



Minority Languages

Digital, Culture, Media and
Sport Committee Call for
evidence

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About the Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland supports people across Scotland to develop their knowledge, acquire new skills and achieve life-changing qualifications. With over 21,000 students, we are the fourth largest university in Scotland and the largest provider of flexible, part-time study. Our students range from school age to 92, with an average age of 28. Most of our graduates (85%) remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefits local communities.

Flexible study is core to our offer with 74% of our students working either full-time or part-time fitting study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that works for them. Our student experience is rated the best in Scotland alongside the University of St Andrews (National Student Survey).

Summary

We believe there are key factors determining whether an indigenous minority language thrives. These include:

- the close link between human rights and minority language support,
- the positive perception and high prestige attached to the minority language,
- the power of digital media
- the importance of education in supporting the language
- society's consideration of linguistic and cultural diversity as an invaluable asset.

We put forward a range of lessons that can be learned from minority language support and its impact in Scotland, Luxembourg, Wales, South Tyrol, Galicia, Catalonia and Norway. We also provide several concrete examples of how we think the revitalisation of the Scots language can be supported, which we believe are easily transferable to other indigenous minority language contexts.

Introduction

Our submission is informed by the expertise, initiatives and insights we have gained from working on revitalising the Scots language in Scotland. The submission will focus on the non-standardised Scots language since the Open University has been working most extensively on supporting this particular minority language.

Call for evidence

1. What are the key factors determining whether an indigenous minority language thrives?

A human rights issue

There are a wide range of linguistic, economic, cultural, and social factors that determine whether a minority language thrives. Experience and research show that two of the most important aspects that can determine the fate of a minority language are whether it is spoken/used by people from all generations, not just in the home but also in a variety of formal and informal contexts across society, and whether it receives robust support from society as a whole, as well as the state. Minority languages need young speakers being brought up confident in using their mother tongue to enable the language to thrive and survive.

Being enabled to speak and be understood using one's mother tongue is a human right. Thus, promoting the use of minority languages in all walks of life and parts of society means upholding core civil liberties (Council of Europe, 2019). This needs to start with reducing the language-based discrimination that still is a daily occurrence for many minority language speakers (Wright and Bougie, 2007). Enabling the use of minority languages in significant realms such as education and public services can be defined as a means to improve people's sense of identity and mental health, as exemplified by Robert and Paden's (2000) study of pioneering minority language use in health care settings in Wales.

The perception and prestige of minority languages

How the minority language and its community of speakers are conceptualised by society and policy makers is a factor in determining whether a minority language thrives. This includes the need for the perception of a minority language as an element of a wider linguistic and cultural network that exists across the globe rather than an 'abnormal' linguistic occurrence:

"To be a linguistic minority [...] is to share a very widespread European experience, to be normal in one's abnormality and to have a common aim at the European level – the normalization of one's status so that we become just one part of an extensive linguistic and cultural mosaic (Thomas, 1994, p. 157)."

Developments such as the creation of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1998) or the more recent legal recognition of British Sign Language by the Scottish Government in 2015 alongside the responsibilities that are attached to such policy commitments – financial and otherwise – have had a significant impact on the support for and wider recognition of minority languages and the empowerment of their speakers.

For example, the recognition of the Scots language, which has come a long way since 2015, when the Scottish Government launched the Scots Language Policy to promote Scots as one of Scotland's indigenous languages in its own right. This recognition of the language has had a considerable influence on the sense of identity and belonging of members of Scots-speaking communities across Scotland, leading to improved social cohesion and Scots speakers' participation in society through their mother tongue.

It built momentum for the establishment of a more unified approach of all involved in Scots language revitalisation activities as well as the development of a strong overarching revitalisation network of individuals and organisations across Scotland. Key Scots bodies like the Scots Language Centre, The Scottish Book Trust, and Education Scotland have played a crucial role in bringing about these changes and bringing on board new stakeholders supporting this cause, like the Open University. The outcomes of the policy decision are manifold and range from the creation of Scots Language awards school pupils can study towards to the establishment of the Scots Language Awards celebrating businesses, schools, teachers, artists, media personalities, pioneering projects and inspirational individuals advocating the revitalisation of Scots in their work.

The power of digital media

The internet with its array of digital tools and media can have a positive influence on the prominence and use of indigenous languages in the public sphere, especially among younger people. Crucially, minority languages that are embraced by younger generations as their mother tongue, fare much better in their chances for survival. This is closely linked to the insight that developing not just speaking but also basic literacy skills in the minority language alongside the knowledge of the community's cultural heritage boosts (young) speakers' confidence in its use and encourages new speakers to learn the language.

Furthermore, minority language communities have widely used the internet and social media to connect with speakers of their language in their diaspora as well as across the globe, thus giving their languages a more prominent position in public perception. The internet therefore allows the recording of language

change as it happens and inform ways of teaching the languages to new speakers.

The case of the Scots language illustrates the power of digital communication for language revitalisation with very active communities on Twitter and Facebook making the language accessible to all, using multi-media content showcasing their language and culture, and forging international links with other minority language communities. This use of the internet has helped normalise Scots language use in spoken and written form in the public sphere. Although Scots does not have a written standard, the internet has led to a huge increase in Scots being used in writing by a growing range of users. It provides a medium for written Scots language to evolve in a way that was not possible before the advent of social media.

Pioneering revitalisation advocates, like Len Pennie, who are active on social media, have helped the language develop by empowering a new generation of Scots writers, bringing together speakers from different dialect areas online, and prompting people to think about how their language sounds and experimenting with how it is represented visually. Scots language use has become so prominent online, that Mozilla have launched their Firefox browser in Scots in collaboration with Edinburgh-based company Rubric, making this a community-led innovation that boosts Scots speakers' confidence, their development and in turn the status of the language.

In addition, the internet removes barriers and allows users to access key digital tools for anyone interested in using the language for free, such as the Dictionary of the Scots Language, giving prestige and highlighting that Scots is a language in its own right.

The importance of education

Embedding a minority language firmly in educational contexts, allowing students to study and express themselves in their mother tongue is a main driver for minority language revitalisation.

To help establish the Scots Language Policy in Scotland's education landscape, the Open University has very successfully collaborated with The Scots Language Centre, Dictionaries of the Scots Language, Scottish Book Trust and the Education Scotland Scots Language Coordinator on a range of initiatives from production of free online curriculum to a webinar series with renowned and emerging authors writing in Scots. We have produced curriculum that has been a game changer in making learning Scots, about the language and related cultures accessible globally.

Our [Scots language and culture](#) open course has seen over 40,000 visitors and 15,000 enrolled students, with 61% from the UK alone, and people enrolling from 129 countries across the globe. This course was produced in the spirit of the Scots Language policy: a co-creation with the Scots language community. The second development, the first of its kind and mentioned as a best practice example in the Council of Europe's 5th evaluation report 2020, is an online

professional learning course bringing together primary and secondary teachers from across the curriculum in Scotland's schools.

Co-created with the Scots community and strongly supported by key Scots bodies it demonstrates that embedding Scots successfully in the life of a school leads to the language playing a central role in helping to value **all** pupils' entire range of linguistic and intercultural literacies in their education, enabling schools to reflect more fully the nature of modern Scotland as a multilingual and -cultural society. We are currently applying for the professional recognition award from the General Teaching Council for Scotland for this course.

As 'negative attitudes towards [the minority language] may influence the speaker's self-image, affect their confidence and willingness to use it and prevent bilingual people from speaking their chosen language, these attitudes are essential considerations [for example in medical practice and] in education. Minority language speakers may feel vulnerable and unable to insist on a [minority language] service' (Thomas, 1998). Developments such as the curriculum, outlined above exemplify how much minority language use in formal educational settings is a widening participation initiative that is key to strengthening minority language speakers' sense of belonging to linguistic communities, chances of participation in society and normalises the use of their mother tongue.

Cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset

In all realms of society, cultural and linguistic diversity need to be conceptualised as an enrichment making it easier to acknowledge the value of and enable a multilingual society, which is the reality of people living in the UK today. Therefore, a vibrant literature and media producing outputs in the minority language are not only signs of a thriving minority language and its community, but they are also effective means to make minority languages accessible. Authors writing in the minority language - their mother tongue, also from younger generations - afford it with prestige and validation as a language in its own right. Prominent recent examples from the Scots context are Booker Prize winner Douglas Stewart's publications *Shuggie Bain* and *Young Mungo*, or Graeme Armstrong's first novel *The Young Team*, which was included in the literature curriculum at Higher and Advanced Higher level in Scottish schools in 2022.

2. What lessons can be learned from countries whose populations achieve widespread fluency in both a majority and indigenous minority language?

The selected examples below underline that successful language policy requires careful linking of top-down and bottom-up support initiatives for minority languages to enable them to be impactful as well as inclusive, referring not just to minority and non-minority language speakers but also to different dialect groups within minority language communities. Positive discrimination in policy making alongside financial commitment to revitalisation is a powerful

tool in helping minority languages to thrive and ensure the implementation of language policies. This will require the establishment of key bodies and institutions and the commitment to bi-/plurilingual education, media, public services and government institutions.

Scotland – The government-funded Scots Language Centre which has evolved as the hub for Scots language revitalisation, has played a vital role in bringing together the various Scots dialect communities to collaboratively support the common cause of Scots language revitalisation. It utilised digital media exceptionally well to make the language and related cultures accessible across Scotland and beyond, even linking with often marginalised minority language communities internationally, thus raising the profile and status of revitalisation activities in Scotland.

Luxembourg – established a regional government for the diaspora of its German-speaking minority of 277,254 Letzeburgish speakers, empowering their self-governance in collaboration with the other official languages communities and their administrations. This balanced policy on Luxembourg's languages led to strong social cohesion across the nation and mutual acceptance of language differences with all languages being afforded equal standing.

Wales – has made bilingualism the norm across society through policy requirements, for example for bilingual education; established cheap and accessible translation services; upskilled public sector staff in using Welsh as well as English and embedded it soundly in services such as health and social care; encouraged businesses to become bilingual and offered many opportunities for new speakers of Welsh to learn the language.

South Tyrol – Italy successfully reversed the decline of its German minority language community by upskilling all public service staff in South Tyrol in German, practically making all public services in this region bilingual. This was a very important development for health and social care, for education and for enabling full participation of the linguistic minority population in society. Positive discrimination was the key to the success of linguistic diversity in this region that allowed Italian and German to co-exist with the same standing and prestige.

Catalonia – is probably one of the most successful examples of how a minority language achieved equal status to the majority language, Castilian, in Catalonia, where Catalan is now spoken across all social spheres, in formal and informal contexts and features at all levels of education with levels of fluency rising to 80% among the under 18 population. The regional government heavily invested in linguistic equality and upskilling, 7 million Euros annually, which included fully embedding Catalan in all mass media, where for example all journalists/reporters were trained to be able to report bilingually.

Norway – is an excellent example of a highly democratic approach to language revitalisation and linguistic diversity. When Norway became independent, Danish lost its status as the majority/dominant language. Instead, Norwegian emerged alongside Sámi as Norway's two official languages. Norwegian has two recognised standard forms, which exist in written communication: Bokmål and Nynorsk. Speakers can decide which form they want to communicate and learn in, schools can, in collaboration with pupils and parents, decide which language they use for teaching and learning. This is an example of truly equal plurilingual education.

3. What should be the criteria for judging whether a minority language should receive official status?

The following are some aspects that should play an important role in the decision whether a minority language should receive official status. In many cases the number of speakers of a minority language is a deciding factor in giving a minority language official recognition. However, the following aspects are some examples of criteria that ought to play an important role, too:

- where the language is spoken (home and public sphere)
- whether there are a thriving minority language community and a related revitalisation movement
- whether the language exists in written communication and has a recognisable literary tradition
- the role the language and its related culture has played throughout the history, as well as for the identity and public life of a nation/region
- whether the language is in danger of extinction
- whether giving the language a more prominent position in public life means a significant social justice/human rights intervention for a minority language community
- whether the language features in media of all kinds
- whether there are groups of new speakers of these languages evolving

The Scottish context is a useful example to illustrate this decision-making process with regard to the indigenous minority languages of this nation. Within the Scottish context, Scottish Gaelic, British Sign Language and Scots already have official recognition, with Scottish Gaelic, and British Sign Language already recognised through a language bill; and a Scots language bill that will come into force in 2023.

- Scottish Gaelic is essential to the history, culture and identity of Scotland, significantly contributing to the multicultural and -linguistic landscape of the nation. However, it's community of speakers is declining through often economic and migratory factors. The official recognition ensures much needed support to allow it to thrive and survive.
- British Sign Language was legally recognised in 2015 to cement its presence in the public sphere and support its community of users in participating more fully in all aspects of public life.
- Scots, a non-standard language, is the most widely spoken minority language and it exists across the nation. The 2011 census revealed that 1.5 million people reported that they could speak Scots and 1.9 million reported that they could speak, read, write or understand Scots. There is a growing revitalisation movement with initiatives in education, media, the arts and literature. Its legal recognition will ensure the Scots-related identity and culture are more fully acknowledged as a central aspect of Scottish life, its speakers identified as bilingual, and public life accommodating the needs of a significant group.

It is important to undertake a wide range of activities from community engagement to academic research and key statistical data collection to establish the state of a minority language and the needs of its speakers in order to inform decisions about the official status of an indigenous minority language.

4. What should be the role of the UK Government in supporting and developing indigenous minority languages?

The UK Government should identify supporting and developing indigenous minority languages as a human rights issue, be committed to enabling language revitalisation, protecting the minority languages and related cultures of the UK as well as their speakers, making policy pledges, providing legal recognition and significant financial support to this cause. This should happen within the wider context of fully recognising the UK as a plurilingual and -cultural society, where the different communities consider each others' linguistic and cultural backgrounds as enriching assets for all.

It is essential to support existing speakers of minority languages across society and to enable new speakers to learn the languages in a range of contexts.

To illustrate possible support and developmental interventions, here is our example of how the Scots language should be supported by the UK Government. There will be a number of aspects that apply to supporting all indigenous minority languages across the UK:

- It is our belief and that of organisations involved within the Scots Language community that the Scots Language Centre, with additional funding, be able to play an even more impactful role by extending its

reach, the amount and quality of its provision as well its global impact – thus becoming a pioneering institution showcasing innovative and well-supported language revitalisation. It is the collective belief with additional funding, the Centre ought to become *the* hub for all things Scots in Scotland, coordinating activities, linking individuals as well as organisations keen to get involved, and crucially, leading on the growth of Scots revitalisation initiatives across all parts of society. Following collective discussion within the Scots Language community we propose the creation of a physical location for the Scots Language Centre that can function as an events, meeting/conference, teaching and research space as well as a communications hub for Scots. This is in addition to the excellent online presence of the Centre at present. The hub could enable novel research and Knowledge Exchange collaborations between primary, secondary and third sector organisations leading to pioneering outcomes for Scottish society. The hub should further enable even closer links between primary and secondary schools with Universities and FE Colleges when it comes to working with the Scots language as well as the development of novel qualifications. Another important area of work for the hub will be supporting innovation in the teaching of and about the Scots language, including the teaching of Scots to non-native speakers.

- The policy objectives of facilitation and encouragement of the use of Scots in speech and writing, in public and private life, as well as the provision of appropriate forms and means for the teaching and study of Scots have been met to a degree. However, Scots language revitalisation

and recognition across society need to embark on a new phase, normalising Scots as a key aspect of Scottish life including its use in all levels of education, the arts and all media. Key to the success of such an undertaking is the legal recognition of Scots through a Scots Language Bill including a related funding commitment to support the interventions outlined here.

Further recommendations relating to education system and the Scots language can be found in our recent [submission](#) to the Scottish Government Consultation on its commitments to the Gaelic and Scots Language Bill.

