

Government in embarrassing U-turn over foreign language study

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Education Secretary Alan Johnson has paved the way for a humiliating U-turn over the downgrading of foreign languages in secondary schools.

He launched a major new inquiry into language learning to halt a dramatic decline in the numbers choosing to take them at GCSE and A-level.

He signalled the Government would be prepared to "reverse" its controversial decision to allow teenagers to opt out of studying languages from the age of 14.

Subjects such as French and German have slumped in popularity since schools were given the go-ahead two years ago to make languages optional at GCSE.

Mr Johnson told the Commons that if the inquiry "says to us this strategy is wrong and we should go into reverse, we will listen to that advice and we will do that."

However he said he continued to believe "forcing" 14 to 16-year-olds to study languages was not the right approach.

Mr Johnson went on to confess he shared the "deep disappointment" over the dwindling numbers studying languages, declaring: "That cannot be right, we have to do something about it."

Entrants for GCSEs in French and German have plummeted by a quarter since languages became non-compulsory in September 2004. German has fallen below the 100,000 mark for the first time. Even Spanish, which had enjoyed a surge in popularity, has seen a recent decline.

Youngsters have instead flocked to subjects derided in some quarters as "mickey mouse" such as media studies.

The Department for Education yesterday highlighted a new obligation placed on primary schools to allow all children aged seven and above to learn a language by 2010.

But the decision to launch the review suggests ministers are concerned the initiative will not be enough to arrest the declining popularity at GCSE and A-level.

The decision to downgrade languages triggered uproar, with ambassadors from several European countries bemoaning a "sad situation".

Teachers' leaders hit out at a "complete disaster" and warned that British teenagers would be disadvantaged in the job market. Late last year ministers took desperate damage limitation measures by announcing that schools from this term would be expected to

ensure at least half of pupils study a language until they are 16.

But now Mr Johnson has ordered a full-scale review of policy on languages teaching. It will be led by top educationalist Lord Dearing, who has spearheaded previous Government inquiries covering higher education policy, the national curriculum and tests.

He will be expected to help schools introduce a wider range of language qualifications aside from GCSEs to encourage more youngsters to study them.

He has also been asked to recommend "incentives" for schools and pupils to continue with languages after 14.

One idea likely to be considered is designing some new specialist diplomas - due to be introduced in 2008 - to include a compulsory element of language study.

Youngsters taking, for example, a leisure and tourism qualification may be asked to master a modern foreign language.

Lord Dearing said he would "start from scratch", adding: "I believe the answers to the questions we have about the recent decline in modern languages are out there in the education community and it is my job to find them."

* THE first review of primary education for 40 years is launched on Friday amid fears that schools have been landed with too many ill-conceived initiatives.

Parents, pupils and teachers will be invited to submit their views to a Cambridge University panel which is leading a two-year independent inquiry.

The wide-ranging review, involving 30 new academic studies, will investigate all aspects of primary education including concerns about over-testing, falling standards, the gender gap, use of computers and influence of the media.

The leader of the inquiry, Wolfson College's Professor Robin Alexander, said: "We have had getting on for 20 years of pretty well non-stop reform, which has greatly accelerated since 1997. The initiatives have been coming thick and fast. Every day almost there is another one and teachers feel snowed under. We want to stand back a bit and ask what it all adds up to."