

PE1395/I

21 March 2012

Stuart Todd
Assistant Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
Scottish Parliament
T3.40
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Public Petition PE1395: targeted funding for lesser taught languages and cultures at universities

Thank you for your letter of 28 February, in which you asked for a response to the written questions arising from the Public Petition Committee's consideration of the above petition on 21 February 2012.

Our views on the issues raised by the Committee are consistent with our earlier responses to the petitioner and to the Committee; that is, that it is for universities to manage their curriculum in order to meet demand and that, having reviewed the supply of – and demand for – the range of modern languages in Scotland's universities, we do not believe there is a case for targeted funding in this case.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) believes that an approach which involves monitoring the supply of and demand for all subjects and considering where intervention is necessary on a case by case basis is a more effective approach, in terms of overall provision, than a targeted approach based on a single list of strategically important subjects. In this respect, it is worth noting that the approach that is emerging in England – whereby the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and its partner organisations will monitor the health of all subjects and intervene collaboratively where necessary to address risks to particular aspects of subject provision – is akin to current practice in Scotland.

SFC has undertaken a full and thorough investigation of the supply of, and demand for, provision in Czech, Polish and Slavonic Studies (the latter being the non-language based study of Central and Eastern Europe through film and culture).

Our review concluded that demand for Czech and Polish in Scotland is very low, especially at the more advanced levels of study, but that the facility still exists to study these languages either as academic subjects (up to the second year of a degree course) or through several universities' language centres (which offer language tuition in these and many other languages, where there is demand).

With regard to the Slavonic Studies course, SFC understands that within Scotland's universities there are academics across a spectrum of fields with an interest in the history, politics, culture and institutions of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and that these interests are reflected in a range of undergraduate and postgraduate options. We also understand that the University of Glasgow's Centre for Russian, Central and Eastern European Studies (CRCEES) is continuing to offer its degree in Central & Eastern European Studies, which can be taken to single or joint Honours level and includes the history, economics, politics and sociology of the region.

SFC considers it important that it should continue to monitor modern languages provision in Scotland's universities in order to ensure that such provision is coherent and responsive to demand. SFC's current assessment is that, overall, modern languages in Scotland's universities are continuing to thrive and that demand remains healthy. SFC is particularly encouraged to see a steady and growing interest in the study of languages and cultures to support Scotland and the UK in their interactions with regions including Russia, Asia, the Middle East and South America.

The Committee also asked about the HEFCE support for the CRCEES at the University of Glasgow, and the reason for this support having ended. The Centre received a strategic grant time-limited from 2006 to 2011 from two of the UK research councils, the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This was part of a wider programme of Language Based Area Studies (LBAS) investments by the two research councils to address UK capacity issues in the interdisciplinary combination of language studies and area studies in particular geographical areas. The LBAS awards were supplemented in the universities in their own jurisdictions by SFC and by HEFCE. The LBAS award at Glasgow was therefore contributed to by SFC. This LBAS award allowed CRCEES postgraduate students to access specialist teaching from the School of Modern Languages & Cultures.

It was made clear in 2006 that SFC did not intend to renew its funding for LBAS beyond 2011, although the AHRC is making modest further support available through a bidding process in 2012-13 and the ESRC is supporting some PhD studentships at the Centre which will require language teaching.

I hope the Committee finds this reply helpful.

MTS Batho
Chief Executive