CIOL Response to UK Government

Curriculum and Assessment Review Consultation

November 2024

This review of the UK school curriculum presents a vital opportunity to address longstanding challenges in our education system, while building on its established strengths. Drawing on research and practical experience, we propose a comprehensive approach to reform which places languages back at the heart of an updated UK curriculum to promote inclusion and breadth of learning and opportunity. Q10

At the core of our concerns is the decline in teaching of languages, despite clear evidence of the importance of languages to the UK's economic and cultural future. The current system, while serving some students well, creates barriers for many others - particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional learning needs. We cannot afford to continue losing the bilingual and multilingual skills of potential future linguists at a time when global connections are more important than ever. Q11

Crucially, reforms must address the clear disparities in educational outcomes based on socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and special educational needs. The current system creates local and regional 'cold spots' where certain languages simply aren't available to some students. This sort of ‘postcode lottery’ isn't just an issue of fairness - it's holding back our national linguistic potential. Q12

We strongly recommend making languages a core part of education through to age 16, while also creating flexible pathways for students to begin language study at 16+. This approach is supported by recent opinion research showing strong public backing for compulsory language learning. Q22

However, language teaching also needs fundamental reform - moving away from an excessive focus on the written word and towards practical oral communication skills and cultural understanding. The evidence shows that when languages are taught in ways that connect with students' lives and future careers, engagement and achievement improve dramatically. Q41b

Language assessment requires particular attention. The current reliance on end-of-course examinations disadvantages many students and fails to measure the full range of language skills. We advocate for a more balanced approach incorporating coursework, oral presentations, cultural projects, and practical communication tasks. This isn't about making exams 'easier', it's about better promoting the communicative skills that really matter in the real world – especially the spoken word. Q36/41a

Technology has an important role to play and could enormously enhance traditional language teaching. App-based learning plays to the strengths of many young learners and provides huge opportunities for reinforcement and extension of vocabulary. But the evidence also shows that increased classroom contact time - combined with well-structured independent learning - produces the best results. Schools need enough staff, proper resources and Language Assistants to make this all work effectively. Q41c/53

The broader curriculum context is crucial. We would support moves toward studying a wider range of subjects to age 19, in line with successful international models like the International Baccalaureate. However, this must be done thoughtfully to maintain depth while increasing breadth. The artificial divide between 'academic' and 'vocational' subjects also needs to be broken down, recognising that both pathways require high-quality spoken language skills - the ability to communicate is equally valuable whether pursuing academic research or diplomacy, business and trade. Q27

The economic case for reform of languages teaching and assessment is compelling. UK businesses consistently report that lack of language skills holds back international trade. Moreover, employers increasingly value humanities alongside STEM subjects, recognising that future success requires both technical and cultural understanding. The government's own data shows that almost 80% of the UK economy derives from services - sectors that depend heavily on communication skills. Q51a

Implementation will require sustained investment in teacher training and retention, better language resources for schools, and careful attention to transitions between educational stages so language learning isn’t unnecessarily disrupted. However, the potential benefits - both economic and social - make this patient investment worthwhile. A more inclusive, forward-looking curriculum - which includes a more communicative focus on languages - will better prepare all students for life in our multicultural, multilingual world while promoting achievement and high educational standards. Q29

Significant reform is needed to re-integrate languages into the heart of an education system that truly serves all students and meets our country's future needs. The evidence shows that with proper support and resources, schools can deliver excellent outcomes across a broader range of subjects while maintaining high standards. After years of being undermined and devalued, the importance of the study and practice of languages to pupils, parents, our diverse communities and the UK’s international connections cannot be understated. Q51b/54