

# French Studies in and for the Twenty-first Century

*Edited by*

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## Introduction

*Philippe Lane and Michael Worton*

The central purpose of this book is to offer a picture of French Studies today, an analysis – from the inside – of what the discipline has become and where it might and, indeed, must go in the future. We hope that this anatomisation of French Studies and the way in which it is taught, researched and managed in the UK will help to energise debates around the place of modern languages in the modern university.

The world of higher education has been changing radically since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and the next ten years will witness the most significant changes experienced over the past half century, as many countries prioritise higher education and invest considerably in it. On the other hand, in the UK, especially after the October 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, which was the most severe austerity budget for 60 years, universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing considerable challenges in terms of their funding, of recruitment of students at all levels, of international competitiveness and, crucially, of their own missions and identities. Furthermore, the government's decision on student funding means that there will be considerably more competition to attract the best students from the UK and from overseas, and in a context of severe financial constraints.

It is now axiomatic that much is changing in the new world of international education – and changing very fast. Students are travelling more and more to different countries for their higher education, and they have high expectations both of their student learning experience and of their employment prospects. For their part, employers expect broad skill sets and evidence of some work experience as well as disciplinary knowledge, and national and regional governments increasingly expect higher education to deliver on national priorities.

In this world of challenges but also of opportunities, universities and subject communities are having to think much more strategically. Key strategic directions are: (a) towards a broadening of the curriculum; (b) towards ever more interdisciplinarity; (c) towards internationalisation of universities, both at home and overseas. There is also an important shift

in the ways in which universities perceive, redefine and reconstruct themselves, with a return of social and moral values to the curriculum, at the same time as there is ever more engagement with business and industry.

In this new world, modern languages have a vital role to play. However, one of the key findings of the *Review of Modern Foreign Languages Provision in Higher Education in England*, which HEFCE commissioned from Michael Worton,<sup>1</sup> was that the modern language community felt itself vulnerable and beleaguered up to the point of being in a crisis of confidence. Since that review was published in September 2009, the situation has, if anything, got worse, with more departments closing down or significantly reducing the number of language degrees offered. The decline in secondary pupils studying GCSE and A Levels in modern languages continues and, worryingly, it seems that a class divide is opening up, with significantly fewer comprehensive school pupils studying languages, compared with those in selective schools or independent schools (in 2009, only 41 per cent of comprehensive school pupils were entered for a modern language GCSE, compared with 91 per cent of selective school pupils and 81 per cent of independent school pupils).<sup>2</sup>

It must be said that the precarious position of languages today is due in part to the fact that the different stakeholders have failed to articulate a powerful, shared message about the value of languages, with government giving a different message from that of the employers, while both of these are themselves often different from those of educators and researchers. It is therefore not simply timely, but urgent for the modern languages community to take a lead in advocacy, explaining and demonstrating why and how languages are vital to every higher education experience, be it in the UK or elsewhere in the world. And the modern languages community needs at the same time to transform itself not only academically but also conceptually in order better to face the challenges ahead.

In this work, French Studies has a particularly important leadership role to play, since French remains the most widely studied and researched language in the UK. While it is the future that must concern us most, the reasons that led French to its place at the core of the modern curriculum in UK higher education are illuminating. For this reason, several essays in this volume trace pathways in the development of French Studies, highlighting, for instance, the ways in which the discipline has adopted what can be seen as a feminine bias, while paradoxically remaining a male-dominated profession, and the progressive shift away from

1 Michael Worton, *Review of Modern Foreign Languages Provision in Higher Education in England* (London: Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2009), online resource, consulted 25 November 2010.

2 For full details, see the national statistics on KS4 results in England, 2008–09 given at Table 11 in Department for Children Schools and Families, *GCSE And Equivalent Results In England 2008/09 (Revised)*, SFR 01/2010 (London: Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010), online resource, consulted on 25 November 2010.

pre-modern literature and culture to an ever increasing focus on the contemporary period. The history of French Studies reveals a discipline, which, while remaining largely committed to a 'language and literature' approach, has steadily embraced other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, to the extent that it often now defines itself essentially through its interdisciplinarity rather than through any linguistic or geographic specificity. Yet throughout most of its history, it has been the dominant language, despite the many and significant geopolitical and cultural changes that have occurred since the early nineteenth century. It is therefore interesting to note that when modern languages were first introduced into the modern university curriculum by UCL (then the University of London), when it opened in 1828, Chairs were established from the very beginning in German, Italian and Spanish, as well as in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Hindustani. French was also taught from the very beginning, but P. F. Merlet, the original teacher of French, was not given the title of Professor until 1834! French did not therefore have a visible position of seniority in the new modern languages community, but over the decades it grew in the UK to be the most studied of languages, both in schools and in universities.

Today, although there are falling registrations for GCSE, AS and A Levels, year on year for the past decade, French remains what could be described as the flagship language, and its fortunes are central not only to the understanding of the place of modern languages today, but also of its future. This book arose out of a seminar convened by us, which brought together colleagues from across the country to discuss the present state of French Studies in the UK and also to look forward to what the future holds for the discipline. The workshop took place in the context of some concern about both funding for teaching and for research, and about the standing of French Studies in the UK. During the workshop, all participants sought to give a greater sense of the breadth and depth of French Studies as well as beginning to shape a common sense of how we could help to shape the future. These ideas were taken forward as these essays were drafted and we invited further specialists from the field to contribute to the volume.

Since that workshop, the landscape has changed yet further, with the HEFCE set to withdraw all teaching funding for humanities and social sciences and fees for undergraduates rising to at least £6,000 per annum, with some universities charging up to £9,000 per annum as a result of the government's response to the Browne report.<sup>3</sup> There will also be a gradual decline in research funding, which will be maintained in cash terms over the next four years, but will be reduced by inflation. However, the Browne report itself made mention of the need to continue

<sup>3</sup> John Browne, *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education In England: an independent review of higher education funding and student finance* (London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2010), online resource, consulted 25 November 2010.

funding for 'strategically important languages'. While this gave some hope, no one is yet quite clear exactly what is meant by 'strategically important' in this context and, at the time of writing, we are still lobbying for this to include all languages and not simply languages which are important to business (e.g. Mandarin and Arabic) or to national security and counter-terrorism measures (e.g. Pashtu and Persian). The increase in tuition fees will also have a very significant impact on student recruitment, and the reduction in research funding, although not as severe as feared, will adversely affect modern languages and other humanities, since the sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine are to be prioritised.

The rapid expansion of international and transnational education may well offer a major opportunity for all those teaching and researching in the modern languages, but it represents also a significant challenge. In this context of challenge and opportunity, it is vital that we are able to define, articulate and communicate not only what is excellent about French Studies but what is distinctive, and we trust that this volume will contribute to that vital process.

As students travel more and more to different countries for their higher education, and as they have different expectations in terms of their student experience and of their employment prospects, all disciplines need radically to rethink their curricula with regard to the changing needs of students and of employers (including universities). A thorough overhaul of the curricula of French Studies and other languages is clearly called for, as is much closer cooperation with, and creative challenge to, primary schools and secondary schools in their own development of French Studies curricula. As far as research is concerned, collaboration must be the way forward, both with other departments within individual universities, between modern foreign language departments and language centres, between UK and overseas universities – and collaboration with business, industry and government must be stepped up at all levels. While we must never adopt a purely utilitarian approach, we need to work strategically with organisations like the Confederation of Business and Industry (CBI) who stressed the importance of language skills two seminar reports,<sup>4</sup> and we also need to lobby government more effectively, stressing the fact that interlinguistic competencies and intercultural skills have key roles in 'soft power' as well as in business and the fostering of global citizenship. French Studies can give a lead in the various redefinings that are necessary, stressing how the study of French, as a flagship discipline for modern foreign languages in the UK, helps our students fully to become active and creative global citizens.

4 Confederation of British Industry (CBI), *Emerging Stronger: the Value of Education and Skills in Turbulent Times* (London: CBI, 2009); CBI, *Stronger Together: Businesses and Universities in Turbulent Times: a report from the CBI Higher Education Task Force* (London: CBI, 2009).

The decade ahead will be a time of some painful reconstruction, but as a community, we do well to remember that globalisation and transnational education have changed for ever the circumstances within which we operate as educators and researchers and are necessitating radical changes in the ways in which learning, teaching and research can take place. Since the development of the 'infinite library' of the internet, we are having to question our traditional conceptions of how much we can actually know and also our conceptions of how we should actually learn when knowledge is constantly expanding and changing, and when it is managed by no single authority. Both reality and knowledge in the virtual world are constructed consensually by communities of readers and texts, and hierarchies between learners and teachers are dissolved. We also need to teach scepticism much more actively than in the past, since the authority of the reference book is no longer what it was. In this new world, our programmes and the learning materials that we use need to be ever more self-consciously aware and we need constantly to explore how language and culture are bound up with issues of ownership and with the question of how any given language and culture is managed, both by its 'originating' or its host country and globally.

In the case of French Studies, questions of cultural ownership and of national, cultural or linguistic identity have become vital research questions and are slowly becoming important elements of some taught courses. With this interrogation of ownership and identity come other questionings, which aim both to determine the specificity of the Frenchness of French culture and, indeed, of French Studies and conversely to explore the ways in which French culture has been 'exploded' conceptually and geographically and how French Studies is increasingly defined in terms of its cross-cultural interactions. Several of the essays in this volume precisely argue that French Studies is now best defined in terms of its multidisciplinaryity. This has great benefits in research and in teaching and learning, yet it poses problems in terms of developing and articulating a coherent identity. Taking another perspective, some essays also argue for the 'feminine' nature of French culture and of French Studies in the UK, while yet others highlight the diversity of provision in French Studies in the UK. And while we would want to celebrate such multiplicity of approach, it does pose problems in terms of developing and communicating a coherent, if complex message about the purpose and identity of French Studies.

The discussions and debates that led to this volume have been wide-ranging and energetic, with attention being paid both to important sub-disciplines, such as literature, linguistics, translation, cinema, popular studies, postcolonial studies, and so on and to the new contexts in which French Studies operates, such as a greater focus in universities on interdisciplinarity, the challenging funding situation, the importance of establishing new partnerships with business and industry, including a much greater focus on employability, the potential

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for UK French Studies to engage in 'soft power' and diplomatic engagements, and so on.

The mood of debates around languages in the UK remains dark and gloomy, yet it is vital that we find ways not only to face the challenging future but also to find ways of helping to shape that future. In this, we clearly need to work together, establishing new partnerships and a culture of creatively challenging collaboration. We give details in Annexe 1 of the ways in which the French government, through a variety of agencies and approaches, is collaborating with universities in the UK, and many of the essays in this volume set out how the UK French Studies community is redefining both itself and its agenda through ever-increasing interdisciplinary work and interdepartmental and inter-institutional working.

The future for the discipline and for those working in it is fraught with challenges, but if we learn to create innovative partnerships both within the national and international academic community and with the world of business, we shall create a discipline that will be creatively and effectively responsive to the needs and demands of our complex, globalised twenty-first century.

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## Annexe 1 French Government Support for UK French Studies

There has always been a close relationship in higher education between France and the UK. However, over the past two decades there have been significant changes and reforms in both the French and the UK systems, with yet more being implemented or planned. The face of higher education throughout Europe and, indeed, globally is changing, and therefore it is even more urgent that France and the UK cooperate as closely and effectively as possible. The French government is taking forward this cooperation in a variety of ways, which are set out below.

### *The Value of Vigilance: Keeping a Watching Brief*

The global market for higher education needs to be closely watched. Our ongoing analysis of UK higher education allows us to assess the advantages and drawbacks of UK policy choices, the hopes and worries that they raise, and the lessons to be drawn for France.

#### *Actions*

- production of reports on academic developments in both countries
- creation of a forum of 'best practices' and 'benchmarking'
- development of exchanges and intense executive education programmes between university vice-chancellors and their administrative teams in both countries.

### *The Promotion of French Higher Education*

The international league tables do not include most French universities and this fact has been harmful to their image. One of the main objectives of the Attaché for Higher Education is to promote French universities and *grandes écoles*, and to encourage student mobility between the two countries.

#### *Actions to raise the profile of French HE*

- participation in carefully selected student fairs
- support of partnership projects between British and French universities (visits by representatives of French universities and *grandes écoles* to gather information about the governance of UK universities to be used in the implementation of the French reform on university autonomy)
- strengthening of the *entente cordiale* scholarship scheme, as this scheme allows an orientation of students towards the best institutions and laboratories, where they will be given a warm welcome; as years

- go by, the alumni network grows in size and influence in Franco-British circles
- development of fundraising to support international student mobility.

*The Development of Scientific and Academic Networks (Student and Researcher Mobility; Dual Diplomas; Agence Nationale de la Recherche; CNRS; Invitations and Visiting Professorships)*

The Bologna Process for the creation of the European Higher Education Area has given a new impetus to cooperation in higher education between the member countries of the EU, including France and the UK. The forthcoming completion of the 2000–2010 phase of the Bologna Process will allow us to make a first positive assessment (since a majority of partner institutions now regard the development of a European Higher Education Area as vital) and to open new perspectives for the next phase – after 2010. These objectives will be achieved through a close collaboration between the Maison Française d'Oxford and the Science and Technology Department of the French Embassy.

*Actions*

- as in past years, creation of dual diplomas and joint PhDs, including new areas of research
- arrangement of visiting professorships for French academics and researchers
- development of research networks with the help of the Science and Technology Department of the French Embassy (ANR projects, Research Councils, etc.)
- exploration of cooperation opportunities in professional training (in collaboration with the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills), especially in the field of ecology and renewable energies.

*Conferences and Seminars, French Studies, Debates*

In recent decades, many French Studies departments have become part of other departments such as European studies, international studies, media studies, cinema studies, and so on, thereby widening the impact of our cooperation. Furthermore, learned societies specialising in French Studies are privileged partners with whom to hold debates on important current issues. Many of the officers of these societies hold positions of responsibility in the most prestigious universities.

*Actions*

- as in past years, invitations to the UK of academics from French institutions

- support of conferences and seminars by the French Studies network
- participation of French universities and *grandes écoles* in important international conferences organised by British institutions.

This represents a significant programme of support and cooperation across the full range of HE provision in the UK. As our two countries take forward their national strategies, it is clear that there is divergence in many of the aspects of the reforms, but there is also a shared vision of placing HE at the heart of the social and economic developments of our two countries. The number of collaborations in both teaching and research grows steadily from year to year. We need to ensure that this growth continues – and also that our collaborations are increasingly strategic.

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