



Plenary Session

8 April 2000

AULC and Authority

David Bickerton
Secretary General, CercleS
Research Professor, University of Plymouth

1. Funding of Modern Foreign Languages in the UK / Ireland

The gloom

- Review of recent trends in the take-up of specialist courses in (or containing) MFL at university in the period 1995-1999 suggests language degrees have fallen by some 15%, which is the same as the growth in the sector generally; MFL is certainly not keeping pace with the rise in people studying English (18%).
- There is therefore a net fall of some 30%, and the trend continues downwards for languages. The effect upon language departments is very serious, and budget deficits are leading to closures. There are many factors behind this trend, all of which are addressed in the report from the Nuffield enquiry.
- The position in Ireland appears to be somewhat different.

UCML's fight

The University Council for Modern Languages in the UK has successfully fought for a re-banding of languages (except for French, which it is anticipated will follow suit in 2001) to effectively increase central funding for languages by approx 50%. This will help compensate for the fall in student numbers in 2000-01.

IWLP data

UCML has commissioned data on student numbers and these confirm its case for a higher unit of funding. The one area in which data have proved very hard to collate is in the non-specialist area represented by IWLPs, a sector central to Language Centre activities. There is good anecdotal evidence that IWLP's may have benefited from the down-turn in specialist study by recruiting more non-specialists. However, UCML's experience in running the re-banding campaign is that we desperately need solid data in order to lobby with authority and plan our strategy.

the positives

- the data collected for UCML by Keith Marshall (Bangor) - see summary in *Guardian Education Higher* 29 Feb. 2000, p. 14 - shows that language students are highly employable, come second only to medicine, law and education for the speed with which they find work, and enter a very wide range of work areas; very few now enter teaching as a profession.
- The Nuffield Report is attracting attention and requires a clear answer from the UK government and universities (UCML and other bodies will lobby for answers); it provides an important political opportunity.

- The EYE (European Year of Languages - 2001) will provide some high profile activity, and a new LINGUA Action Line for lifelong learning will provide a funding stream (see **CercleS Bulletin** 12 p.15).
- The new UK-funded Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies will provide a good focus for university language-teaching staff, given its remit to disseminate and to encourage collaborative action

the threats

- a UK review (planned by HEFCE) of central funding for all subjects after 2001 may, in fact, produce a fee mechanism which damages Language Centres; the only way to fight back will be through command of the facts
- some down-sizing of MFL in the UK seems inevitable
- representation of the non-specialist sector in decision-taking bodies is often not in proportion to its size and strategic importance, hence the need for bodies like AULC to be visible and heard, and to work well with other similar Associations
- the competition for students will understandably encourage some specialists to switch to IWLP-type activities; this can threaten the equilibrium within universities where degrees for specialists and IWLPs are separately structured; it can also undermine the professionalism (hard-won methodological specialism) found in the best Language Centres. On the other hand, the days when different actors within the HE languages sector ran the risk of competing with each other, and therefore of cross-subsidising each other, may be passing; management data is now much more sophisticated within universities, and budgets tend to follow work.

AULC's opportunity? - We must ask ourselves how AULC can best respond, and serve its members, in the present climate. It has major strengths: institutional links with Europe (through **CercleS**); and authority - conferred by the work its members perform and their responsibility for what, by any measure, is a key sector in HE languages.

2. CercleS in Maturity

David Little (q.v.) has summarised the priority areas for **CercleS**. These will affect the way languages are taught and certified for non-specialists throughout Europe in the next few years.

- **Electoral Opportunity** - the renewal of the **CercleS** Executive on 16 September 2000 (at the Antwerp Conference) - with the departure of the President and Secretary General and the re-election of the Treasurer and all deputies - provides a major opportunity to build on the achievements of the first decade and establish **CercleS** as a unique force in European education.
- **Electoral rules** - see **CercleS Bulletin** 12 (April 2000), p. 19. The statutes were modified in 1998 precisely to ensure that the national associations and their members would have a direct input into the electoral process.
- **Ideal Result** - we shall get a balanced and experienced team, drawn from many different countries, able to ensure continuity and growth.

3. AULC's Mission

AULC has a mission established by its statutes. AULC also has a duty and an opportunity: to speak and act with the authority that comes from what its members do, and are well qualified to do. To do that it must monitor and quantify what its members do. Its members manage resources, apply and manage new technologies, research, analyse and apply methodologies, and deliver quality teaching to clearly defined and very numerous sets of learners. There has never been a better time, given the sectoral need for all to co-operate, to define the work of Language Centres, and make AULC's voice heard.