

# The research needs of the UK's indigenous languages

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## Introduction

The UK is a multilingual state and among the languages used daily are its indigenous languages. Based on online estimates of speaker numbers, there could be as many as 2.7 million users of indigenous languages in the UK (around 4% of the population). In 2000, acknowledging the special place of its indigenous languages, the UK government signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In addition to the European Charter, there are various legislative apparatuses both at UK level and in the devolved nations which commit government and government agencies to supporting these languages through intervention measures. As part of its Future of Language Research call (2021), the Arts and Humanities Research Council sought to identify the research needs of indigenous languages stakeholders and government departments to inform future possible investment in languages research.

This paper, therefore, considers the research needs and practices of government agencies and other stakeholder organisations to support successful language policy and intervention; these are contextualised alongside Higher Education (HE) research in the related fields. We indicate some perceived challenges around meeting the research needs and consider how the HE sector could potentially better support these. The languages considered in this research are: British Sign Language (BSL), Cornish, Gaelic, Irish, Manx, Scots, Ulster Scots and Welsh.

Data for the research were drawn from:

- an analysis of existing research reports published by government departments and languages stakeholders.
- 18 interviews with representatives from devolved and local government with responsibility for language policy; language in education policy practitioners; language board executive staff; and state-sponsored minority language media representatives (referred to here as Group A).

- an online survey of smaller language organisations and of organisations for whom language was not necessarily the primary focus but who have some working remit with at least one of the UK's indigenous languages (referred to here as Group B); 29 responses were analysed.
- interviews with 10 senior academics.

## Previous stakeholder research themes

From 37 publicly available online research reports produced or commissioned in the last 10 years externally to the HE setting, we were able to ascertain that the most commonly explored themes were as follows:

- language in education and language learning outside the education environment (both in the home and in other non-formal settings).
- language usage: how language use can be promoted within specific areas, including in the field of 'business' and 'consumerism'.
- language planning and policy: generally reporting on the implementation of various language strategies and their effectiveness.
- the media.
- the visibility of language X: studies of this nature are also largely about language status.

## Conducting research outside the HE Sector

Two-thirds of Group B reported that they had engaged in some type of research in the past. A clear preference was indicated for commissioning research from independent consultants. The primary motivation given for conducting research was to gather evidence to allow the implementation of particular projects to be measured and to guide policy. A third of Group B reported that they were not (and had not previously) engaged in research; this cross-section is comprised of organisations focused on BSL, Cornish, Manx, and Ulster Scots — arguably among the most minoritised of the language groups surveyed.

The main challenges facing both research-active and research-aspirational organisations were lack of budget and lack of personnel. Across the relevant Group B organisations, average yearly research budgets spent on each piece of research commissioned were low: overall budgets are less than £5k for the majority and no more

than £100k for better-funded outfits. No Group B organisation reported any individual project costing more than £20k. Lack of personnel was cited as the leading preventative factor for not currently engaging in research. For research-active Group B organisations, the majority reported that research is carried out by someone for whom it is only part of their role.

Around challenges in the research landscape for the major language stakeholders, the biggest hurdle again relates to human resource: many were still found to often lack the human resource to carry out their own research or analysis, with staff being stretched in many directions. Some Group A stakeholders also spoke of limitations regarding the financial resources necessary to carry out research to understand their particular social challenge.

## Experiences of collaborating with the HE sector

Several of the Group A stakeholders noted that they have drawn on universities in the past to collaborate on research and to consult when they knew particular universities or individual academics had expertise in the relevant topic. There was widespread agreement that more opportunities were needed to facilitate the sharing of ideas, needs and expertise.

Some of Group A are able to commission research, usually via a regulated tendering or procurement process. Both private sector research companies and, less commonly, university departments take part in this process.

Just over half of the Group B organisations surveyed who identified as research-active reported that their research was collaborative, and most frequently with universities. While collaboration rates seem relatively healthy for some organisations, several of those dealing with some of the UK's smaller minority languages reported having never worked with an HE institution on a research project.

One of the challenges identified regarding collaborative research projects across stakeholders and HE is timescale. Often, language stakeholders and policy makers require a piece of research within a tight timeframe in order to align with a planned project or campaign, or to provide timely evidence-based feedback on an initiative, and this quicker turnaround does not always suit the HE researchers.

In addition to the difficulties of carrying out or commissioning research to support language policy and practice, the difficulty of finding published academic research was also raised.

## Current research needs

From the various data sources, the areas where the demand for research to support indigenous languages is most needed are:

- Language acquisition:

Research on language learning in its broadest sense and language in education was one of the most common themes across the data. There is scope for applied research, working in partnership with schools and language in education policy makers, and there is call for understanding the learning journey and processes, both within and outside the formal education sector.

- Language usage:

Facilitating the learning of a language is of little value to policy makers unless speakers have the opportunity to use their language. Understanding who the language speakers are and where they are located and how to support, create and develop diverse communities of usage appears repeatedly as an issue across the data. Interdisciplinary research would help stakeholders understand why uptake in learning does not always result in increased usage.

- Problematising and measuring language planning and intervention:

Language planning research and practice is an evolving interdisciplinary field which has to be innovative and reflective. The data clearly show that stakeholders need research instruments to measure the effectiveness of their approaches and policies. Focussed collaboration across languages and also between academic researchers and practitioners could facilitate the development of such tools.

- Language promotion:

A shared interest of the HE sector and the stakeholders is the effective promotion of the indigenous languages. There is an opportunity for interdisciplinary research to investigate society's attitudes towards languages, with a view to working with policy makers in order to address barriers to learning and usage and create more positive

attitudes towards languages in general. Applied research in this area would support the normalisation of multilingualism in the UK.

- Language related technology:

Technology is an important tool for language stakeholders, and it is important for them to remain up-to-date and be able to use the right technology to support their initiatives and interventions. Stakeholders have needs in the areas of corpus planning, lexicography, onomastics, machine translation and assisted learning packages. These are all areas which could be supported by collaborative action research from the HE sector.

## Conclusions

Language has the capacity to bring people together; this is as true of indigenous languages, whose speakers are normally bilingual, as it is of any other language. However, because of the low social prestige traditionally associated with minority languages, and engrained societal language practices biased towards English, indigenous language speakers and users are often excluded from using their languages in various social and public settings or choose not to use them even when this is possible. Quality evidence-based research could contribute significantly to understanding barriers in accessing and providing services, for example, and it could problematise and investigate new interventions to increase language usage across a broader range of language domains.

One of the major recurrent themes across our data was how to facilitate collaboration: both working across languages and working between universities and language stakeholders. Although each language has its own challenges, all strategies are framed in similar UK policy environments, except those relating to Manx which is subject to strategy intervention in the self-governing Isle of Man (though this is also subject to requirements of the European Charter). This means there is scope for much more sharing of ideas and experience as well as pooling of resources to fund research projects. For the smaller minority languages in particular, access to collaborative experiences with minimal financial input would be very beneficial.

Research to support indigenous languages is often interdisciplinary: research to support language policy and planning often overlaps with e.g., education, law, media,

technology, anthropology and sociology. Research projects which are interdisciplinary must be designed with methods which prioritise language vitality and must evolve to fit the needs of the different language communities. Policy makers also indicated that they would benefit from the development of research methods which would help them understand whether their interventions were working satisfactorily and if not why.

From the interviews with the senior academics, a clear sense of obligation to support the languages strategies and policy sectors was noted; however, despite the strong appetite for collaborative research and knowledge transfer from both sides, the academics also noted possible barriers. HE researchers need to be better enabled to support the sector by, for example, being able to react more quickly to low-budget projects with quick turnarounds, and by working across disciplines and across languages. Our data revealed a number of good examples of HE researchers working well alongside the public sector in different language settings. Such models of good practice need to be shared and replicated so that more impactful projects can be created to support the indigenous language policy sector and language communities.

## Further reading

McLeod, Wilson, Rob Dunbar, Kathryn Jones and John Walsh (eds.). 2022. *Language, Policy and Territory: A Festschrift for Colin H. Williams* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan).

Council of Europe. 1992. *European Charter for Regional or Minority Language*, <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-charter-regional-or-minority-languages/text-of-the-charter>> [accessed 24 May 2023].