



INSTITUTE OF
LANGUAGES
CULTURES AND
SOCIETIES

SCHOOL OF
ADVANCED STUDY
UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON

PhilSoc
The Philological Society

UCFL
The University Council
For Languages

University
English

8th May 2024

Dear Vice-Chancellor, Provost and Senior Vice President, and Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,

We write on behalf of the English Association, the Institute for English Studies, University English (the three major subject bodies in the UK representing the study of English Language, Literature and Linguistics), the Institute of Languages, Cultures and Societies, the University Council For Languages, the Philological Society, and the Arts and Humanities Alliance (AHA), to express our dismay at the news of the proposed redundancies being imposed on colleagues in the School of Literature and Languages at Surrey, ranked 4th in the UK in the Guardian University Guide this year. Whilst we recognise such decisions are not easy, running down high-achieving subjects such as Literature and Languages poses a risk to your reputation as a university with a strong track record of providing transformative, future-facing education to students from diverse backgrounds. The outstanding REF2021 performance of Literature and Languages at Surrey, their exceptional record of grant capture (especially in the world-class Morphology unit, and the Centre for Translation Studies), and the leadership talent in the School makes clear that these subjects are well placed to help steer the University of Surrey through a time of crisis into a sustainable future.

As senior leaders ourselves, we are only too aware of the serious financial challenges faced by the vast majority of HEIs in the UK at the moment, and indeed the number of HEIs currently facing restructuring and redundancy programmes. We know it is very hard to plan for the long-term when short-term savings are needed, and that, in the current climate, the arts and humanities have become a soft target. This is exacerbated by a reliance in some universities on data-harvesting companies who offer apparently reassuringly straightforward forecasts based on an overly simple assessment of data that demand more than a cursory glance. There is reliable evidence that in some universities, recruitment in arts and humanities subjects over the last two years has outstripped these forecasts. UCAS data shows us that applications to undergraduate degree programmes in English Studies grew in 2022 and 2023, contradicting predictions by some of further decline; A-level enrolments are also rising.

The English subject bodies are working together to combat some of the data challenges that universities face and have jointly funded a pilot project with SUMS Consultancy to get a more nuanced and accurate dataset for English Studies, so concerned are we by the reliance of some universities on predictions based on problematic historical data. Our intention is that this will provide a blueprint for an approach that will be rolled out across other disciplines to enable more robust future planning and improve data literacy in HE.

Modern Languages subject bodies like the University Council For Languages are also proactively working with national and international government bodies to safeguard and promote the uptake of languages, in a context where the job market urgently needs more

languages graduates. As [British Academy reports](#) have demonstrated, ‘the economic cost of the UK’s linguistic underperformance in terms of lost trade and investment has been estimated at 3.5% of GDP’, and ‘the UK’s poor language capacity has resulted in the loss of economic, social, cultural, and research opportunities’. The importance of improving the languages skills of the UK workforce with a view to enhancing employability and economic prosperity has been at the centre of recent [government reports](#), showing an urgent need for support and action. Languages education has also been recognised as an urgent priority area by higher education bodies such as the AHRC, British Council, DfE (with its recent [announcement of new investment](#) in the languages pipeline), GCHQ, and the British Academy.

Because we are all concerned about the implications of our subjects being misunderstood by potential students we have launched some large-scale projects designed to improve engagement with Languages and Literatures: the English Association is working with 14-16-year-olds to encourage them to take A-level English; University English’s #EnglishCreates campaign encourages 16-18-year olds to apply to university to read English. Similarly, The New National Consortium For Languages Education (NCLE), together with the Goethe-Institut and the British Council, is leading a new nationwide hubs programme funded by the DfE of up to £14.9 million over the next three years to re-energise language learning in state-maintained primary and secondary schools in England.

Rather than finding an answer to current recruitment challenges by cutting staff numbers, we argue for an approach that concentrates on future-proofing our universities, and the UK economy by providing multidisciplinary opportunities for the age of AI. It is well recognised that collaboration is needed to address global challenges, with [Sir Paul Nurse advising government that the UK needs greater permeability in its universities](#). It is also well recognised that the current turmoil in the university sector is undermining the UK’s most successful industry – the cultural industries, which contribute [£126 billion to the UK economy](#) (more than the car industry, oil, gas, or aerospace). To help deliver this future we are articulating what arts and humanities programmes offer students and employers: e.g. of the ten ‘top skills for 2025’ listed in the World Economic Forum’s ‘Future of Jobs Report’, eight are inherent in arts and humanities disciplines. AI is a good example of a sector that needs the skills that our subjects provide. In a language-based sector, our graduates are in demand for the new jobs – like prompt engineers – that this growth area needs. In addition, this summer the English Association, in partnership with CRASSH (University of Cambridge), the School of Advanced Study (University of London), and Arts and Humanities Alliance, is launching a national conversation, *Thinking Forwards*, about SHAPE and STEM collaboration in teaching and research, to show the way to more permeability in our universities, and develop the programmes that will enable human- *and* technical problem solving. As part of this future, we recognise students need more opportunities to study the SLL disciplines in our universities, in Single or Joint Honours degrees, but also as a complementary part of degrees such as Business Studies, health studies, computing, and engineering.

We would like to work with you in supporting Literature and Languages at Surrey so these subjects can achieve their full potential. To that end, we urge you to rethink your decision and current strategy, and work with SLL colleagues to investigate ways in which, rather than shrinking provision, their teaching is used to equip more undergraduates with the vital skills they will need in future. As a recent British Academy report put it, ‘arts and humanities students are the “ideal entrepreneurs” of the future, digitally literate, ready to thrive in a globally diverse world, resilient, confident at analysis and team working, independently minded’ (British Academy’s Right Skills). We would be very happy to meet with you to discuss how we can help Literature and Languages thrive at Surrey.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Charles Burdett (Director of the Institute of Languages, Culture and Societies; Professor of Italian Studies, School of Advanced Study, London)

Professor Emma Cayley (Chair, University Council For Languages; Co-Chair, Arts and Humanities Alliance; Professor of Medieval French and Head of the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds)

Professor Susan Fitzmaurice (President, The Philological Society; Vice President and Head of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and Professor of English, The University of Sheffield)

Professor Charles Forsdick, FBA (Chair of the Advisory Council of the Institute of Modern Languages Research; Drapers Professor of French, University of Cambridge)

Professor Clare Lees (Director of The Institute for English Studies; Professor of Medieval Literature, Vice Dean, School of Advanced Study, London)

Professor Gail Marshall (Chair of University English; Head of the School of Humanities, University of Reading)

Professor Thea Pitman (Chair, Standing Conference for Latin American Studies; Co-Chair, Arts and Humanities Alliance; Professor of Latin American Studies, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds)

Professor Jennifer Richards, FBA (Chair of the Higher Education Committee of the English Association; incoming chair of the EA; English (2001) Professor, University of Cambridge)