

20 November 2023

Professors George Boyne, Karl Leydecker and Gary MacFarlane  
Principal, Senior Vice Principal and Dean for Interdisciplinary Research and Impact  
University of Aberdeen

Dear Professors Boyne, Leydecker and MacFarlane,

I write on behalf of the Arts and Humanities Alliance UK to express our dismay at news of an ongoing review of Modern Languages degree programmes, which includes the possibility of closure and potential redundancies for colleagues teaching and researching in the affected subjects in the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture.

We are concerned that while you have expressed support for the to continued study of practical language-only modules, there is no ongoing support for programmes in the integrated study of languages and cultures for which you were most recently listed 12th in the country in *The Guardian's* university league tables, with particularly impressive ratings for student satisfaction with teaching and feedback.<sup>1</sup> We would like to underscore the fact that degrees in Modern Languages are so much more than 'just language courses'. They are interdisciplinary and international in nature, both of which, we note, are key elements of your University's strategy, and cutting such programmes risks causing serious reputational damage. Furthermore, it is essential that universities such as Aberdeen continue to offer Modern Languages degrees to avoid regional cold spots in provision and keep the pipeline of future language teachers flowing, in order to address the issues raised in the British Council's most recent report on the gravity of the UK's language learning deficit and the curb on social mobility that that creates.<sup>2</sup> We would also like to flag up the knock-on impact of disbanding degrees in Modern Languages on your joint honours offer. You have an excellent reputation for programmes that combine Anthropology and Art History, for example, with Francophone, German or Spanish and Latin American Studies. Those programmes will be adversely impacted by this decision, with potential consequences further down the line for all Arts and Humanities subjects at your institution.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2023/sep/09/best-uk-universities-for-languages-linguistics-league-table>, 9 Sept 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/england-has-language-learning-deficit-and-its-exposing-social-divide-education>, 15 Nov 2023.

In terms of the national standing of Modern Languages, you should be very proud of the achievements of your staffs, many of whom are engaged in leadership roles as presidents and chairs of subject associations such as the Scottish branch of the University Council for Languages and the Society for Latin American Studies, and are involved in setting the agenda for the field as a whole through involvement in the recent QAA subject benchmarking for Languages, Cultures and Societies. You were also lucky enough to have one member of staff secure one of only three AHRC Future of Languages Research Fellowships in 2022. We also note the excellent results in REF 2021, in particular the strength of the impact case studies submitted by staff in Modern Languages. Suffice it to say that the University of Aberdeen is an integral and highly-esteemed member of the research community in the UK in the field of Modern Languages.

We do, of course, understand that these are difficult times in the UK Higher Education sector and no institution is immune to the pressures of dwindling revenue from student fees and the changing dynamics caused by the removal of the student numbers cap. We would ask, however, that you engage directly and constructively with the affected staff who we know will be able to devise cogent plans to address issues of sustainability in their field if they are given a chance. On behalf of the Arts and Humanities Alliance, we would also like to extend our services to you as you navigate this period of institutional change. We have experience of similar situations that have occurred in recent years at other institutions and would be very happy to engage with you to develop workable solutions.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thea Pitman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left and underlining the name.

Professor Thea Pitman  
Co-chair, Arts and Humanities Alliance

On behalf of the affiliates of the Arts and Humanities Alliance  
<https://www.artsandhumanitiesalliance.org/>