



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



The status, role and future of Russian language training and Slavonic studies in the Scottish education system

Scotland-Russia Institute, 9 South College Street, Edinburgh,
1pm-5pm, Monday 28th May, 2012

Final Report

Language training and related learning are crucial for determining our collective understanding of Russia and the countries of Central & Eastern Europe. Without proficiency in the languages of the region, academic research is seriously devalued, political and business opportunities are misunderstood or else simply missed, and the region as a whole is relegated to a peripheral place within our society. The workshop was therefore predicated on the conviction that matters of language training and learning lie at the heart of any attempt to 'translate' culture.

The workshop was intended to bring together a range of interested parties from schools, universities as well as cultural organisations, in order to reflect critically on the current status of language training (particularly Russian, but also other Slavonic languages) in Scotland's education system and within the context of a broader political debate over the place and roll of language learning. Slavonic languages have suffered from marked cuts in Higher Education provision in recent years and these have been replicated at the school level with the withdrawal of national exams in Russian from 2015 and only one school left with Russian on the curriculum. The workshop also provided the opportunity to reflect on the recent publication of the Scottish government report: 'Language learning in Scotland: A 1+2 approach.'¹

The workshop had the following main aims:

1. To examine the current status of teaching and training concerning the Russian language and Slavonic studies in the UK, and particularly the Scottish, education system.
2. To consider the potential value of such teaching and training within the context of the UK education system as well as UK society more broadly.
3. To reflect upon existing initiatives for furthering and advancing learning and understanding related to Russian language and culture within the UK.
4. To determine purposeful ways in which to bolster the status and sustainability of Russian, and Slavonic studies more broadly, within the UK/Scottish education system.

¹ The report can be downloaded from the following site: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/05/3670>

The workshop was divided into two general sessions. The first session explored **Russian language teaching & Slavonic studies within the Scottish education system**, and included three paper contributions. *Martin Dewhurst's* paper ('How to improve and increase the teaching of Russian in Scotland'), reflected on the achievements of a school based in the southeast of England which has managed to increase the uptake of Russian amongst its pupils to a considerable extent in recent years. In trying to explain this increase, Martin highlighted the importance of factors such as the intriguing, and yet accessible, nature of the language, its relevance within the context of a globalising world, and the potential offered by Russia with respect to future areas of work and employment. Beyond these relatively well-understood reasons, he went on to determine three key areas of innovation: (i) the organisation of an annual trip to Russia for the pupils, (ii) the existence of an active Slavonic Society (which deliberately engages with other Slavonic countries beyond Russia via talks and discussions etc.) within the school and (iii) the development of a stimulating range of course materials allied to dedicated teaching staff. Furthermore, the school has also employed a native Russian speaker as one of the Russian teachers and this, it was felt, provided a strong impetus for Russian language learning within the school. The strong and consistent support of the Head teacher with respect to promoting the Russian language was also acknowledged.

Jenny Carr's paper focussed on 'How the SRF is trying to reverse the decline of school Russian in Scotland'. She began by noting the marked decline in uptake of Russian at Highers level during the last 40 years within a broader decline in language provision in general. Furthermore, the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) has decided to abolish the national exams in Russian by 2015 with limited scope for interested schools to utilise the comparable English examinations (GCSE and GCE) due to curriculum and associated differences. Jenny also made the point that the majority of the small number of Scotland's Russian language students tend to have some link with the region. In order to try and redress this situation, the SRF is active in a number of areas including: (i) lobbying activity, (ii) working with schools, (iii) running language classes, taster sessions and clubs and (iv) participation in relevant multilingual events across Scotland.

Simon Macaulay, as chair of the working group underpinning the aforementioned Scottish government report on language learning in Scotland, provided some reflections on the future for Russian language in schools. Importantly for Russian, Simon noted that the report was supportive of early start (age 5) for initiating learning in a second language within the context of the mooted "1+2" policy (pupils' right to learn 2 languages in addition to their mother tongue), and for a greater diversity of languages to be offered, to include important non-European languages.

The second session (**Russian & Slavonic studies and the UK education sector**) also incorporated three papers. *Jon Oldfield* opened the session by providing an overview of the development of Slavonic Area Studies in the UK post-1945. He drew attention to the key role played by a series of government initiated reviews, the formalisation of cultural relations between the UK and the Soviet Union, and the activities of the Joint Services School for Linguists.

Clare McManus as Co-Director of the Centre for Russian, Central & East European Studies (CRCEES), reflected on the current work and future initiatives of this inter-institutional Centre of Excellence in Russian, Central and East European Language-Based Area Studies. Funded in its second phase by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), CRCEES is active in areas of knowledge exchange, networking and capacity building. Clare highlighted a range of new initiatives including network building, paid placements at leading cultural organisations such as the British Library, and ongoing support for postgraduate training in research methods and language as well as the development of online language resources.

Nina Kruglikova is currently completing her doctorate at the University of Oxford and also works for the Russian Centre (Russkiy Mir Program), University of Oxford. Her paper reflected on the activities of this new Russkiy Mir initiative. Russkiy Mir is a joint project of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science and supported by both public and private funds with the main aim of promoting the Russian language abroad. The Oxford Centre joins similar centres based in Edinburgh and London. It organises a range of cultural events, roundtables and symposia open to the public.

The workshop was attended by more than 20 participants representing Scottish schools, higher education institutions as well as Russian language and cultural organisations.