated university researchers possessing the competence to read and engage with research materials in languages other than English is declining.
RC UUK	2.1; 2.3	The supply of well-qualified non-UK born and educated researchers with language skills necessary for undertaking research is increasing, for all the languages relevant to the research.
RC UUK	2.2	The supply of UK born and educated researchers with the required level of reading and speaking skills in languages other than English is small and declining.
RC	2.2	The supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with the required level of writing skills in English is insufficient.
RC	2.4	Increasingly there is a supply of PhD researchers in some fields who are

UUK		using language skills other than English.
DIUS UUK	3	<p>There is consistent evidence on three aspects of the mismatch between demand and supply:</p> <p>the overall supply of UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills is insufficient to meet the overall demand, and declining;</p> <p>this undersupply affects research in many non-language disciplines as well as research in language disciplines;</p> <p>the overall supply of non-UK born and educated researchers with modern European language skills is sufficient to meet the overall demand.</p>
DIUS UUK	4.1	<p>There are three main reasons for the undersupply of UK born and educated researchers with language skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language teaching and learning in schools • dominance of English • socio-economic status of students
UUK	4.2	A consequence of UK born and educated researchers not possessing language skills is to restrict the research to (a) reliance on the available English translations of the relevant primary and secondary sources in other languages; and/or to (b) selection of topics that avoid the need for non-English language material.
DIUS UUK	4.3	A consequence for UK born and educated researchers who lack language skills other than English is that they are less able to participate in international research projects as researchers and/or supervisors; or to engage in other international research activities (conferences, publication in other languages, etc.)
DIUS	4.3	A consequence of an undersupply of UK born and educated researchers equipped to undertake language-dependant research, together with an adequate supply of well-qualified researchers from elsewhere, is that the UK born and educated researchers will find it increasingly hard to compete for research posts and research funding, both in UK universities and elsewhere.

Next steps

Further investigation is required in relation to (a) evidence on demand for researchers with language skills, and (b) evidence about the causes and consequences of any mismatches between supply and demand. We therefore suggest some further enquiries and sources of evidence that would strengthen the assessment of the range and extent of concerns:

- researchers at earlier stages in their careers (UK and non-UK born and educated), to explore which factors are most salient to them in choosing whether to undertake research careers, how they identify research topics, what factors persuade or deter them

to consider areas or topics, how they decide which university to aim for, the influence that research facilities and supervision, language training and other services have in their decision and attitudes, whether they seek to develop (additional) language skills, what sources of funding they consider, their knowledge of and interest in international research activities; their interest in non-research or non-academic work.

- university leaders and senior managers, to explore what factors internally and externally influence their research and recruitment strategies, their assessment of supply and demand factors in research
- research funders, to explore what factors affect their design of funding programmes and their ways of assessing the “paybacks” from their investments
- research commissioners, to explore what value those procuring projects and evaluating bids (for example at the EC, OECD, WHO) place on language skills, and whether there are also other intangibles (such as awareness of other cultural contexts) that are perceived to be associated with other-language proficiency
- former university researchers now working in other sectors, to explore their career paths, motivations and reasons for their career decisions, the relevance of language skills to their careers, the most salient influences on their progress
- employers outside the universities, in the public and private sectors, UK, EU, US and elsewhere, to explore the economic and social implications of possession of language skills for a range of professional and occupational roles, the fitness of postgraduate researchers to take up employment opportunities on offer
- research libraries, to explore trends in UK and international libraries’ acquisitions of non-English language materials, using journal subscriptions (paper and e-journals as well as free material) as one crucial indicator of the languages used for scholarly communication and trends in the development (growth and decline) of disciplines and areas of study
- undergraduates and postgraduates who choose to study language subjects for their main degree courses, to discover whether they already possess some of the language skills relevant for their course
- postgraduate students who choose to study non-language subjects that involve knowledge of languages other than English, for their main courses, to discover whether they already possess some of the language skills relevant to their course
- schools in different localities, and that tend to send students to different universities, to discover what approaches and attitudes and cultures in different schools tend to influence the students’ choices
- a range of higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere, to discover what correlations exist between staff from outside the UK and international research grants.

Analysis of evidence from this wider spread of sources would transform the robustness of understanding of the place of language skills in society. Funders from different sectors might want to support these studies jointly with the BA.