

# The Languages Crisis: Arresting decline

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With a Foreword by the Rt Hon. Sir Nick Gibb



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duolingo

## About the author

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## Foreword

### **By the Rt Hon. Sir Nick Gibb, former Minister for Schools**

Prior to 2004, and the fateful decision of the then Government to end the compulsion to study a foreign language to the end of Key Stage 4 (age 16), three-quarters of young people took a GCSE in a foreign language, mostly French (318,000 entries in 2004), German (122,000) and Spanish (64,000).

In the years after 2004, with languages compulsory only to the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14) the proportion taking the GCSE plummeted to just 43% by 2010. And without the necessity of taking the subject to GCSE, many pupils failed to take even those three years of study seriously.

When we came into office in 2010, Michael Gove and I sought to reverse this embarrassing decline. We introduced a new school accountability measure, the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). This reported the proportion of students in each school entered for a specific combination of core academic subjects that provided the widest future opportunities: English, Maths, at least two Sciences, a Humanity and a Foreign Language. As a result, we saw a jump in the proportion of pupils taking a language GCSE to around half, then settling at about 45% afterwards.

Alas, it failed to go further despite reforms to the grading and subject content of the Modern Foreign Languages GCSE, designed to make them fairer and clearer to study for. In 2016, we sought to improve the way languages are taught in our schools by commissioning Sir Ian Bauckham, the executive head teacher of Bennett Memorial Diocesan School and a former languages teacher, to draft a best practice guide to teaching languages - the *Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review*.

In 2016, we also introduced the Mandarin Excellence Programme with a select group of schools (now around 100) teaching Mandarin to pupils prepared to commit to eight hours of study a week. Around 10,000 students are now participants and are on track to fluency.

I hope Megan Bowler's excellent report will inspire schools and pupils to take the study of languages seriously and encourage more schools to insist the majority of their pupils study a language through to GCSE.

In an increasingly competitive world economy, we owe it to the next generation to ensure they are as prepared as their contemporaries overseas to compete in this environment. England is now fourth in the world in the reading ability of our 9 and 10-year-olds (PIRLS) and eleventh in the world in Maths (PISA). We need to make the same progress in our ability to speak and write in the languages of the world around us.

## Introduction

**By Michael Lynas, UK Country Director, Duolingo**

We launched the Duolingo Westminster Language Challenge with a simple goal: to re-energise the conversation around languages in the UK. Over 200 parliamentarians took part, completing 65,000 lessons in everything from Spanish and French to Vietnamese and Zulu. In doing so, they reminded us that the appetite to learn languages is alive and well. It just doesn't always show up in the places we're used to looking.

This report, five years on from HEPI's landmark *A Languages Crisis*, comes at a critical moment. At a time when technology is reshaping how we learn, when support for formal language learning is under pressure, and when national cohesion and global connection matter more than ever, we need to rethink the role that languages play in our society.

Too often, the conversation about language learning in the UK is framed negatively: that we're no good at it, that young people aren't interested, that English is enough. The evidence says otherwise. Our own data show that the UK ranks second globally for the proportion of learners studying more than one language. And it's under-22s who are leading the charge, choosing Japanese, Korean and Chinese in increasing numbers.

What we're missing is not interest, but good pathways. We need a national approach that joins the dots between early enthusiasm and formal opportunity; between self-directed learning and academic recognition; between the languages we speak at home, and the languages we're supported to learn at school.

That's why we're proud to sponsor this report. It sets out clearly and persuasively what's at stake, and what can be done. It shows that languages aren't a luxury – they're a bridge: helping us connect across cultures, compete in global markets and build a more empathetic, outward-looking society.

At Duolingo, we'll keep doing our part – supporting teachers and learners, working with universities, supporting migrants to learn English and engaging millions every day in the joy of learning a new language.

But we also know that the change this report envisages will only come through collaboration – between policymakers, educators, innovators and learners themselves. Our hope is that this report helps catalyse that conversation, and that the momentum we've seen in Parliament can now spread more widely to universities, classrooms and communities across the UK.

## Executive summary

This report illustrates the deep challenges faced by language educators, whether their specialism is classical, modern, heritage or other types of languages, such as British Sign Language.

The benefits of learning languages and developing a 'linguistic mindset' are clear. They include critical thinking skills, improved communication, creativity, intercultural understanding and empathy.

Yet language learning has been declining and now faces huge challenges. For example:

- only 2.97% of A-Levels taken in 2024 were for Modern Foreign Languages, Classical Subjects, Welsh (Second Language) and Irish;
- there are more A-Level entries for Physical Education than for French, German and Classical Languages combined;
- the percentage of Year 11 pupils studying a language for GCSE is 20 percentage points lower in poorer areas than affluent ones (69% versus 46-47%);
- language teacher recruitment consistently falls well below government targets – in 2024, just 43% of the target was reached;
- declines in the uptake of Languages degree programmes have continued across all modern language groups each year since 2020, when the previous HEPI report on the issue was published; and
- since 2014, 17 post-1992 universities have lost their modern languages degrees, bringing the total closures to 28 and leaving modern languages in just 10.

Language skills remain important for the UK's competitiveness in trade and research and it is well documented that improving language skills would yield economic benefit. So now is the time to invest in, rather than cut, the provision of languages.



The report includes 10 clear recommendations for the future.

- 1. Action on teacher recruitment:** Schools are underequipped to support languages. Desirable changes include the Westminster Government easing the pathway for international language teachers, such as reinstating the international relocation payment for trainee teachers (cut in April 2024). Professional development for teachers to deliver plurilingual opportunities should also be a priority.
- 2. Offer alternative qualification pathways:** Language-learning opportunities should be a statutory entitlement for pupils up to 18. In England, a GCSE in a language should continue to remain a requirement rather than an option for the EBacc there should be additional opportunities at Key Stage 4 for gaining qualifications, such as a streamlined vocational qualification focused on practical language knowledge and intercultural skills. Alternative qualification pathways could also broaden the post-16 curriculum – most obviously via a Level 3 certificate in Applied Languages, comparable to Level 3 Core Mathematics.
- 3. Revitalise language hubs:** The Department for Education should look to expand, rather than downgrade, the hub-based approach to facilitating training and resources, and create networks for languages beyond French, German and Spanish. These should also aim to help state schools benefit from the staff and resources of the independent school sector, and create links with higher education providers.
- 4. Enhance recognition of multilingualism:** Languages spoken at home or taught in supplementary schools would especially benefit from centralised support. It is thought around one-in-five UK pupils are bilingual to some degree. So it would make sense to improve guidance for schools on how to support home learners and liaise with external providers to streamline the pathway to qualification entries, as well as sharing information about available teachers, examiners and existing networks.

- 5. Do not forget about British Sign Language (BSL):** The GCSE qualification in BSL, and a clear plan for staffing and resources to support the incorporation of it in schools and higher education institutions, is overdue. Improving awareness and understanding of this language has a strongly egalitarian dimension.
- 6. Make languages a priority in higher education:** Higher education institutions should be conscious of the vicious cycle created by the loss of high-level language expertise when making decisions about curriculum reviews and cuts. Institutions should look for ways to strengthen language provision, including more joint provision with other departments or with language specialists at other institutions.
- 7. Improved oversight of languages in higher education:** Diverse language provision tends to result from coordinated government support and should not just be left to the vagaries of student demand. This could be critical in preserving instruction for small but strategically important languages.
- 8. Targeted government funding to support languages in higher education:** Interventions to prevent the loss of strategic languages and reduce regional cold spots could yield valuable returns, as could facilitating access to Institution-Wide Language Provision.
- 9. Design pathways for lifelong language learning:** This could in time include incorporating modular language courses as part of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) but also the expansion of alternative 'applied language' qualifications for learners of all ages.
- 10. Establish a clear voice for language issues in government:** For instance, this could take the form of an equivalent to Chief Scientific Advisers, in order to co-ordinate the above proposals and provide regular updates on research-informed evidence about languages.

## 1. 'Rebranding' languages skills

New challenges and opportunities have emerged for language-learning in school and higher education in the five years since HEPI's publication of *A Languages Crisis?* in early 2020. Some positive developments have taken place since that report, in particular the growth of a joined-up approach to languages across schools, higher education institutions and policymakers. These include the publication of *Towards a National Language Strategy* by the British Academy in collaboration with other research, university and school associations, and in 2023 the launch of the 'Languages Gateway', a resource and advocacy portal for learners, teachers, researchers and policymakers.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Government have developed a strategy for promoting and investing in Gaelic and Scots, and recently the Scottish Languages Bill was passed to protect these as official languages.<sup>2</sup> Enthusiasm for the Irish language among the next generation appears to be growing in Northern Ireland, with uptake rising at Key Stage 3 and more pupils taking this language for A-Level than French.<sup>3</sup> In 2023, the Department for Education in England funded a new National Consortium for Languages Education (building on the work of the former National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy). This consortium delivered 'language hubs', with 15 lead schools working to revitalise French, Spanish and German across state schools in England. However, the future of this model is uncertain, with plans to reduce funding and shift primarily to online professional development.<sup>4</sup> As we will see, this reluctance to prioritise languages in the face of financial uncertainties is a common theme of this report.

We can also observe the impact of new factors on the state of language learning in the UK: the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term effects on pedagogical practice, and the rise of new technological developments in artificial intelligence (AI). This HEPI Report first makes the case for why language learning must gain, rather than lose, relevance in this changing context, and then provides an update on school qualifications and the 'leaky pipeline' for languages in higher education, before making some specific policy recommendations.

The Department for Education's decision in December 2024 to scrap the Latin Excellence Programme compelled me to reflect with greater urgency on how we can better articulate the value of ancient and modern languages.<sup>5</sup> It is regrettable that we are losing a programme which, for a modest £4 million, brought GCSE Latin to students from non-selective state schools who chose to participate (over a third of whom were eligible for Free School Meals).<sup>6</sup> The decision indicates that such perceptions of languages as elitist and out-of-touch are now at risk of becoming 'a self-fulfilling prophecy', given that this was the very divide which the Latin Excellence Programme aimed to mitigate.<sup>7</sup> Languages are evidently still at risk of being perceived as outdated relative to other subjects. In an age of economic challenges and technological transformation, the emphasis on utility and relevance is likely to persist. A clearer case needs to be made for the benefits of engaging with languages, literature and culture, observing clear skills that have practical importance specifically for the 2020s and beyond.

## **How is AI changing languages education?**

A major development in Artificial Intelligence (AI) – computer systems that perform tasks usually requiring human intelligence – is the rise of Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, which are trained on large sets of text and capable of generating human-like responses. Most language tools, such as for translation, rely on Machine Learning (ML), a method where systems learn patterns from data: in particular, they are trained on huge language datasets, assigning values and probabilities to each input to predict and generate text (Deep Learning).

In many ways, the advent of popular LLMs is not such a sea change for linguists, who had already navigated the changing landscape of their field in the previous decade with improvements to digital translation, notably Google Translate's neural machine translation.<sup>8</sup> The role of the human translator continues to shift to that of a human linguistic consultant: making use of digital technology but providing crucial oversight in the form of imaginative flair, cultural nuance and geopolitical awareness.<sup>9</sup> Human linguists also contribute trustworthiness in contexts where precise details are consequential, such as legal contracts or international policy and diplomacy.

However, LLMs are most notably changing the way in which students go about learning and practising a language. The convenience of AI-powered apps – including Duolingo, which has over 500 million users – are increasing language-learning outside of conventional academic settings.<sup>10</sup> LLM-based chatbots can ‘role play’ as a languages teacher or conversation partner, and may be a useful tool for offering corrections and explaining grammar or vocabulary.<sup>11</sup> As LLMs use ML algorithms, they can adapt to individual learners’ progress, offering tailored exercises and spaced repetition schedules. As such, we should not dismiss their potential as a supplementary tool (such as for memorising vocabulary knowledge) and as an accessible starting-point for engagement with languages.

Nonetheless, these technologies are limited in their ability to instil grammatical and analytical skills, nor can they empathise with the learner’s experience. The use of AI in education also raises questions of bias in data training. Algorithms trained on languages with more limited datasets may reinforce inaccuracies and cultural assumptions, which can lead to the overgeneralisation and simplification of grammatical rules, misinterpretations of idioms and the generation of incorrect phrasing. In the case of languages with very small datasets, such as ancient Greek, LLMs fail to deliver any reliable level of accuracy.

This presents an opportunity, then, to clarify the perceived role of languages education and educators – much like the role of human translation – and to articulate the value of languages in school and higher education settings.

### **The linguist mindset: skills for the future**

The Government’s ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review places considerable emphasis on equipping students for the digital age, helping them to ‘achieve and thrive in the workplaces of the future.’<sup>12</sup> The rapid growth in the capability and accessibility of AI tools since 2022 indicates the skills and attributes needed for future work are evolving: the question of pinpointing the unique contributions of human input is no longer a mere thought experiment.

Languages might initially seem an unpromising candidate for this modern curriculum: if AI-enhanced tools can automate translation and streamline the learning process, what place does the study of ancient and modern languages have? Such a question mistakenly reduces language-learning to a process of training students to ‘convert’ one language into another. Languages education is better articulated as the development of a ‘linguistic mindset’. While some elements of the cognitive discipline that languages instil, such as the memorisation of a high volume of information, may be valued less in a modern context, language subjects are ideal for cultivating modes of thinking that ChatGPT cannot do for us, and offer a critical perspective that is needed in navigating and deploying these tools effectively. Moreover, computer coding is one of the many areas where the clarity and concision typically cultivated by languages is useful.

- 1. Close reading and fine-grain analysis:** The process of understanding sentences or passages in the target language, whether as a beginner or at an advanced level, necessitates problem-solving with a high level of attention to detail. This includes, for instance, picking up on grammatical distinctions and syntactical structures, and being observant of subtle clues rather than relying on assumptions and guesswork. This process of careful deduction, most famously associated with codebreaking and intelligence, offers transferable benefits for all kinds of high-level analysis.<sup>13</sup>
- 2. Critical thinking:** Another aspect that emerges from the observant literacy of the ‘linguistic’ mindset is the ability to think in evaluative and critically-engaged terms. The variety of analytical tools increases further for those who study a language to A-Level / International Baccalaureate and beyond, which requires students to sustain analytical interpretations of literature, theatre and film. Critical thinking is consistently cited as essential in response to the growth of AI: assessing claims, skilfully deploying evidence and identifying logical flaws, are all central to languages research. Since translations generated by LLMs can reiterate human biases – including political misinformation or the censorship of authoritarian regimes – human, critical expertise in languages is more important than ever.<sup>14</sup>

- 3. Linguistic precision:** A linguistic mindset also makes the learner attuned to semantic nuances. Languages students are in the habit of reflecting carefully, for instance, on why a particular word or construction has been chosen, its wider connotations and tone, and the avoidance of ambiguities or miscommunications. The value of this level of clarity, concision and nuance of expression – notoriously lacking from the reams of designedly vague and imprecise language produced by Generative AI – therefore stands out.
- 4. Oracy and communication:** another facet of this precise command of language is fluency and persuasiveness in oral as well as written communication. ‘Oracy’ – the ability to express yourself grammatically and clearly in spoken communication – has become a buzzword of education discourse in recent years.<sup>15</sup> Research by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy, and the charity Voice 21, highlight the role this skill plays in confidence, employability and social mobility. Oracy, once at the heart of classical language training in rhetoric, is also a focus of modern language education, which is currently the only subject area in which spoken language is part of statutory assessment.<sup>16</sup>
- 5. Confidence in vocabulary:** If you come across an unfamiliar word – whether in a target language or your native language – a linguistic approach encourages you to apply a methodical attitude rather than giving up. It is a mindset which not only expands students’ command of vocabulary and awareness of shared word roots, but makes them unflappable in the face of technical jargon or highbrow Latinate terms. This is a skill that is also transferable, for instance to unpicking scientific, medical or legalistic terminology.
- 6. Grammatical understanding:** Since English grammar is no longer taught in great depth, learning another language is often the primary way in which students learn about grammatical concepts and rules in their own language. While word-processing and AI-enhanced tools like Grammarly can correct mistakes, a linguistic mindset fosters a deeper understanding of *why* such rules exist: knowing when to use ‘I’ versus ‘me’, or ‘who’ versus ‘whom’, is more intuitive if you can think of these distinctions in terms of subject versus object.

- 7. Applying knowledge to real-world scenarios:** Part of the value of a linguistic mindset lies in having an incomplete knowledge of a target language – this condition compels you to think on your feet, applying knowledge of patterns, etymology and intuition derived from experience to new material. A challenge of language learning also lies in encountering real-world examples of writing or speech beyond the textbook, picking up on variations such as slang forms, regional differences or changes over time.
- 8. Creativity:** Finding ways of expressing yourself in other languages also cultivates lateral and creative modes of thinking. Recognising the differences between languages, and thinking laterally to find solutions to translating idioms and literary effects, promotes flexibility and mental agility.<sup>17</sup> Multilingualism also broadens students' access to and awareness of art, music, literature and media.
- 9. Interdisciplinarity:** The interdisciplinary nature of language subjects enables students to become adaptable and find unexpected connections between the vast array of topics that are encountered through the medium of another language. The linguistic mindset, therefore, is predisposed towards constructive collaboration with other fields of enquiry.
- 10. Intercultural awareness:** This is a crucial advantage of language study that cannot be superseded by machine translation. Studying a language involves engaging thoughtfully with its surrounding culture, traditions, history and current affairs, and this can aid multiethnic societies as well as international relations. Politeness or humour, for instance, are linguistically and contextually rooted. Language disciplines hence develop competence in effective cross-cultural communication and at a deeper level of social norms and values, avoiding diplomatic missteps.<sup>18</sup>
- 11. Gaining different perspectives:** For English-speaking people, the study of languages invites the learner to step outside Anglophone perspectives and assumptions, something that is necessary if efforts at inclusion and decolonisation are to have meaningful depth.<sup>19</sup> This



occurs also at the level of linguistic detail: encountering culturally-specific concepts that are insufficiently replicable by translation or grasping a new grammatical system which automatically encodes different information prompts self-awareness of one's own linguistic perspective and subjectivities.

- 12. Identity:** The political weight of languages is also apparent in the case of the UK's heritage language provision. In Northern Ireland, the closure of the Scoil Spreagtha scheme in June 2025, a popular cross-border scheme that facilitated the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools, organised by Foras na Gaeilge (founded as part of the Good Friday Agreement), led to strikes by 40 language organisations.<sup>20</sup> Even in a globalised world, languages and dialects continue to hold significant connections with personal identity and political recognition.
- 13. Empathy:** Gaining new perspectives and cultivating a global mindset encourages empathy and emotional intelligence towards people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is evident that 'linguaphobia' continues to persist: 26% of British people surveyed by YouGov felt 'bothered' by hearing a language other than English being spoken in the UK.<sup>21</sup> A survey by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People found that 90% of BSL users experienced negative attitudes or behaviours towards their language within the past year.<sup>22</sup> This indicates that we still have a long way to go in improving the esteem of all languages, and interventions through education are meaningful.

### **Embracing partial, part-time and plurilingual learning**

Having made the case for why languages are not less, but rather more, valuable in our current and future climate, we may also note that these benefits are apparent not just for those who study languages to degree level, but for learners at any stage of education, and are cross-curricular. Studies suggest language learners improve across a range of academic subjects, and experience better focus and concentration.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, a shift in how we 'reframe' languages subjects – in terms of irreplaceable and cognitive value, rather than merely an ability to convert words in one language to another – is needed to improve public

perceptions of what languages offer. The value of a ‘mathematical mindset’, for example, is widely accepted. Even though we all have calculators on our phones and can now use AI to handle complex mathematical problems with accuracy, numeracy and the ability to ‘think mathematically’ remain relevant.

A plurilingual and pluricultural approach – which emphasises breadth of engagement with different languages, and an ability to make connections between them – is beneficial for this linguistic mindset. This would help to combat a popular misconception that only total fluency in a language makes it useful, acknowledging instead a greater spectrum of language knowledge and encouraging flexible and lifelong learning.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, improving not only knowledge of language content but also of linguistics – as pioneered by the Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages’ (or MFL) Project – and knowledge about languages is useful in itself.<sup>25</sup> Research highlights the importance of creativity and enjoyment generated through a ‘discovery mode of learning’, and of connecting languages with the wider curriculum, for informing learners’ decisions to continue with Languages to GCSE and beyond.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, primary and secondary education play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of languages and language-learning, motivating not only the uptake of language degree programmes, but also instilling the value of all kinds of voluntary or professionally-focused languages education in later life.

Positive case studies of this include a languages curriculum initiative for Key Stages 2 and 3 called World of Languages, Languages of the World (WoLLoW). This provides free teacher-created resources to engage pupils with ancient and modern languages: these aim especially to promote linguistics and the interconnections between languages, build oracy and communication skills and to celebrate the value of languages spoken at home.<sup>27</sup> Plurilingualism can play a role in English as well as languages classrooms: for instance, the mythology-themed online resource Vocabulous helps students to learn English vocabulary more efficiently using patterns of word roots.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Languages in schools: the perennial pipeline problem?

We can observe some more stable trends in the entries for Languages GCSE qualifications post-2020. However, an important caveat is the 10-percentage point rise in overall GCSE entries from 2020 (5,281,745) to 2024 (5,811,790), meaning language uptake has not grown *proportionally*.<sup>29</sup> This continues to be a problem not only of low overall numbers, but of stark socioeconomic inequality. The estimated percentage of Year 11 pupils studying a language for GCSE is more than 20 percentage points higher in more affluent areas: 69% for the most affluent quintile, compared to 46-47% for the other four quintiles.<sup>30</sup> This has obvious implications for the workforce of the future.

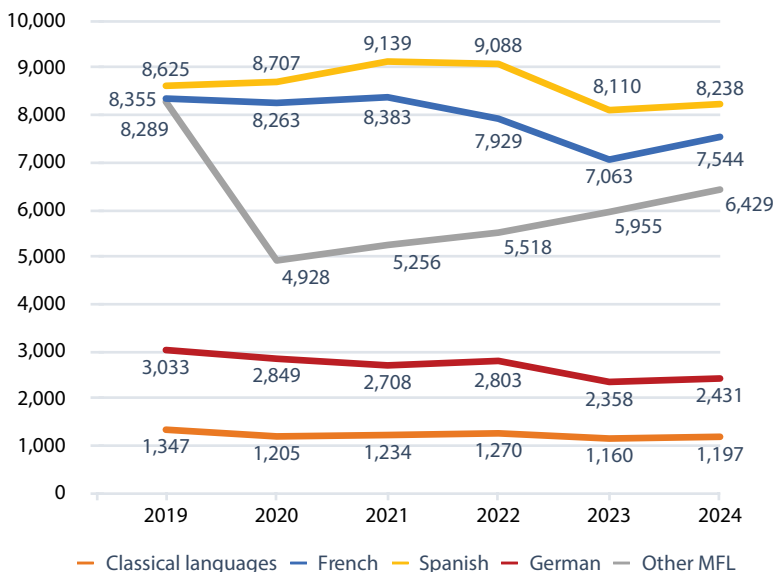
The uptick of Spanish GCSE entries continues, while the take up of French has now stabilised after a sharp decline in the 2000s and 2010s. Provisional entry figures for summer 2025 also indicate that Spanish has overtaken French as the most popular language at GCSE.<sup>31</sup> German entries continue to fall, despite this being the foreign language most sought after by UK employers.<sup>32</sup> Some adjustments to harsh grading were introduced for GCSE French and German from 2022 onwards, though pupils continue to underperform in modern foreign languages relative to other subjects.<sup>33</sup> In England, this low uptake for languages GCSEs is a major reason why the target of 90% of students studying the EBacc curriculum has not been met. The new GCSEs from 2024 (to be awarded from 2026 onwards) in French, Spanish and German, featuring a more defined core vocabulary of 'word families' and an emphasis on phonics teaching, may encourage uptake, though teachers and academics have also expressed reservations about this focus on 'measurable' knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

Exam entries for 'other languages', a large proportion of which is made up by heritage language-learning, have recovered from their slump during the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Polish, for example, is now one of the most popular modern languages at GCSE, and is taught through 180 'Saturday Schools'. It is crucial that these supplementary schools are better supported by exam boards to ensure the path to examination preparation and entry is as streamlined as possible.<sup>36</sup> Given that 8.9% of the UK (over five million people) have a main language which is not English, it is clear that the UK's existing

multilingualism is still undervalued in academic settings.<sup>37</sup> There continue to be barriers to attaining qualifications in languages spoken at home, particularly non-European ones.<sup>38</sup> (However, a large majority of the small number of independent schools surveyed recently by the British Council do support this.<sup>39</sup>) A 2023 report found that 76% of recent school leavers from underrepresented groups had knowledge of at least one community language, but 82% chose not to pursue a qualification in it.<sup>40</sup>

British Sign Language (BSL) gained legal recognition as an official British language in 2022, sparking greater interest and awareness. However, it is unfortunate that the implementation of a GCSE qualification in BSL, already delayed to 2025, will be further postponed for at least three more years (and has even been suspended in Wales).<sup>41</sup>

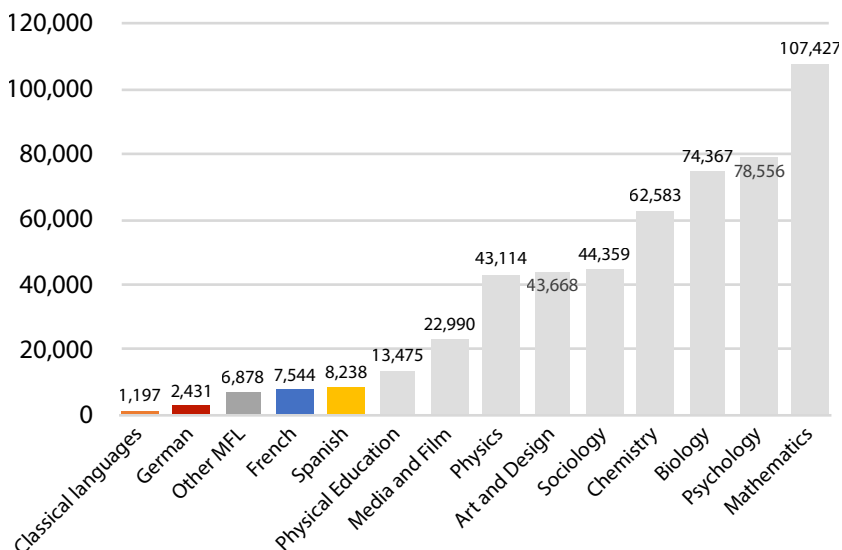
#### *A-Level entries, 2019-2024*



(Source: Joint Council for Qualifications and Council for University Classical Departments)

Similar trends can be seen at A-Level, with the pandemic causing a sharp drop in 'Other MFL' entries, which are now recovering.

### A-Level entries in 2024



(Source: Joint Council for Qualifications and Council for University Classical Departments. 'Other MFL' includes Welsh and Irish.)

However, overall uptake of Languages at Key Stage 5 remains remarkably low. Only 2.97% of A-Levels taken in 2024 were for Modern Foreign Languages, Classical Subjects, Welsh (Second Language) and Irish. There are more entries for Physical Education than for French, German and Classical Languages combined. This is an unfortunate side-effect of the UK's unusually narrow post-16 curriculum, and the emphasis on STEM subjects.

Strengthening primary-school languages provision, and the difficult Key Stage 2 to 3 transition, should remain a priority.<sup>42</sup> A further avenue worth exploring is to introduce alternative modes of assessment, such as vocational language qualifications at Key Stage 4, and in particular the creation of a new qualification for Key Stage 5, such as the Level 3 certificate in 'Applied Languages' proposed by the British Academy.<sup>43</sup> This is designed to consolidate and extend language ability through an area of particular personal interest, with a view to the subject being of interest to students on different disciplinary pathways. Such qualifications would incentivise

language learning as a relevant supplementary skill, preventing age 16 from being ‘the end of the languages road’ for so many students, though we do underestimate the big challenges in getting new qualifications established.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, public appetite for increasing and diversifying language-learning in schools is encouraging. In a 2023 YouGov poll, 71% of British adults felt that modern languages should be compulsory in secondary school; 49% regretted not engaging more with languages at school, and 35% were not able to learn their preferred language.<sup>45</sup>

Difficulty recruiting and retaining languages teachers is also a crucial factor behind low language-learning provision in schools, with 64% of state and 46% of independent secondary schools in England reporting this as an issue.<sup>46</sup> We see a similar picture in primary schools: in Wales, 67% of primary teachers cited staff language proficiency as the biggest concern in following the new plurilingual curriculum introduced in 2022, highlighting the need for professional development opportunities.<sup>47</sup> Similar barriers regarding teacher confidence and knowledge pose challenges for the ‘1+2 approach’ to primary languages in Scotland.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the introduction of £25,000 bursaries for postgraduate teacher training for both ancient and modern languages as ‘shortage subjects’, language teacher recruitment consistently falls well below government targets.<sup>49</sup> In 2024, just 43% of the target was reached.<sup>50</sup> A parliamentary report noted that this persistent shortfall of MFL teachers, previously better mitigated by the recruitment of teachers from Europe, is creating a ‘vicious cycle’ whereby schools have to reduce their GCSE and A-Level offering.<sup>51</sup>

The limitation of Languages provision in state schools, combined with other barriers to participation (including perceptions of Languages as elite and out-of-touch), further fuels the low uptake by students from underprivileged backgrounds. At AS and A-Level, just 3% of students studying German, and 6% studying French or Spanish, are eligible for Free School Meals.<sup>52</sup>

While the *Languages Trends* reports have observed this correlation of language-learning opportunities with socioeconomic advantage for several years, it is evident that languages in schools are facing an urgent situation for access and participation which continues to escalate.

Routes into Languages Cymru is a pan-Wales collaborative outreach project that promotes the visibility, uptake and profile of languages in schools in Wales. The Routes Cymru brand is respected across the International languages community in Wales, recognised in official reports and closely aligned with the Curriculum for Wales.

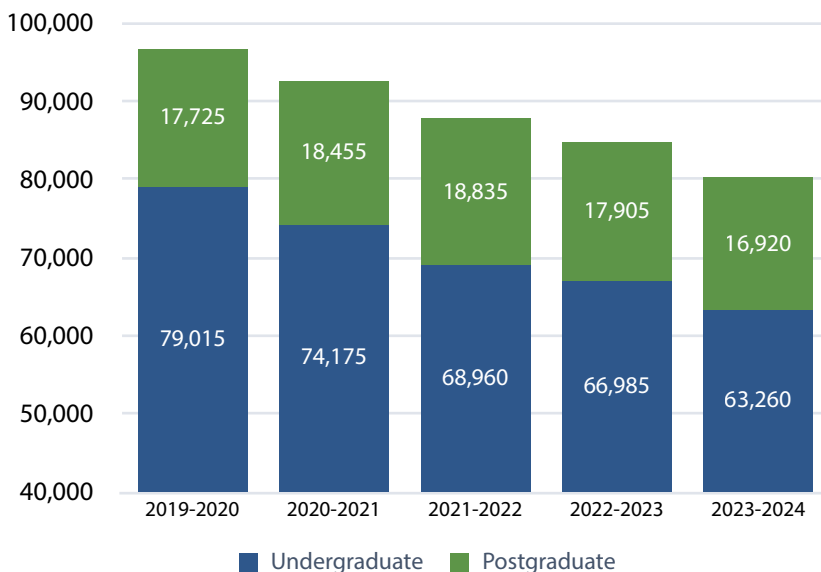
Routes Cymru's measurable benefits include:

- **Increased Pupil Engagement:** Over 450 secondary school students trained as Pupil Language Ambassadors, with 92.5% reporting enjoyment in their roles and 68% indicating they were more likely to pursue languages at GCSE level.
- **Supporting Teachers:** The bilingual Primary Toolkit has increased teacher confidence in delivering international languages.
- **Peer Collaboration:** Through events and ambassador schemes, teachers have new opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and external partners, strengthening professional networks and sharing good practice.

Routes Cymru's multifaceted approach has significantly strengthened language learning pathways in Wales, fostering enthusiasm, confidence, and cross-sector collaboration.

### 3. Languages in higher education

*Higher education enrolments in 'Language and Area Studies'*



(Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency)

The low uptake of Languages in schools has evident consequences on enrolments for higher education programmes. Despite the employability of graduate linguists, declines in uptake have continued steadily each year since the publication of *A Languages Crisis?* In 2020, across all modern languages groups at undergraduate and postgraduate level.<sup>53</sup> Undergraduate enrolments overall are down 20% while those in 'African and modern Middle Eastern Languages' have dropped by 45%.<sup>54</sup> In Classics, while the number of undergraduates opting for degrees involving ancient languages is slightly down, students taking *ab initio* Latin are on the rise; declines are more apparent at postgraduate level.<sup>55</sup>

However, while the viability of single-honours languages degrees is under threat, this is partly due to the adaptation and diversification of subject provision: for instance, a rise in joint-honours programmes with other



subjects, such as social sciences, and translation studies programmes which incorporate language proficiency.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the low overall uptake of language degree programmes has further negative consequences for the availability of language skills across all sectors of employment, as well as the shortage of language teachers in schools.

French and Spanish, followed by German, Chinese and Italian, remain the dominant languages on undergraduate degree programmes; Chinese recently took fourth place ahead of Italian for the first time and there have been rises in Russian and Portuguese.<sup>57</sup> Almost all languages can be taken from beginners' level (*ab initio*): the exceptions are French and German, but some institutions report either recently introducing or having plans to introduce these *ab initio*.<sup>58</sup> This indicates that higher education institutions are increasingly adapting to the lack of prior language-learning experience in schools: insisting on prior experience and qualifications risks becoming exclusionary as well as impractical.

### **Departments under threat**

The concerning trends of department closures from the previous two decades are continuing.<sup>59</sup> A particularly troubling announcement came in January, when Cardiff University initially planned to cut all modern foreign language and translation degrees due to financial challenges.<sup>60</sup> This would have had disastrous consequences for the provision of languages in Wales: Cardiff University provides 60% of all Modern Languages, Translation and Joint Honours undergraduate programmes in Wales, and plays a leading role in outreach projects, including the successful MFL Mentoring programme which is based there and has worked with over 80% of secondary schools in Wales.<sup>61</sup> Fortunately, this decision was reversed at the end of May 2025, in part due to successful campaigning by linguists who argued that the 'School of Global Humanities' merger would lack credibility without the diverse perspectives and cultural flexibility, and indeed employability, gained from high-level language skills.<sup>62</sup> Uncertainties remain for Modern Languages, however, with programmes delivered to 'smaller cohorts', 'primarily in French, Spanish, Mandarin and Japanese' by 'a smaller staff base'.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, the University Council for Languages (UCFL) 2024 survey indicated that there are concerns about staffing, departmental restructurings, upcoming curriculum reviews and financial cuts across Russell Group universities. The picture is even more critical for other pre-1992 institutions. Since 2014, four have lost all foreign language degree provision, with several others reporting staff cuts and losing particular languages.<sup>64</sup> In post-1992 institutions, another 17 institutions have lost their modern languages degrees since 2014, bringing the total closures to 28 and leaving modern languages in just 10. The ‘crisis of opportunity’ is drastically affecting universities which have lower entry tariffs and are favoured by applicants from socioeconomically disadvantaged and non-traditional academic backgrounds, further entrenching the existing inequalities that are apparent in school contexts.<sup>65</sup> A report by the British Academy also highlights the untapped potential of languages provision in further education ‘to forge a link between schools, FEIs [Further Education institutions] and HEIs [higher education institutions], and to enable a more diverse community of learners to engage with post-compulsory education.’<sup>66</sup> Further education could thus provide a further point of collaboration, particularly for the provision of ‘Applied Languages’.

## **Institution-Wide Language Provision**

‘Institution-Wide Language Provision’ (IWLP) refers to language learning outside of a main degree programme. This may include elective language modules or components taken for academic credit, or extra-curricular language learning that students can choose to take alongside a degree programme. IWLP and Continuing Education provision in higher education institutions also frequently include courses which are open to the public, providing a further revenue stream and encouraging participation from learners at all stages of life.

As such, Institution-Wide Language Provision is an enrichment opportunity for students across all academic disciplines, many of whom have limited prior experience of language-learning. Language-learning can benefit academic research directly, offer employable skills or (no less importantly) fulfil personal interest. Expanded range, flexibility and increased funding,

with the aim of making subsidised or free language-learning accessible to all students, would equip the graduate talent pool with better linguistic and cultural awareness, valuable for all kinds of career paths.

It is unfortunate, then, that since 2020 a further five IWLPs have closed, with a further eight known to be under threat of closure or significant reductions in activity, according to a 2024 survey by the Association of University Language Communities (AULC).<sup>67</sup> The report also identified a 'lack of value, visibility and support from the institution' as a recurrent challenge, resulting in a lack of collaboration with Languages subject departments and ongoing staff recruitment issues.<sup>68</sup> Given the decline of Languages qualifications in schools and in single-honours degrees, and that multilingual capabilities are essential for research across all academic disciplines in a globally connected research environment, higher education institutions have an obligation to make IWLP a priority.<sup>69</sup>

## **New challenges in the 2020s**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new opportunities for Languages in degrees and Institution-Wide Language Provision. The strengthening of existing Virtual Learning Environments, improved availability of online resources and recordings, and provision of virtual and / or hybrid modes of learning, has resulted in continued advantages of greater flexibility and a receptiveness to new approaches. The increase of online networks and seminars has also benefitted the sharing of research.

An important difficulty, however, has been ensuring fair and meaningful examinations for testing grammar and translation. The shift to online and open-book exams has continued to spark discourse on whether traditional exam formats are outdated and non-inclusive.<sup>70</sup> Finding solutions for assessment that acknowledge the present-day realities of language learning and avoid discouraging uptake, while maintaining high standards of academic integrity, is a complex problem.<sup>71</sup> However, this is also prompting new approaches which incorporate more creative modes of pedagogy and continuous assessment alongside traditional exams.<sup>72</sup>

A further, fast-evolving challenge for languages in higher education is students' access to AI tools. Generative AI is now able to synthesise online information, provide translations, come up with essays instantaneously, proofread and give feedback. It is creating additional obstacles to fair formative and summative assignments, with its writing abilities improving and becoming harder to detect.<sup>73</sup> This provides a further impetus to reflect on the purpose and methods of higher education and assessment, framed increasingly in terms of 'complex analysis, real-world application and critical thinking.'<sup>74</sup> HEPI's recent survey identified that almost all students (92%) make use of AI in some form, and many received mixed messages from their institutions about the acceptability of its use.<sup>75</sup> Respondents sought clearer guidance on how to harness such tools effectively and ethically; an understanding of how generative AI works may be especially important for Humanities students.<sup>76</sup> The availability of paid 'premium' subscriptions for unlimited usage of AI tools, and the greater immediacy of LLMs on demand for those with newer electronic devices, also raise concerns of unequal access. As outlined in the introduction, it is clear that AI cannot replace the fundamental value of learning about other languages. However, proactively training students and staff to understand AI's practical contributions and limitations in the language-learning process, and highlighting the irreplaceable advantages of the 'linguistic mindset', is increasingly essential.<sup>77</sup> It may contribute to a better public understanding of languages and the contribution of languages education.

## **Higher education and outreach**

Higher education institutions also have a crucial role to play in providing outreach opportunities for schools and in stimulating public engagement with languages, whether as part of cross-institutional networks (such as Routes into Languages) or at an institutional level. Schemes which make use of trained university students and resources to support school pupils, notably the MFL Student Mentoring Project in Wales, yield impressive results in improving attitudes towards languages in schools.<sup>78</sup> Interventions from higher education institutions can be targeted particularly at inspiring students to pursue languages at GCSE and beyond. For instance, 'Think like a linguist', run by faculties and organisations at the Universities of Oxford

and Cambridge, offers 12-to-13 year olds clear demonstrations of the value of a linguistic ‘mindset’ and its real-world applications.<sup>79</sup>

However, the UCFL’s report notes that, despite the enthusiasm of staff, a lack of funding and lead coordinators places constraints on the development of school-facing activities.<sup>80</sup> Given the problems facing languages in state schools, there is a strong case for equipping higher education institutions to expand their links with schools to combat these barriers and misconceptions.

### *Languages For All: Reversing the decline in languages*

Royal Holloway, University of London has partnered with Languages For All (LFA), a non-profit programme of the Reach Foundation since 2022, and continues to deliver the pilot scheme in Hounslow. Over this time, the number of schools in Hounslow offering modern languages has tripled, and A-level enrolment more than doubled.

LFA addresses the decline in language study within UK state schools through regional hubs that foster strategic partnerships between schools, universities, employers, and international cultural bodies. It overcomes key barriers – such as the high cost of offering small A-Level language classes and misconceptions regarding language study and career prospects – through strategic collaboration.

LFA helps to unlock funding by articulating the ways in which modern language provision serves the needs of a particular community. Royal Holloway brings deep subject-level expertise in modern languages, and the work aligns with multiple strategic priorities – from a civic-minded, globally engaged approach to a fundamental commitment to breaking down barriers to higher education. As such, work is partly supported through Access and Participation Plan funding, as well as the Reach Foundation – but other approaches would be possible.

This is a place-based, scalable model that addresses critical gaps in provision, mobilising existing expertise and resources towards shared goals.

## 4. Key policy recommendations

This report has outlined that now should be the time to invest in, rather than cut, the provision of languages. Despite the initial cost of the measures discussed, language skills remain important for the UK's competitiveness in trade and research, and it is well documented that improving language skills would yield economic benefits. A 2022 study using the 'gravity model of trade' found that investing in languages education in the UK would – given the positive impact this would have on trade and export potential – offer high returns. It even estimated a benefit-to-cost ratio of 2:1 for promoting Arabic, French, Mandarin and Spanish education.<sup>81</sup> Another study found that SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises, which account for 99.8% of the UK economy) which make use of language capabilities are 30% more successful at exporting than those who do not.<sup>82</sup>

- 1. Take action on teacher recruitment:** Schools are currently underequipped to support language learning. IWLP in higher education is also facing serious recruitment problems. The Westminster Government should therefore ease the pathway for international language teachers, such as reinstating the international relocation payment for trainee teachers (cut in April 2024).<sup>83</sup> Providing training pathways and professional development for existing teachers to deliver plurilingual opportunities should also be a priority.
- 2. Offer alternative qualification pathways:** Language learning should be a statutory entitlement for pupils up to the age of 18. In England, a GCSE in a language should continue to remain a requirement rather than an option for the EBacc. However, a more effective way to encourage a greater range of students to gain languages skills could be to introduce additional opportunities at Key Stage 4 for gaining qualifications. These could include a more streamlined vocational qualification focused on practical language knowledge and intercultural skills, and supporting students to achieve a widely recognised CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level of proficiency. Alternative qualification pathways are likewise crucial for enhancing the narrow post-16 curriculum: a Level 3 certificate in Applied Languages, comparable to the one-year Level 3 Core Mathematics qualification, would facilitate continued participation in Languages at Key Stage 5.<sup>84</sup>

- 3. Revitalise language hubs:** The Department for Education should look to expand, rather than downgrade, the hub-based approach to facilitating training and resources, and create networks for languages beyond French, German and Spanish. These should also aim to help state schools benefit from the staff and resources of the independent school sector, and create links with higher education providers.
- 4. Enhance the recognition of existing multilingualism:** Languages spoken at home or taught in supplementary schools would especially benefit from centralised support. It is thought around one-in-five UK pupils are bilingual to some degree. So it would make sense to improve guidance for schools on how to support home learners and liaise with external providers to streamline the pathway to qualification entries, as well as sharing information about available teachers, examiners and existing networks.<sup>85</sup>
- 5. Support British Sign Language:** The GCSE qualification in BSL, and a clear plan for staffing and resources to support the incorporation of this language in schools and higher education institutions, is long overdue. Improving awareness and understanding of this language has a strongly egalitarian dimension.
- 6. Make languages a priority in higher education:** Though many are under financial strain, higher education institutions should be conscious of the vicious cycle created by the loss of high-level language expertise when making decisions about curriculum reviews and cuts.<sup>86</sup> Rather than shutting courses, institutions should look for ways to strengthen language provision. This might include individual departments developing more joint provision – this might be with other departments focusing on different disciplinary areas in the same institution or with academics specialising in languages at other institutions. The Intercollegiate Modern Languages Master's programme at the University of London provides one model for joint working.<sup>87</sup> Universities additionally should safeguard the value that IWLP and extracurricular language opportunities provide students with.

## **7. Improved oversight of languages in higher education:**

Internationally, diverse language provision is usually the result of coordinated government support. The current lack of this approach in the UK means language provision in higher education is 'primarily subject to perceived student demand', particularly since the loss of the Higher Education Funding Council for England in 2018.<sup>88</sup> This could be critical in preserving instruction for small but strategically important languages that are important for trade, intelligence and diplomacy.

## **8. Targeted government funding to support languages in higher education:**

Interventions to prevent the loss of strategic languages and reduce regional cold spots would yield valuable returns. The same can be said for facilitating student access to IWLP services, particularly given the limited and unequal provision of languages in schools, and for supporting the outreach role and mentoring schemes of higher education institutions.

## **9. Design pathways for lifelong language learning:**

This could in time include incorporating modular language courses as part of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) but also the expansion of alternative 'applied language' qualifications to learners of all ages. Further consideration could also be given to the idea of a language learning ladder, based on the way that music exams work and making use of online learning methods.

## **10. Establish a clear voice for language issues in government:**

For instance, this could take the form of an equivalent to Chief Scientific Advisers, in order to co-ordinate the above proposals and provide regular updates on research-informed evidence about languages.

These policy proposals are not sufficient in and of themselves to combat the widespread and deeply held misconceptions of languages, and must be accompanied by an ethos of 'rebranding' the contribution of language skills in the modern world and the value of linguistic mindset, as outlined in Chapter 1. Nonetheless, implementing these changes would be an important step towards safeguarding Languages from even further declines, and towards making the benefits of a linguistic education accessible to a wider section of society.



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# HEPI Report 192

Formal language learning has fallen dramatically in recent years even as the UK has become more diverse. In this report, Megan Bowler from the University of Oxford considers the benefits that learning a language provides and assesses the current state of play in schools and universities. She ends with 10 practical recommendations for rejuvenating the learning of languages – including classical, modern and heritage languages – for the benefit of individuals, community cohesion and the economy.



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