



CENTRE FOR  
LANGUAGES  
LINGUISTICS &  
AREA STUDIES

UCML  
UNIVERSITY COUNCIL  
OF MODERN LANGUAGES

# Survey of non-specialist language learners 2011

John Canning

## Executive summary

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- This is the second annual survey of non-specialist language learners in UK universities
- The most popular languages are Spanish, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Chinese
- Many international students opt to learn a further language while studying in the UK: one in four respondents is not a native speaker of English
- Students are most likely to be specialising in Business, Social or Physical Sciences or Engineering
- The vast majority were enjoying the course and pleased with the quality of teaching, though some of the (self-selecting) respondents were critical of their tutors
- Nine out of ten planned to continue to a higher level, but availability of courses was a concern
- Some wanted to learn but were not concerned by assessment and certification, while others just wanted the credits and did not attend classes
- A minority needed the language skills for business and often visited a country where the target language was spoken, but very few were funded by their employer
- Older learners were more likely to visit a target language country regularly, but virtually all respondents were interested in target language cultures
- As in 2010, there were more women than men, and few could define their proficiency level in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) or other terms, an issue not helped by the wide and inconsistent range of course titles.

## Introduction

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This survey builds on the report conducted in 2010 and available on the UCML website.<sup>1</sup> The 2010 found that non-specialist experiences of language learning are very positive with 96% enjoying the experience of learning a language, that progression is often blocked by the non-availability of courses and that language learning is mainly self-funded, with little evidence of employer investment. The main negative comments in the open comments section of the 2010 questionnaire concerned the quality of teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Canning, J. (2011) A survey of non-specialist language learners in UK higher education 2010. [http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/non-specialist\\_language\\_learners\\_UCML.pdf](http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/non-specialist_language_learners_UCML.pdf)

## Methodology

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A link to the online survey was sent to learners through language centre directors and lecturers on the UCML and AULC e-mail lists.

As with the 2010 report a 'non-specialist' is defined as a student who is not taking a full- or part-time undergraduate or postgraduate degree in which a language is either named (e.g. BA French, BSc Mathematics with Spanish) or implied (e.g. BA European Studies, BA Language Learning). These 'non-specialist' learners include:

- Undergraduate or postgraduate students taking language courses as part of their degree, but not in a quantity sufficient for the language to be named in or implied in the student's programme title. The amount of language study necessary to be part of a named degree is likely to vary by institution.
- Undergraduate or postgraduate students taking university accredited language courses in addition to (and not counting towards) their programme of study.
- A learner who undertakes a university accredited language course, but is not registered for any undergraduate or postgraduate study.
- A learner undertaking a language course provided by an HEI, but accredited by another organisation or not accredited at all.

## Profile of the learners

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There were 1191 eligible respondents, 174 of whom were studying more than one language leading to 1365 learning experiences. Although the 2011 survey used the same questions and methodology as the 2010 survey, it would be erroneous to suggest that any changes constitute trends, especially in view of the relatively small sample. The most notable change was that the age profile of the 2011 respondents was much younger than the 2010 respondents. 32.9% of those who responded to the 2010 were over 35 compared to just 21% of those who responded in 2011. Over successive years, a more reliable picture independent of sample bias may be obtained.

### Gender

62.5% of respondents were female and 37.5% male (compared with 65% and 35% in 2011). Women outnumber men in all languages in the survey with more than 30 learners with the exception of Russian which had equal numbers of men and women. Interestingly the language with the highest percentage of female students was Japanese with 68%, which in 2010 had the highest male proportion of the most popular languages. Almost half of respondents were studying either French or Spanish with a further 14.7% studying German. This indicates that the languages most commonly taught in UK schools are also the most popular at university.

Table 1: Languages Studied (30+ learners)

Language	Number of learners in survey	Percentage
Spanish	337	24.69
French	326	23.88
German	201	14.73
Italian	111	8.13
Japanese	99	7.25
Arabic	44	3.22
Chinese	87	6.37
Russian	31	2.27

### Native language

Just over 25% of respondents reported a first language other than English. The number of speakers of each individual language was low, but it is possible to see that French (94 respondents), Spanish (92) and German (44) are the languages most frequently chosen by non-native speakers of English. One language centre director reported that many Chinese students wish to learn French though their ability to progress was often restricted by poor English skills, and in many cases tutors discourage them. There is also evidence of a small number of students studying their native language.

Table 2: Native language of learners other than English (30+)

Native language	Number of respondents	Languages studied
Chinese	55	French (24), Spanish (15), German (9)
German	44	French (13), Spanish (11), German (8)
French	43	Spanish (14), French (11), German (9)
Russian	32	French (8), Spanish (8)
Polish	31	French (9)

*My first language is Chinese. English is used to teach Japanese. It's interesting in translating words between three languages. F, 18-21, Japanese, BEng Environmental Engineering.*

One language centre director reported that non-native English speakers were especially difficult to place in the right group.

## Subject of study

Business, physical sciences, social sciences and engineering were the most popular subjects of study with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

*I chose to learn a language as my free choice. It is very fast paced. I am not able to spend as much time studying it as I should due to the more important workload of my main degree. Having said that, I have enjoyed the course and have learned a lot but I am not hopeful of passing, or, if I do pass, of achieving a good grade. If the course wasn't part of my degree I would have liked to do further study. F, 56-65, Spanish, BA English*

Table 3: Subjects studied by undergraduate and postgraduate students learning languages

Subject area (mapped to HEA subject centres)	Number of Learners
Business, Management, Accountancy and Finance	118
Sociology, Anthropology and Politics	96
Engineering	64
Physical Sciences	87
History, Classics and Archaeology	54
English	54
Economics	49
Mathematics and Statistics	40
Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences	36
Psychology	35
Art, Design and Media	32
Philosophical and Religious Studies	26
Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism	24
Law	23
Biosciences	19
Medical Sciences	19
Materials	10
Performing Arts	10
Information and Computer Science	2

One respondent felt that being able to sit in on lectures with specialist ML students would have been helpful:

*I was very disappointed to find out that, despite being a full time student at [named university], I am forbidden from attending French lectures - I don't see how a few extra faces in a lecture hall could hurt!* F, 22-25, French, PhD Chemistry

## Obstacles to non-specialist study

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This survey clearly focuses on students who do study a language rather than students who have not studied a language, but might have done had they had the opportunity. Languages centre directors spoke about students being forbidden to take credits outside their course or being prevented from studying languages due to timetable clashes. In at least one institution language study is timetabled when other teaching should not take place, but in practice some departments commandeer these slots for their own teaching. Another director observed that social science departments in his/her institution seemed particularly reluctant to allow their students to study languages.

## Experience of study

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Learners were asked a series of likert scale questions about their experiences and expectations of language learning. 86.8% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of teaching on their course. Additionally, 92.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed learning the language. More than three-quarters

felt that the level of difficulty was what they had expected though learners of Chinese were particularly likely to report that the course was more difficult than they had expected.

Table 4: Experience and expectation of learners

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
The level of difficulty is what I expected (All respondents)	17.0	60.1	18.6	3.9	0.5
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>14.4</i>	<i>60.4</i>	<i>20.7</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>0.5</i>
<i>Students not studying for a degree</i>	<i>22.9</i>	<i>59.3</i>	<i>14.0</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>0.5</i>
This course is more difficult than I expected it to be (all respondents)	5.2	17.5	58.2	17.8	1.3
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>5.8</i>	<i>19.1</i>	<i>56.6</i>	<i>16.8</i>	<i>1.7</i>
<i>Students not studying for a degree</i>	<i>3.8</i>	<i>14.0</i>	<i>61.6</i>	<i>20.0</i>	
I enjoy learning this language (all respondents)	57.1	39.1	2.6	1.0	0.3
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>55.6</i>	<i>59.6</i>	<i>3.2</i>	<i>1.2</i>	<i>0.4</i>
<i>Students not studying for a degree</i>	<i>60.1</i>	<i>40.0</i>	<i>1.3</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>0.4</i>
I am satisfied with quality of teaching on this course.	43.5	43.3	8.8	4.0	0.4
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>41.3</i>	<i>43.8</i>	<i>10.9</i>	<i>3.6</i>	<i>0.4</i>
<i>Students not studying for a degree</i>	<i>47.6</i>	<i>42.2</i>	<i>4.6</i>	<i>4.8</i>	<i>0.5</i>
I find learning this language difficult	7.1	35.9	43.0	13.0	1.2
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>7.3</i>	<i>35.5</i>	<i>43.1</i>	<i>13.8</i>	<i>1.0</i>
<i>Students not studying for a degree</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>36.9</i>	<i>42.7</i>	<i>13.0</i>	<i>1.7</i>
When this language course has finished I will continue to study the language at a higher level	35.3	45.4	12.5	2.8	4.0
<i>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</i>	<i>34.8</i>	<i>44.3</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>3.5</i>	<i>4.0</i>

*This is a brilliant language course, Italian, taught by a native-speaker [tutor named]... You should co-opt him to re-inspire language teaching, full-stop.* M, over 65, Italian

*I have enjoyed every minute of learning Spanish. Although I have had to work very hard it has given me a real sense of achievement and enhanced my visits to Spain and Latin America. It has also gone a little way to counteracting the idea that the English speak English and only English. The people I have met have been delighted with my attempts!* F, 56-65, Spanish

*The native French-speaker was an enthusiastic and excellent teacher who made classes really enjoyable, and kept me attending (even from 7-9pm after a long day at work!)* F, 56-65, French

## Teaching quality

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A question on teaching quality was added for 2011, as poor teaching quality was regularly cited in the open comments section of the survey. This is a common feature of open surveys: many who choose to respond do so because they have a specific criticism to make. However, 86.8% of learners agreed or strongly agreed that teaching quality on their course was good.

*The quality of teaching at the university is superb. It by far exceeds the quality of teaching of languages I experienced at the state high school I attended. The focus on grammar in the university language classes makes the language make more sense to me, and I find it easier to grasp than the methods of teaching at GCSE. I thoroughly enjoy learning the language. I am planning to do, as part of my undergraduate course, a semester abroad in the country whose national language I am learning (Germany).* F, 18-21, German, BA English

Another learner commented on their experience favourably in comparison to school experiences.

*I thoroughly enjoy learning this language and I enjoyed learning with people outside the university as well. I previously studied this language at high school for 3 years and have learnt more in 5 months than I ever did there. Brilliant teaching and I have thoroughly enjoyed learning a language (finally!)* F, 21-25, French, BSc Physics with International Studies

*The evening open Access courses have been very well taught and very enjoyable.* M, 22-25, Spanish, PhD Psychology

However, reports of poor teaching continue:

*I'm very passionate about learning French however I am considering on writing very long complaint letter to college about teaching standards of my French teacher. Absolutely rubbish teacher, who does not prepare for our lessons, doesn't know what the requirements for each exam are, no IT skills what so ever, lesson never starts on time, never remembers anything... I could carry on all day... what a shame. F, 26-35, French*

*I have hated every moment of doing this. This was the worst decision I ever made. I hated the class and never went, and as a result probably failed. But, this isn't the way to learn a language. I'm at least proficient in three other languages, and I didn't learn them by looking at a board. M, 22-25, German, MPhys Physics*

*The teaching standard is very poor. The teacher does not have any kind of lesson plan, sets homework, then does not collect or mark it, simply does not seem to have any kind of method regarding teaching! M, 56-65, French*

*I think I got unlucky at my language course with a very poor, unprepared, and lazy tutor taking over from another tutor who was apparently much better. M, 26-35, German*

## Prior experience and progression

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Prior experience of learning the language of study varied considerably. Just 15% of learners of French were beginners and of those with experience 86.4% had studied the language at school. 68.4% of those who had studied German previously had done so at school. 49.2% of experienced learners of Spanish and 40.0% of learners with prior experience of Russian had studied these languages at school. Around one-fifth of experienced learners of Chinese and Japanese had studied these languages at school, with most of the others getting their experience on a previous course in a university or were self-taught.

Some respondents compared their university experiences favourably with their school experiences of languages.

*Despite being quite weak at learning languages during my time in secondary school, I have found learning Japanese at university to be much easier and more enjoyable. I think this is mostly due to my interest in the language, as secondary school languages had no interest to me and were forced subjects. M, 18-21, Japanese, BSc Computer Science*

*This is my first experience of a classroom setting since leaving school 40 years ago, I have found it to be a rewarding experience in terms of improving my understanding of French. It has also been a good experience to mix with other people and learn alongside them. M, 56-65, French*



*At school age I was a very poor language learner, but I have thoroughly enjoyed learning Swedish, and will do all I reasonably can to continue my studies and enthusiasm for the culture. M, 36-45, Swedish*

Most students indicated that they intended to continue their studies, but some reported barriers to progression including the lack of course availability at higher levels and/or concerns that existing courses would be withdrawn due to low numbers.

*My tutor [name] was a fantastic support and has really made learning the language fun and interesting. She has always gone the extra mile putting up with my tedious questions and always doing her best to answer them. I look forward to taking the Intermediate course with her in September. F, 22-25, German, BSc Combined Studies*

*In the open comments section some respondents identified barriers to progression:*

*...there are not enough courses available for higher levels, e.g. level 3 or 4. F, 26-35, Italian, BA Tourism Management*

*Every semester we struggle to find enough numbers to make up the minimum class size - for an advanced Chinese class it's impossible to find enough people - it's so specialist. So while there are large numbers for beginner classes there is no support for the most academic and interested students who progress through the levels only to be abandoned when it comes to higher levels. M, 26-35, Chinese, BA Psychology*

*One language centre director reported that the language centre did not run any courses post-A-level standard—these were only available in the Modern Languages department.*

*One respondent identified a mid-level gap:*

*I found this particular course not at all challenging and at too low a level for me to make any sort of progress but for some reason the 'Level 7' course is absent for German and 'Level 8' looked like too much of a step up. M, 18-21, MSci Physics*

*I find the language courses enjoyable and beneficial, however as funding has been reduced, there is currently no level 3 Arabic on offer to progress to. I find this a huge shame as there is enough interest to have a class, just not enough resources. F, 25-35, Arabic*

*One respondent identified mixed-ability classes as an issue:*

*I was very happy that there were enough people for the course to run, however there was a huge difference in people's abilities which made it very difficult to keep up, plus I also feel*

that this makes it much more difficult for the tutor to adapt the lessons accordingly. F, 22-25, Dutch

## Course titles

It remains a matter of concern that 35.7% of learners were not able to articulate the level they were at, either in terms of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) or GCSEs, A-levels, Scottish highers etc.<sup>2</sup>

Learners were asked to name an exact title of their course and a randomly generated selection of titles was mapped to the level of the course. It is evident that there is no consistency in course titles across institutions and that stage and level numbers (and letters) mean entirely different levels in each institution. For example 'Level 8' courses appear at both the B levels and C levels of the CEFR. Level/Stage 4s appear at all three levels. Whilst this finding is not entirely unsurprising, if more standardised titles were to be adopted then a higher proportion of students may be able to articulate their level more accurately.

Table 5: Example course titles by CEFR level (learner reported)

Course Level (as reported by learners)	Example course titles
CEFR A1/A2 (approximately GCSE, Scottish Standard Grade and below)	German Level 1 German level C German 3 Russian Level 4 Mandarin Stage 1 Spanish basic Spanish Level 6 Spanish intermediate Chinese Level 3 French stage 1B French language 3 German Level 2 Arabic Level 2 German A2 IWLP German 4
CEFR B1/B2 (approximately AS, A-Level or Higher Grade)	French Level 8 French Stage 4 French intermediate French advanced French level 7 German Stage 3 Italian stage 6 Post-intermediate French Further German German Intermediate II Spanish Advanced Spanish Level 4A
CEFR C1/ C2 (approximately degree level/ post A-level or post Higher Grade)	Spanish level 7 Proficiency French German Level 4 Spanish Advanced Level 8

## Employment, employability and prospects

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre_en.asp)

6.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that study of this language was essential for their current job. The most 'demanded languages' were French and German (both 15% of learners) and Spanish (13%). However, fewer than 1% of respondents in full or part time work reported that their employer was paying for the course, suggesting that employers are not investing in languages even if they are essential for their business. Of those who said the language was essential 17% were studying at CEFR A1 or A2, 22% at B1 or B2 and 16% at C1 or C2. This would seem to indicate that there is some demand for languages at all levels, not just higher levels.

It was on this group of questions that the responses of undergraduate and postgraduate students differed most from other language learners. These other learners are much less likely to agree or strongly agree that their language studies will provide future job opportunities or express a wish to work in a target language country. However, many of these learners are likely to be in an established career or retired. 31.6% of non-undergraduate/ postgraduate learners selected non-applicable in response to the questions about future job opportunities compared to just 3.2% of undergraduates and postgraduates.

Table 6: Languages and employability

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Studying this language will provide future job opportunities	44.4	24.7	15.2	3.3	12.4
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>51.3</b>	<b>11.8</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3.2</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>31.6</b>
Knowledge of this language is essential for my present job	2.3	4.4	30.8	29.3	33.1
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>34.1</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>29.4</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>40.8</b>
In the future I would like to work in a country where this language is spoken	17.3	41.5	23.1	4.9	13.1
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>48.3</b>	<b>22.3</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>4.7</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>27.2</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>31.0</b>
Knowledge of this language is useful, but not essential for my present job	17.3	39.7	11.4	6.3	25.3
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>44.4</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>22.8</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>19.4</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>30.5</b>
I would like to have a job where I can use this language	20.4	45.2	18.5	3.3	12.7
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>23.8</b>	<b>52.7</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>4.2</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>13.2</b>	<b>29.3</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>30.7</b>
I frequently visit a country in which this language is spoken for business	3.8	11.5	35.1	24.1	25.5
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>23.4</b>	<b>25.4</b>
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>34.0</b>

19% of those in part-time or full time employment and 28% of self-employed respondents reported that they frequently visited a target language country for business.

*I need to understand both English and French as I would like to work with the UNHCR to help refugees all around the world.* M, 26-35, French, BA Politics.

## Interest and leisure

Table 7: Interest and leisure.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
In the future I would like to live in a country where this language is spoken	18.3	39.7	27.1	5.3	9.5
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	20.9	44.9	25.0	3.9	5.4
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	12.8	28.9	31.9	8.1	18.3
I frequently visit a country in which this language is spoken for leisure (e.g. holidays, holiday homes)	17.7	32.3	29.8	13.1	7.1
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	15.9	28.7	35.1	14.2	6.6
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	22.7	39.7	18.6	10.8	8.1
I am interested in the culture of a country in which this language is spoken	47.1	46.2	5.1	0.5	1.1
<b>Undergraduate and postgraduate students</b>	45.0	46.6	6.5	0.7	1.3
<b>Students not studying for a degree</b>	51.6	45.2	2.1	0.3	0.8

As might be expected older learners reported that they frequently visited a target language country for leisure. 78.4% of over 65's reported frequent visits compared to 42.6% of 18-21 year olds. 66.7% of 18-21 year-olds and 65.6% of 21-25 year-old expressed an interest in living in a target language country. Only a handful of learners reported that they were not interested in the culture of the target language country.

## Conclusions

Students overwhelmingly report positive experiences of language learning. The quality of teaching is generally considered to be good and languages are seen as useful for current or future employment, though rarely essential. Most students seem satisfied that their courses are not a lot easier or more difficult than they expected. However, the inability of students to be able to articulate their level of study could usefully be addressed further, possible by encouraging institutions to map explicitly to the CEFR and move towards standardisation of course titles to allow easier movement between institutions so that non-specialists can continue their language learning in a different location, for example, when moving to a new

area after graduation. Attention also needs to be paid to ‘dead ends’ in progression where students are unable to progress due to a lack of advanced courses.

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## Author note

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John Canning is Senior Academic Coordinator at LLAS Centre for Language, Linguistics and Area Studies, School of Humanities, University of Southampton, [j.canning@soton.ac.uk](mailto:j.canning@soton.ac.uk)

## Appendix: Summary of responses to selected questions (by language)<sup>3</sup>

Language	Arabic	Chinese	French	German	Italian	Japanese	Russian	Spanish
Number of learners	43	94	341	177	111	104	36	328
% male	42	44	33	40	44	30	50	35
% female	58	55	64	58	55	68	50	63
% who agree or strongly agree that teaching quality is good	74	77	76	75	74	85	78	74
% of learners who are beginners	58	53	15	18	50	49	69	38
% of learners who are native English speakers	67	73	72	75	80	79	75	72
% learners at A1 or A2	37	39	18	24	32	57	44	26
% learners at B1 or B2	2	7	22	28	14	6	8	18
% learners at C1 or C2	2	1	24	16	4	2	3	12
% of learners who do not know the standard of their course	46	45	28	26	41	57	36	36
% who agree or strongly agree that their course is good value	72	79	70	72	74	74	62	70
% who agree or strongly agree that they enjoy learning this language	84	85	84	87	81	88	86	84
% who agree or strongly agree their course will increase job opportunities	65	78	59	65	42	68	75	59
% who wish to continue	74	76	68	71	77	78	81	67
% receiving university credit	16	27	48	41	16	31	17	32
% studying this language as part of an UG or PG degree	21	18	28	29	22	16	17	30

<sup>3</sup> Percentages may not always add up to 100 due to rounding and missing responses. Only languages with at least 30 learners have been included.