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8 Careers Using Languages: how to set up a conference for schools

Alison Hayes¹

1. Introduction

Since 2011, York St John University (YSJU) has run an annual one-day ‘Careers using Languages’ conference for schools in Yorkshire and Humberside. It has the aim of demonstrating to school students the opportunities in life that speaking a foreign language opens up as well as showing how they will be able to offer an added bonus to their future employers if they maintain their language skills.

The conference programme includes a high-profile keynote speaker with wide experience of using languages in their career, while the rest of the day comprises a range of interactive workshops.

It is advertised to local schools, including those with a high Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) score, and their feedback has always been overwhelmingly positive.

So far the event has been funded by Routes into Languages and supported by York St John Business School, and has become a fixture of our Widening Participation (WP) activities.

Keywords: languages, careers, schools, employability.

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2. What we do

“Close to half of businesses (45%) recognise foreign language skills among their employees as beneficial” (CBI, 2015, p. 7).

Primarily, the Careers using Languages event aims to convey to school students the message that having some language skills will increase the variety and the level of jobs available to them, even if languages are not the main focus of their job or career, hence the title of the event: not Careers in Languages but Careers using Languages.

The students who attend are mainly in Years 9 and 10, usually between 13 and 16 years old, and typically are studying one or more languages at school. It is hoped that they will be inspired and motivated by the event to continue studying languages at A-level and beyond, and that in the future they will be aware of and interested in the possibilities that languages can create.

Engaging keynote speakers who have a career in an industry other than the obvious language-based areas of teaching, translating and interpreting are invited. An example is Sally Fagan of Business Language Champions (<http://business-language-champions.co.uk/>), who has an impressive background in international sales. She explained how she was employed because of her languages and trained in engineering and sales by her employers, as they felt this would be far quicker than employing an engineer and training them in languages. The keynote speaker for the 2015 conference was a representative from the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), who explained to students how languages can be useful in the world of James Bond!

The parallel sessions which comprise the rest of the day are mainly interactive; for example, getting students to create a French or Spanish marketing campaign, how languages are used in the hospitality industry, volunteering abroad, using culture and body-language when communicating internationally, studying abroad, language and culture tasters in Japanese, Arabic and British Sign Language, and also a hands-on introduction to interpreting.

“There is value in language learning for students of all disciplines and for individuals of all ages, throughout life” ([Born Global Symposium, 2014](#), p. 36).

In addition, the event gives students a taste of university life: the chance to see that it is a welcoming, lively place, and they are able to meet and ask questions to current undergraduate students in the form of Student Ambassadors, including during an optional tour of the campus at the end of the day, when students can see the range of facilities on offer.

The event has been funded by Routes into Languages for the last five years, and publicised to schools throughout the region, particularly those with a high IMD score, as this is the purpose of Routes into Languages: to encourage participation in Higher Education (HE) from schools with low involvement. These are the students who can often benefit most from the breaking down of perceived barriers or misconceptions about HE through a day of inspiring language and culture events in a university environment.

3. Discussion of outcomes

Feedback from staff and students after each event has been overwhelmingly positive:

“All lectures and taster sessions were well planned and well delivered. Found the opening lecture interesting as to the roles in industry having a language can benefit”, said one teacher, and student comments included: “I really enjoyed this event, it has made me look further into studying languages”; “Motivated my thinking about languages and my future”; “I would like more opportunities in the future to do events like this” ([Routes into Languages, 2015](#), p. 1).

While YSJU has often been involved in running taster sessions or masterclasses on school premises, it is also important to hold events at YSJU, in order to give

students a taste of HE as well as input on careers. Events have also been run on campus comprising language tasters and an ‘Introduction to HE talk by the marketing department, but these tended to involve one school at a time. The Careers using Languages conference involves students from five or six different schools, and while students tend to remain within their school groups, it is beneficial for them to see others from different institutions and possibly observe different attitudes to languages and careers amongst their peers.

4. Conclusion

Although Routes into Languages funding is coming to an end, YSJU intends to continue to hold the conference using funding from other sources. As this event has become a regular part of the YSJU Business School’s WP activities, hopefully it will endure and evolve for many years to come. The Born Global Symposium’s Interim Report states that:

“Young people who can connect with others through their languages and through a shared understanding of diverse cultures are at an advantage in the global labour market over their monolingual peers” (The British Academy, 2014, p. 21).

The Languages team at YSJU hope that in a small way their event contributes to this.

References and links

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Employability for languages: a handbook

Edited by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett

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