



The IHA Welcomes

Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in

Education, 2017-2026

One of the most important and far reaching documents in late modern Ireland was launched on 4 December 2017. To almost universal indifference. This is an immense pity as *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education*, offers an exciting blueprint for the repositioning of Ireland in the wider world. The strategy document from the Department of Education and Skills which aims at dramatically improving foreign language competency in the schooling population is to be welcomed in three crucial respects.

Firstly, in a context where migrants are repeatedly seen as a threat or a burden the strategy explicitly acknowledges the rich economic and cultural contribution of the new migrant languages and commits to the maintenance and flourishing of these languages. Secondly, in the midst of Brexit gloom and turmoil, the proposed strategy offers an exciting vision of an Ireland that actively engages with Europe through the learning of its languages and immersion in its cultures. Thirdly, the strategy avoids the inevitable Punch and Judy bust ups between Irish and other modern languages in the educational system by pointing to the benefits of early bilingualism as an important template for enhanced language awareness.

Languages Connect in affirming that the 'education system must support learners of all ages to gain the skills and confidence to be not only Irish and EU citizens but also global systems' breaks decisively with the dismaying, isolationist mantra that to be a citizen of the world is to be a citizen from nowhere. That a confident sense of self is born of involvement with not retreat from the world clearly underlies the assertion that 'Knowledge of foreign languages is essential for Ireland's cultural, social and economic welfare'.

Let us give praise where praise is due. In a political culture where nay-saying is often seen as the only acceptable virtue it is right that we welcome this bold, courageous and ambitious document. In a time when hope is often the scarcest commodity of all, it offers hope in many forms. Economic hope in the transformed fortunes of companies that will be able explore the immense economic opportunities of the non-Anglophone world. Social hope in the creation of a respectful and inclusive society that values the languages and cultures of our fellow citizens.

Cultural hope in the cultivation of a rich, prolonged and meaningful engagement with our European neighbours so that Europe is a space of creative possibility not a forcing house of bureaucratic compliance. Of course, the resources need to be put in place to make the commitments a reality and vigilance is required to ensure that fine words become effective deeds. However, the new strategy provides a detailed and transformative template for bringing the Irish educational system into the post-Brexit era. As the title of the strategy document suggests, languages do connect and most importantly they connect us to a better future for all the citizens of the country.

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