

Opening Address

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I'm very pleased to be speaking to you as part of this conference. I was originally invited to open the conference so you're having a kind of opening speech three quarters of the way through! Because I was looking at some of the things I wanted to say to you and some of them are actually about reaffirming this assembly government's commitment in terms of the fact that Modern Foreign Languages teaching, training and learning is extremely important to us in Wales, both in economic and social terms, because languages are about communication – and this is a central driver in the global market place. And we feel very strongly that for a small country like Wales, we must look outward, we must be able to encourage our citizens to have greater mobility in Europe, we must encourage European citizens to have greater mobility in coming to Wales. And I was delighted only yesterday to open the world school debating championships, which this year are taking place in Cardiff, and 36 countries – many, many different languages, many diverse young people, coming and experiencing Wales, and I hope they will come back, but I hope that we will start more and more to be able to promote Wales as a place that very warmly welcomes people with different languages and encourages our people here to speak them.

Now all the issues that you will know and the work that you do about the fact that businesses are facing more competition, exposure to European and international markets, and therefore young people who gain language skills are actually in a very good position in terms of what jobs they might want to do for the future. And Welsh businesses need the right skills to gain and maintain a competitive advantage and require a workforce capable of breaking down potential barriers to exporting that exist due to lack of Modern Foreign Languages competence, so we must always try and think from a government perspective to equip our young people with the skills they need to access opportunities in the world of work and it's something I'm going to be discussing with the new sector skills councils, those representatives of the employers, here in Wales, looking at business needs, to see whether or not we can look at specific projects that will encourage the acquisition of Modern Foreign Languages skills as part of that skill-based agenda for employers.

And of course, for those of you from Wales, we always feel we have such a huge advantage here, the Nuffield Enquiry demonstrated this so effectively, but having a bilingual culture, where the place of both English and Welsh in our education system is assured, where we are seeing rapid increases in the number of people who are having an education through the medium of Welsh – last year alone, 5 more primary schools, 1,700 more pupils, learning primarily through the medium of Welsh. I mean, if we carry on growing at that pace, when our school population is declining rapidly, then incrementally, we're going to have far more people learning through the medium of Welsh. But therefore we have a real strength in bilingualism that should be turned to our advantage in learning other languages. And it's self-evident that to study Modern Foreign Languages at a higher level we have to ensure that there is language teaching provision in the early stages of young peoples' education. And the number of young people – which you all know well – studying Modern Foreign Languages after the age of 14 has been in decline for a number of years. It's not unique to Wales, it's one that's faced across the UK. And I am very keen that we create a thirst for language learning among our young people and that we should raise the profile of language learning and increase its value, and therefore we do have this strategy, *Languages Count*, the very important work that CILT does in supporting that, and since the publication in 2002 of

that strategy, there's been many initiatives taken forward here in terms of achieving aims. I mean, very successful pilot projects directed at the upper reaches of primary school, with very broad ranges of languages on offer.

And in addition, uniquely here, the development of the Welsh baccalaureate qualification has recognised the importance of language learning – we have put a small language module into the core of the Welsh baccalaureate in the “Wales, Europe and the World” component, and initial feedback from the evaluation of the Welsh baccalaureate qualification pilot, shows that the language module is of interest to and is valued by students, and encouragingly, a healthy proportion of those Welsh Bac students said they would be willing to commit to an optional language module. Now an optional language module in that sense is either a GCSE at level two or an A-Level at level three, so we are actually arousing a greater interest in language learning as a result of having put that module in place.

As somebody who spends quite a lot of time in Europe, it's always extraordinary to me that I move regularly among people where bilingualism and multilingualism is just a reality of people's daily lives. We don't have that here, other than in the context of the Welsh language. But I think having that language module takes account of a variety of students' learning backgrounds. It does help students have a sense of being a part of Europe, and highlights study as a continuing element in lifelong learning. But I think particularly it's a real opportunity for those who might have been turned off languages earlier in their school career to think again about coming back to them and realising that perhaps with greater skills, as they are slightly older, they can utilise those more effectively.

Another way that we are seeking to bring more learners into the languages fold is using the Languages Ladder, and associated Asset Languages qualifications will be implemented in Wales from September this year. And I was very interested when this was designed as part of the languages strategy in England, because it offers flexible provision at various levels and allows students to take small bites, with separate certification of the four language skills – the reading, the writing, the listening and the speaking. And we want the Languages Ladder to run alongside our traditional provision such as GCSEs, encouraging more learners to take up and stick with language learning.

And higher education has an important part to play as we strive to position Wales more competitively in the European and international context. Next week Wales is hosting a prestigious Bologna seminar at the University of Wales, Swansea, on enhancing employability. And the fundamental rationale for the Bologna process is the free movement of students and staff across the European higher education area, and there are now 45 signatory countries who signed up to Bologna, much wider than the EU, and having been there in Bergen, when the next stage of the agreement was signed, clearly language skills are a key and I'm very keen that we have a student body that is able to take advantage of the kind of opportunities that Bologna offers as well.

Now, last year, our higher education funding council here conducted a strategic review of Modern Foreign Languages in higher education and we then, through the funding council, invited the higher education sector in Wales to come forward with proposals for strengthening the student offer and to support our ambitions for increasing the linguistic capacity of Wales. And HEFCW ringfenced money in the last financial year to support proposals from the sector. And I was very pleased by the response that we had from the sector. A bid led by the Open University in partnership with CILT Cymru has been approved. It's a strategic focus; it's seven higher education institutions in addition to the Open University – that's over half of the higher education institutions in Wales – and it

will help assure that Modern Foreign Languages provision is Wales-wide and help combat the reduction of provision in some institutions, which has been the individual trend, if we don't take this more strategic approach. And the bid also contains a number of elements which have been moulded into an integrated, coherent whole. The first element focuses on marketing activities and the development of a mechanism for workplaces abroad for Modern Foreign Languages students, and in particular, this work focuses on engagement with the business community to highlight the skills that language graduates bring to the workplace and scope for improving business performance. So if higher education engages with the business community in this way and I engage with them through the Sector Skills Councils in driving forward this agenda, I'm hopeful that we really will see some movement here.

And the second element focuses on the sharing of expertise in distance learning, and how that can be utilised in partnership with existing providers to offer students flexibility and choice. The third rolls out an initiative developed by the university in Bangor, an exciting project that utilises Erasmus students or fourth year Modern Foreign Languages students as linguistic mentors to school pupils. And this is immensely important, as there has been a decline in foreign language assistants in secondary schools, where they are patchy and not in any way strategic, depending on individual local authority support. So having something like this, a clear support from the university in terms of the Erasmus students or fourth year Modern Foreign Languages students as linguistic mentors is very, very important and something we'd like to see extended. Now these students quite clearly are also role models and can stimulate language teaching in a number of ways. They're usually closer in age to pupils than most teachers and allow pupils to see foreign languages spoken by real people with their own culture and interests.

Now I think it's also important to allow teachers to refresh their own language proficiency and aid with the renewing of their teaching materials as well. And activities in the higher education sector are not just limited to this strategic bid. The University of Wales, Swansea, has utilised funding for Welsh medium teaching fellowships, to support developing Welsh medium provision in French, and in German, and in Spanish, and that's crucially important to us in the assembly government, I mean, it's a really exciting initiative because the idea that we could be a bilingual nation and not be able to access Modern Foreign Languages opportunities through the medium of Welsh is extraordinary. We must be able to do that! And therefore I think this particular work is extremely important because those modules will be made available more widely as well, in the model.

Work is ongoing through our "Reaching Wider" partnerships, our partnerships in terms of increasing access to the higher education sector, to ensure that the study of Modern Foreign Languages is not the preserve of the elite either. Technology has been utilised by the first campus partnership that operates across the South Wales area, which has developed an interactive website providing language support for secondary pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly for those in years 9 and 10. And running alongside that, we've introduced a new programme called "Raise", raising attainment and individual standards in education, that's going to be focussing on the most disadvantaged cohorts of young people in our schools in Wales, and these programmes running alongside each other will hopefully help a number of pupils to be introduced and encouraged to take Modern Foreign Languages for the future as well.

And since I addressed some of you, because looking around I see some of the same people in the audience from the HEFCW/CILT Cymru event that was held on the third of March, the world has also moved on in this area. We are beginning to see the fruits of our endeavours, and the developments we now see coming forward are I think

testament to the successful partnership between CILT Cymru and LLAS and their close engagement with the sector, and there is much more work to be done. We do need to carry on encouraging young people to study Modern Foreign Languages by stressing the benefits, so that we have a linguistically capable workforce and the next generation of language teachers, and I have already indicated that I'm very supportive of the stance that a number of LEAs have taken, which is to set themselves targets in their single education plans, and I think we need to look at how effective that is, to see whether that's something that we should be doing across Wales.

And we need to engage with businesses to demonstrate the added value of linguistic and cultural awareness to any business operating outside the UK, and we must seize and maximise the opportunities that we have as a bilingual nation. But I also feel that it's important that we do this in a very collaborative way, in collaboration and partnership working – for us this is very important in the way we take forward the agenda in Wales. The funding provided has allowed the development of the partnership approach between CILT Cymru and the LLAS, which aims to reinforce the promotion of Modern Foreign Languages in Wales by encouraging collaborative innovation both within and between institutions at the higher education level and aims to develop a network of support for languages from school to higher education institutions, from careers advisors to businesses.

We know it's a difficult area, we know there aren't any easy solutions here, but I think we've got a real opportunity now to build on the foundations that have been laid so far, and this is a major challenge for us all. And I was interested to see that there is a workshop tomorrow morning – if the programme remains as the programme I saw – on stimulating demand for languages in higher education, where Keith Marshall will be talking about the constructive collaboration approach versus cut-throat competition. And we definitely want to pursue the constructive collaboration approach in Wales, so if you want to know more – because I've got to go – see Keith!

Thank you very much.