

December 2004

ARABIC (*data removed*) SPEAKERS IN THE FCO

1. The Foreign Secretary asked how we develop and manage our Arabic-speaking cadre. This response is set in the context of language training as a whole (*data removed*)

Establishing a Cadre and Filling Positions

2. Language training depends on our training officers for particular vacancies. Posts determine the requirement for each job on the basis of the business need. To promote a consistent approach, we have recently drawn up guidance on the levels of language skill likely to be needed in each of the main job categories. In this way, we build up cadres of hard language speakers from which to draw in filling jobs, and identify a number of policy and service delivery jobs overseas as 'training positions'. Officers in Bands C and B (usually new entrants) are boarded into these and put through a Hard Language Programme before starting in Post. It is made clear to these officers that they will be expected to serve more than once in the relevant overseas Posts.

3. When speaker positions at more senior levels are boarded, staff with existing language skills are actively encouraged to bid. It is rare, at the most senior levels, to find no-one willing to do so. Non-speakers can if necessary be appointed and trained. But the time and cost involved, particularly for hard languages, is clearly impractical. We encourage hard linguist officers to recognise their unique selling points in bidding realistically for jobs. But we cannot in the final analysis force people to serve where they do not wish.

4. The greater emphasis on work/life balance, on family friendly policies and on spouse careers has led to increasing reluctance both to undertake hard language training and, thereafter, to return for subsequent postings. As a result, we do have difficulties finding bidders with the right mix of language and other skills not only for some Arabic-speaking jobs but also in China and Japan. We have much less difficulty filling Russian-speaking slots, for which the training period is shorter.

Arabic (*data removed*)

5. Arabic (*data removed*) training programmes usually involve 8 months full-time training in the UK followed by 10 months in the region. We use three centres for Arabic - Cairo, Damascus and Amman - to allow for linguistic variations in their destination Post. Events in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused an increase in the number of speaker slots (*data removed*). Although the number of junior trainees has increased proportionately, they have yet to feed through into middle ranking jobs. So the increased demand has resulted in stretched resources, with a significant impact on other Posts in the region. This has been compounded by the increased security threat which has made it more difficult to attract qualified bidders for jobs in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. We expect demand to remain at this higher level for the medium term. However, at the time of writing, all

speaker slots in MENA and Iraq Directorates are filled (except for one currently being trawled).

Filling hard language speaker jobs over the longer term

6. We are exploring ways to address this. These include:

- Recruiting more new entrants with existing language skills, including targeting Arabic-speaking communities and university departments, changing our criteria so that more weight is given to language skills. There may be difficulties with this. Some may not meet our nationality requirements; numbers of foreign language university departments and students are falling; there is competing demand for Arabists across Whitehall and the private sector; and many linguists prefer to diversify their skills by serving in a different part of the world for their first overseas posting. Nonetheless, increased recruitment of linguists offers a potentially cost-effective means of boosting the size of our existing cadres;
- Making the training more attractive: to encourage new entrants to put themselves forward, we might review the length of training and conditions for immersion (e.g. in Cairo/Amman/Damascus) as well as the travel and allowances package to ensure a more family friendly policy. But this will have extra costs;
- The review currently underway of the Boarding system is looking at possible changes to our postings policy and procedures. This is due to report to the Board early next year. It will look closely at the scope to require all C4 new entrants with the aptitude for hard language training or with an existing language skill to bid for a certain number of hard language jobs and make this an understood part of the package when they join. More radically, the Review could also consider establishing a requirement for speakers to bid for speaker slot jobs or face some form of sanction (such as losing language continuation allowances);
- Taking a more strategic view, by establishing mechanisms that will ensure, as far as practicable, that long-term needs are factored into current recruitment, boarding and training. We are working towards devolving language (and other) training budgets to Directorates, giving them clear responsibility for planning ahead and an incentive to find creative ways to meet their needs. PRISM, once fully functioning, will provide an accurate, readily-accessible database of all speaker slots and all speakers and facilitate workforce planning and enable the devolution of training budgets. The Professional Skills for Government initiative will put greater weight, in career progression/promotion, on skills, particularly hard languages.

7. There are other courses open to us as well, which might be more problematical:

- we could train a pool of speakers so that we can react more quickly to changing demands. But it is extremely difficult to motivate someone to learn a hard

language if they do not know whether there will be a relevant job at the end of the training; and it is also difficult to justify the considerable costs if the skills learned are not subsequently put to good use;

- We have cut back language continuation allowances, but they have been retained in a reduced form for hard languages. Increasing these to a significant extent might encourage staff to maintain their skills. But it would be costly and would not in itself guarantee that the right people would bid for hard-to-fill speaker jobs;
- shorter tour lengths might encourage officers to undertake return postings. The downside would be less continuity at posts;
- faster promotion and improved long-term career prospects: but we do not want to damage the integrity of the ADC process; and more people now want varied careers rather than being typecast to one region;
- golden ticket for next posting (ie by taking up a particular job, an officer is given preference at the next selection board): this scheme is already having an effect and at recent boards ten officers who had previously served in Iraq were able to secure further jobs using their golden tickets;
- financial incentives: allowances are probably at the maximum we can afford.

Conclusion

8. For the short term, we are managing to cope with the increased demand for Arabists. But overcoming the difficulties in placing more people with the right mix of skills in hard language jobs is likely to require a mix of some or all of the ideas above. We will explore this actively and I will submit a further report to Ministers when we have worked through the findings of the Boarding Review.

(data removed)