

Ab initio language degree programmes in HE institutions in England and Scotland: a mapping survey and a case study

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CENTRE FOR
LANGUAGES
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1. Ab initio language degree programmes at HE institutions in England and Scotland - A mapping survey

Ab initio language learning at undergraduate level in the British educational context enters the relevant literature as the focus of debates and studies in the mid-90s, the main issue being the effectiveness of ab initio language degree programmes in comparison with undergraduate programmes for post-A level students. The reservations then expressed, in relation to German, by Ernst (1995) with regard to the success and appropriateness of the ab initio programme, were immediately followed by a series of responses, surveys and studies whose aim was to state or prove the comparability, or even the superiority in certain cases, of ab initio students' performance in relation to that of the post-A level students (Weber-Newth, 1995; Proudfoot, 1998; 2001; Baumann, 1999; Bowker and Stuart 2005). The exceptionality of the language degree ab initio student is further emphasized by the publication in 1996 of a manual for German ab initio language courses at secondary and HE level which was meant to affirm the necessity of a specialized provision to meet the needs of what was perceived at the time to be a growing category of undergraduate language students (Leder, Reimann and Walsh 1996).

Following the review of ab initio language teaching in Scotland (Bowker and Stuart 2005) and the 2006 report on ab initio language teaching commissioned by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), the current study sets out to help further by quantifying and qualifying the ab initio provision within language degree programmes at HE level by providing a mapping survey, covering HE institutions in England and Scotland, and a case study, focusing on ab initio language learning within the Italian Studies degree programme at the University of Reading.

This survey intends to map the extent of ab initio foreign language degree programmes in Higher Education institutions in England and Scotland, with a view to identifying the range of languages on offer at ab initio level and, in particular, to defining what ab initio translates as in the various institutional contexts. The implications of the survey findings for future curricular and strategic choices are also considered in relation to ab initio language provision at HE level.

1.1 Methodology

The data collected here are the result of a series of searches conducted, mainly online, between June 2010 and February 2011. At first English and Scottish universities offering degrees in a language (or in languages) as a named component of the programme were identified through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website (www.ucas.ac.uk). This first set of data was then checked against the data accessible on each single institution's website (July-September, 2010). A first document was then produced which listed languages on offer at each institution, classified

according to entry requirements for the various degree programmes. From this document it has then been possible to extrapolate a list of languages offered within relevant institutions at ab initio level, together with their relative minimum entry requirements. This final set of data was checked a second time against online information (February 2011) and supported, where data was incomplete, unclear or contradictory, by further information collected by contacting specific institutions directly.

1.2 Criteria

The handling of such extensive and diverse raw data has created some difficulties in its analysis and classification. It has been deemed necessary, therefore, to restrict the focus of this survey to BA Honours degrees where one or more languages are a named component of the programme. The relatively high number of degree programmes that include a language, or more than one, as an unnamed component (mostly optional) and which may or may not involve a Year Abroad remains therefore external to the data presented here. Also, the list of languages identified in the survey does not include English as a Foreign Language.

The distinction between ab initio and non-ab initio language degree programmes has been applied to individual language degree programmes, both single and joint honours, for each language offered within the various institutions under consideration. This large set of data has consequently been first analysed and then condensed to provide a much more manageable and readable set in which the term ab initio signals any given language offered by any given institution to students who have no qualifications or experience in the language in question, at least within one language degree programme listed at that institution. This means that the classification proposed here of a language as ab initio does not exclude the existence of degree programmes, at that same institution and involving that same language, which are not ab initio. By the same token, the entry requirements that identify the ab initio languages in this survey are to be read as the minimum requirements in a range defined by the various degree programmes that language is offered in as a named component.

The repeated presence of contradictory or incomplete data has also proved quite problematic, especially when comparing the sets of information derived from the two main sources: the UCAS website and the individual institutions' websites. In this case, after directly checking with a sample of institutions, it was concluded that institutional websites were most likely to present reliable data.

Problems pertaining to the interpretation of ambiguous terminology have been solved, where possible, by direct queries to the institutions involved. For example, after checking with the institutions in question, in those cases in which the terms 'preferably' or 'normally' were used to define ab initio entry requirements – referring to the request of an A level in another language at entry point – they were interpreted, the first literally as a 'preference but not a compulsion', the second as a stricter requirement with exceptions determined exclusively by access routes internal to the institution itself. So in the first case the language programme in question was classified as imposing no specific

entry requirements, whereas in the second case an A level in another language was identified as the minimum entry requirement.

For the sake of simplification and standardisation across the study, in the charts detailing data regarding entry requirements in Scotland, the label ‘A level’ has been chosen to indicate both the GCE Advanced level qualification (A level) and its Scottish equivalent as the highest, most common university entry requirement, the SQA Higher. Other A level- or GCSE- comparable qualifications are not explicitly referred to in this survey, and have been subsumed under their corresponding British certificate. More generic requirements, which could not be incorporated into any given standard qualification, are still identifiable within the survey results.

1.3 Results

11 Scottish universities and 53 British universities were identified as offering degree programmes, either single or joint, in one or more languages.

1.3.1 Scotland

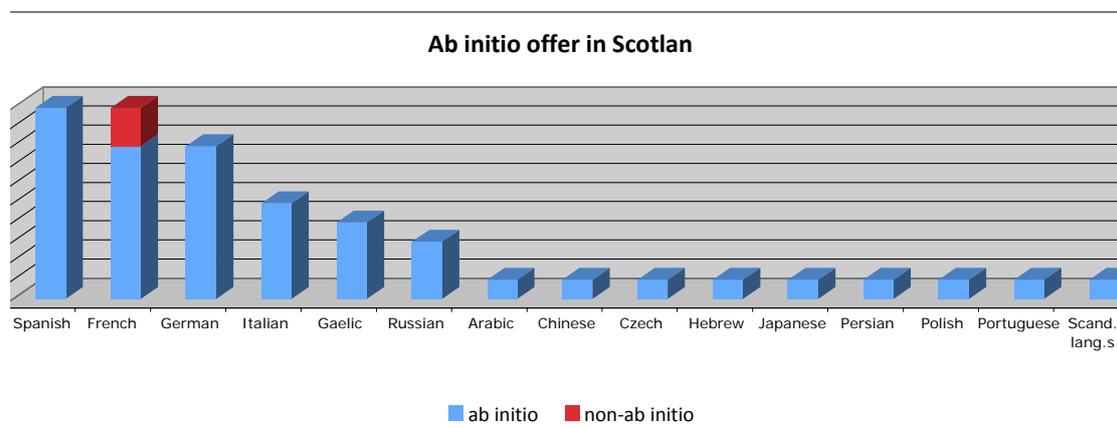
15 foreign languages are offered at degree level in Scotland. Here Spanish and French jointly lead the table as the most popular languages on offer at degree level, immediately followed by German and, at some distance, by Italian. The label ‘Scandinavian languages’, on offer at one Scottish institution, includes Norwegian, Danish and Swedish (table 1).

Table 1: Languages on offer as a named component of degree programmes in Scottish HE institutions and figures relating to ab initio and non-ab initio offer

	No of institutions	ab initio	non-ab initio
Spanish	10	10	0
French	10	8	2
German	8	8	0
Italian	5	5	0
Gaelic	4	4	0
Russian	3	3	0
Arabic	1	1	0
Mandarin	1	1	0
Czech	1	1	0
Hebrew	1	1	0
Japanese	1	1	0
Persian	1	1	0
Polish	1	1	0
Portuguese	1	1	0
Scandinavian languages	1	1	0

All languages on offer in Scotland can be studied ab initio. Only two institutions offer French exclusively as non-ab initio. (Table 2).

Table 2: Ab initio and non-ab initio offer in Scottish HE institutions



When considering in detail the entry requirements for ab initio students of languages at degree level within Scottish institutions (table 3), it appears that in almost half of the cases students are required to show evidence of a more or less specific qualification or of experience in learning a language other than the one chosen at degree level. In the majority of the cases, though, most languages on offer at Scottish HE institutions can be accessed at degree level also by students who have no previous language experience or qualifications. Excluded from this group are Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Persian, Portuguese and the Scandinavian languages, for which a language qualification remains a prerequisite for access.

Table 3: Details of entry requirements for ab initio language degrees in Scotland

Figures refer to the number of institutions where such requirements are applicable

	Spanish	French	German	Italian	Gaelic	Russian	Arabic	Mandarin	Czech	Hebrew	Japanese	Persian	Polish	Portuguese	Scandinavian languages
A level/SQA Higher in another language	3	3	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
GCSE in another language	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

65 UCAS points in languages	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Previous successful experience of language learning	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
No language requirements	5	3	3	2	3	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	
Total no of institutions	10	8	8	5	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Table 4: Language requirements for ab initio degree students of Spanish in Scotland

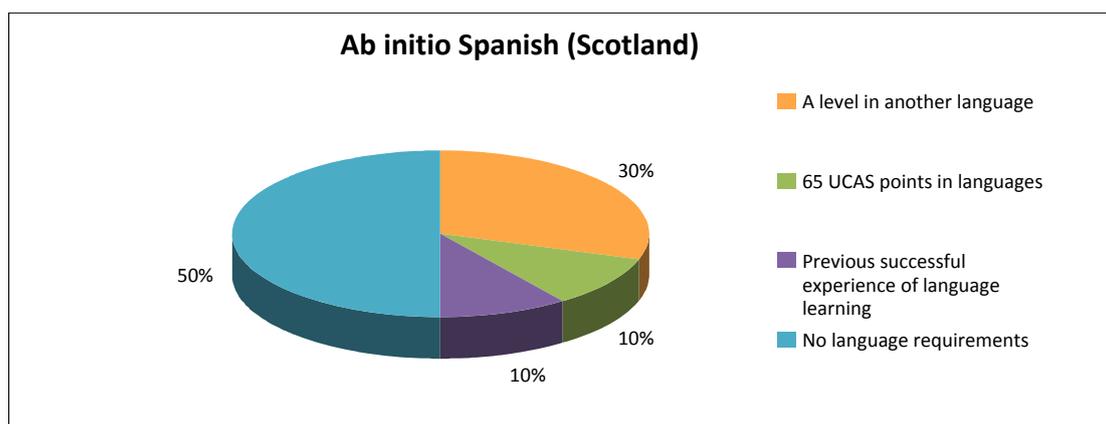


Table 5: Language requirements for ab initio degree students of French in Scotland

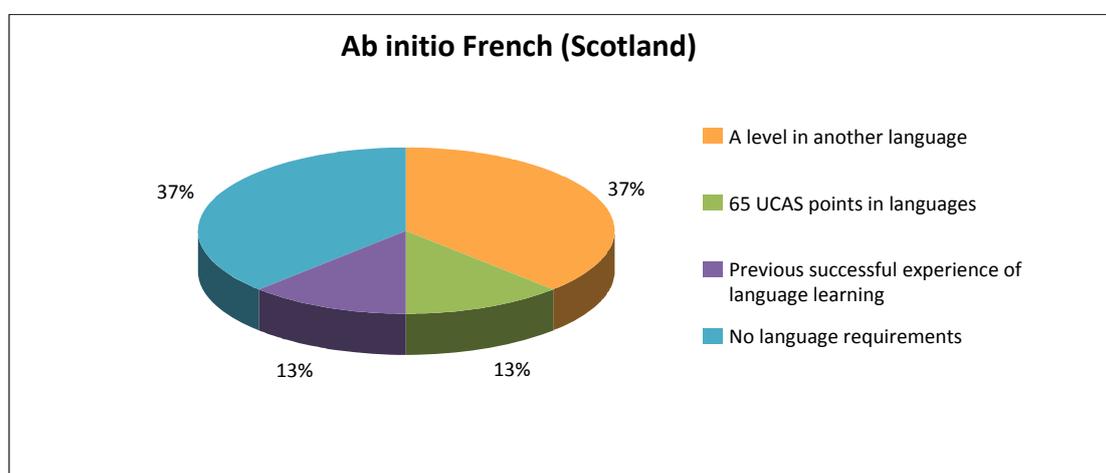


Table 6: Language requirements for ab initio degree students of German in Scotland

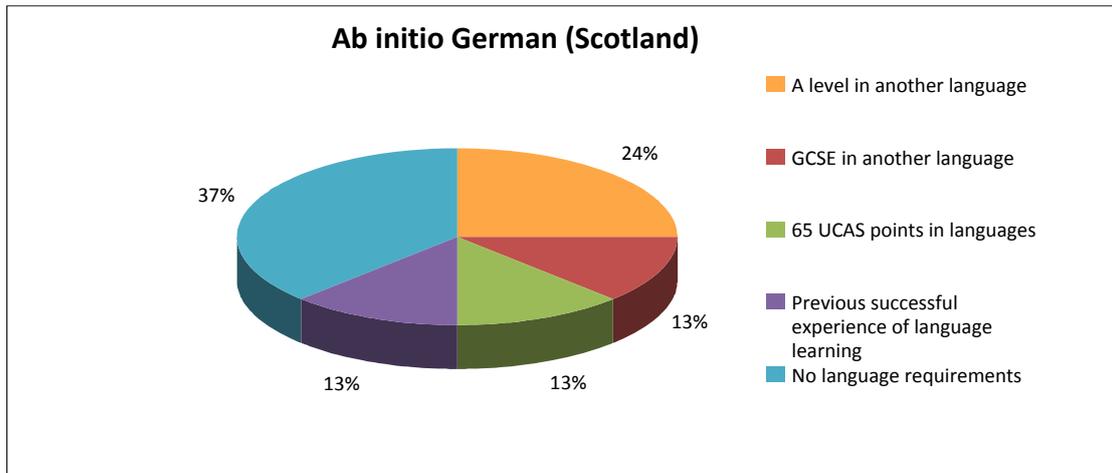
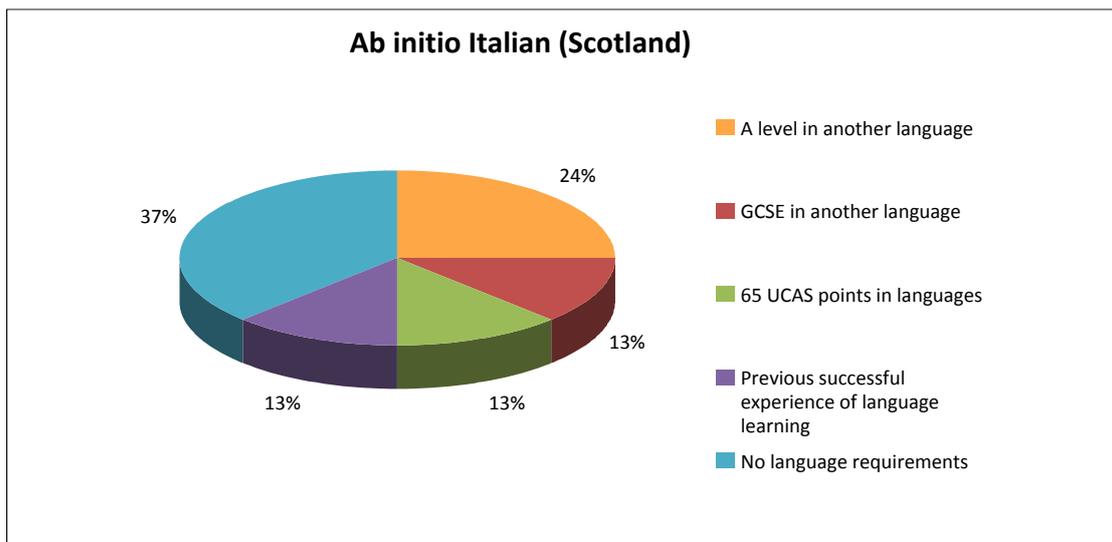


Table 7: Language requirements for ab initio degree students of Italian in Scotland



Tables 5-7 above provide a detailed breakdown and relative percentage of each language entry requirement for the top four languages offered in Scotland at degree level: Spanish, French, German and Italian. What is notable is the absence of a requirement of previous language qualifications or experience for half of the instances considered for Spanish, and for more than a third of the cases considered for the other three languages.

1.3.2 England

A total of 46 languages are on offer at degree level across the 53 English Higher Education institutions, with Serbian and Croatian being considered as one unit (table 8). In England, French retains a leading position in the modern language provision at HE level, offered by all the institutions identified in the survey.

Table 8: Languages on offer as a named component of a degree in HE institutions in England

Languages	Total number of institutions	Languages	Total number of institutions
French	53	Burmese	1
Spanish	49	Celtic	1
German	42	Finnish	1
Italian	30	Georgian	1
Mandarin	20	Hausa	1
Russian	17	Hindi	1
Arabic	15	Hungarian	1
Japanese	15	Icelandic	1
Portuguese	14	Indonesian	1
Hebrew	5	Irish	1
Catalan	4	Kurdish	1
Dutch	4	Nepalese	1
Polish	4	Norwegian	1
Czech	3	Romanian	1
Persian	3	Sanskrit	1
Serbian and Croatian	3	Slovak	1
Turkish	3	Slovene	1
Danish	2	Swahili	1
Korean	2	Thai	1
Modern Greek	2	Tibetan	1
Swedish	2	Ukrainian	1
Bengali	1	Vietnamese	1
Bulgarian	1	Yiddish	1

Of the 46 languages on offer almost all are accessible at ab initio at degree level across the entire range of Higher Education institutions in England. In table 9, below, languages are ranked according to the number of institutions that offer the language in question at ab initio level

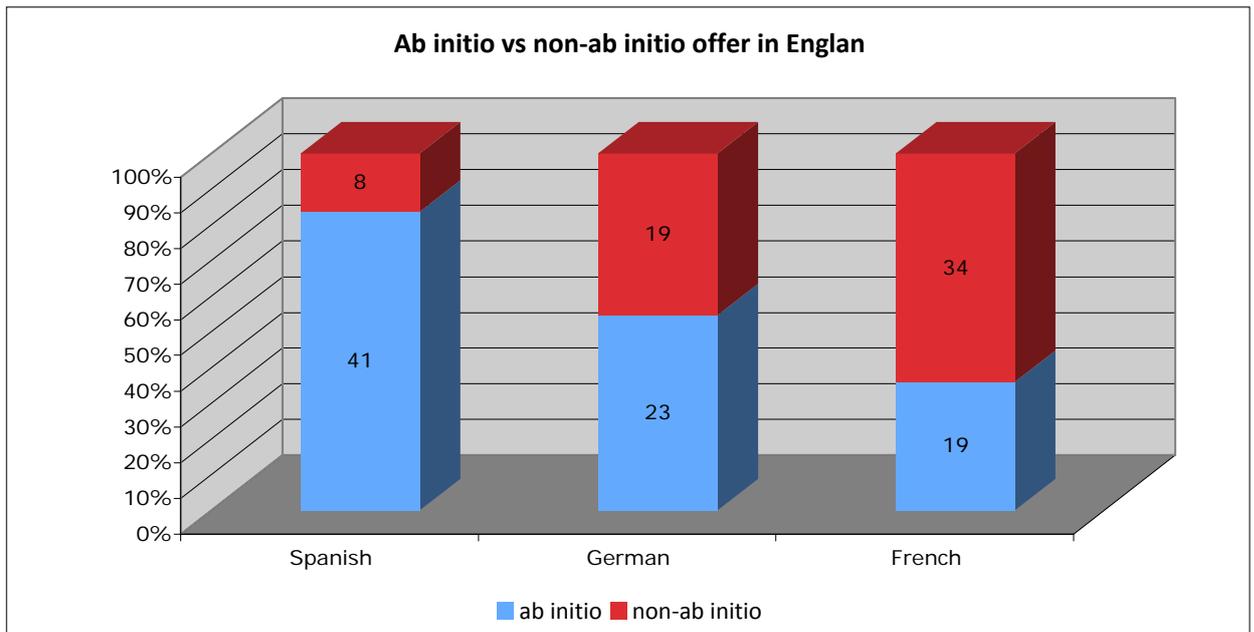
Table 9: Figures relating to the number of English HE institution offering ab initio and non-ab initio languages as a named component of degree programmes

Languages	ab initio	non-ab initio
Spanish	41	8
Italian	30	0
German	23	19
Mandarin	20	0
French	19	34
Russian	17	0

Arabic	15	0
Japanese	15	0
Portuguese	14	0
Hebrew	5	0
Catalan	4	0
Dutch	4	0
Polish	4	0
Czech	3	0
Persian	3	0
Serbian and Croatian	3	0
Turkish	3	0
Danish	2	0
Korean	2	0
Modern Greek	2	0
Swedish	2	0
Bengali	1	0
Bulgarian	1	0
Burmese	1	0
Celtic	1	0
Finnish	1	0
Georgian	1	0
Hausa	1	0
Hindi	1	0
Hungarian	1	0
Icelandic	1	0
Indonesian	1	0
Irish	1	0
Kurdish	1	0
Nepalese	1	0
Norwegian	1	0
Romanian	1	0
Sanskrit	1	0
Slovak	1	0
Slovene	1	0
Swahili	1	0
Thai	1	0
Tibetan	1	0
Ukrainian	1	0
Vietnamese	1	0
Yiddish	1	0

Out of the 46 languages identified in this study, French, German and Spanish are accessible exclusively as non-ab initio respectively in 64%, 45% and 16% of the English institutions that offer these languages at degree level (table 10).

Table 10: How the ab initio and non-ab initio offers compare in England



Tables 11-19 below report the data relative to the entry requirements of the top nine ab initio languages accessible as a named component of a degree programme in England. For French, Italian and Spanish at one institution, data is classified as insufficient as the institution was unable to provide firm information on its entry requirements.

Table 11: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Spanish in England

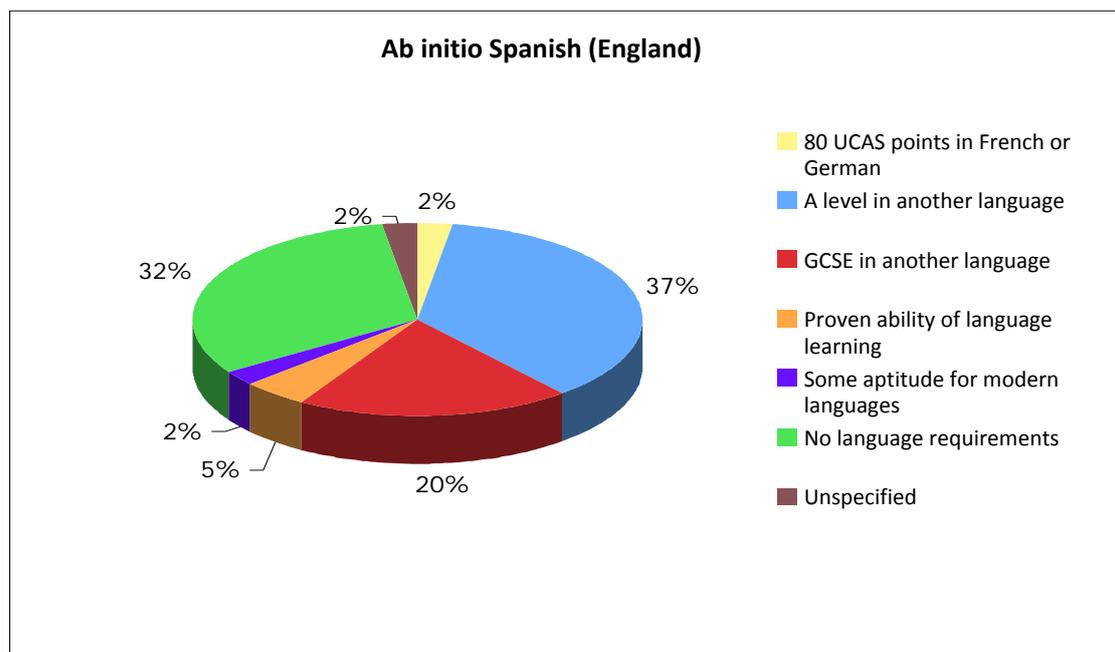


Table 12: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Italian in England

* It includes "A level or language learning ability"

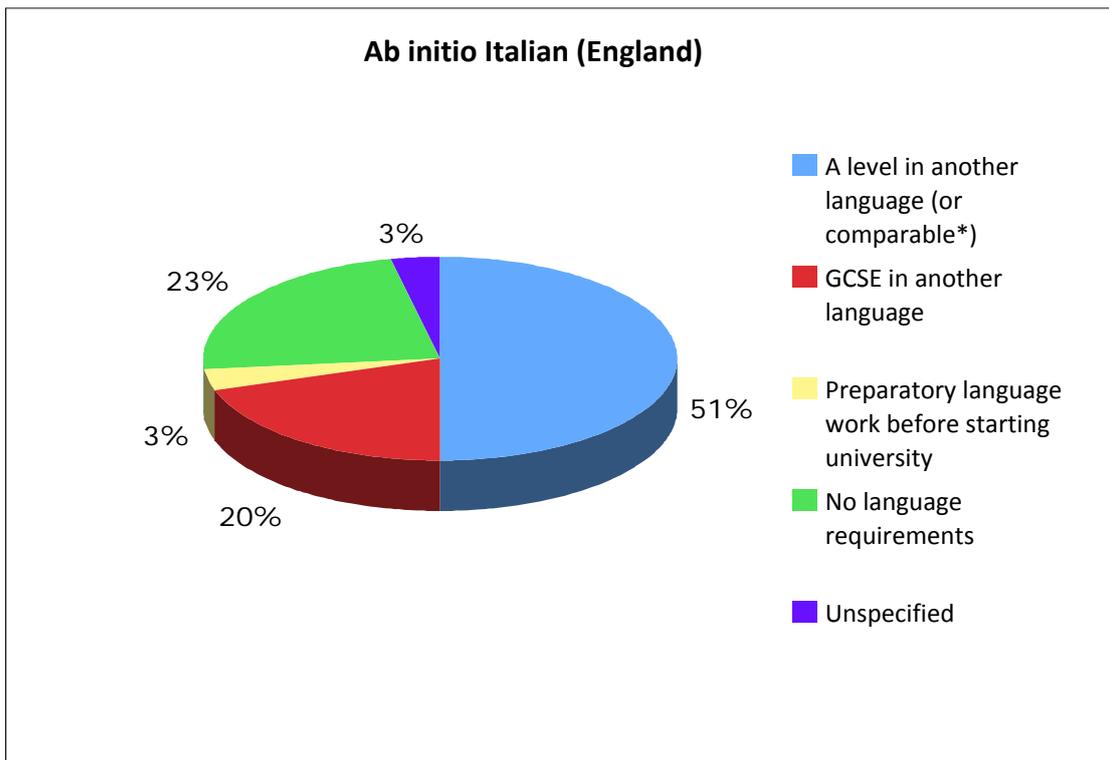


Table 13: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of German in England

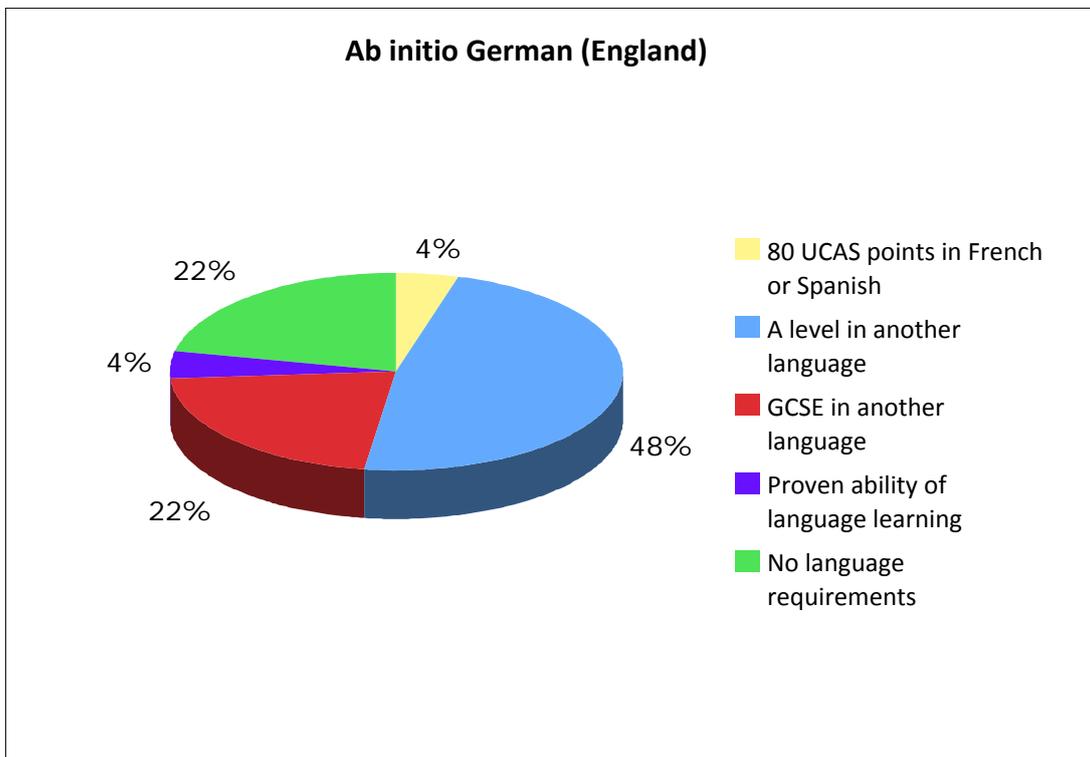


Table 14: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Mandarin in England

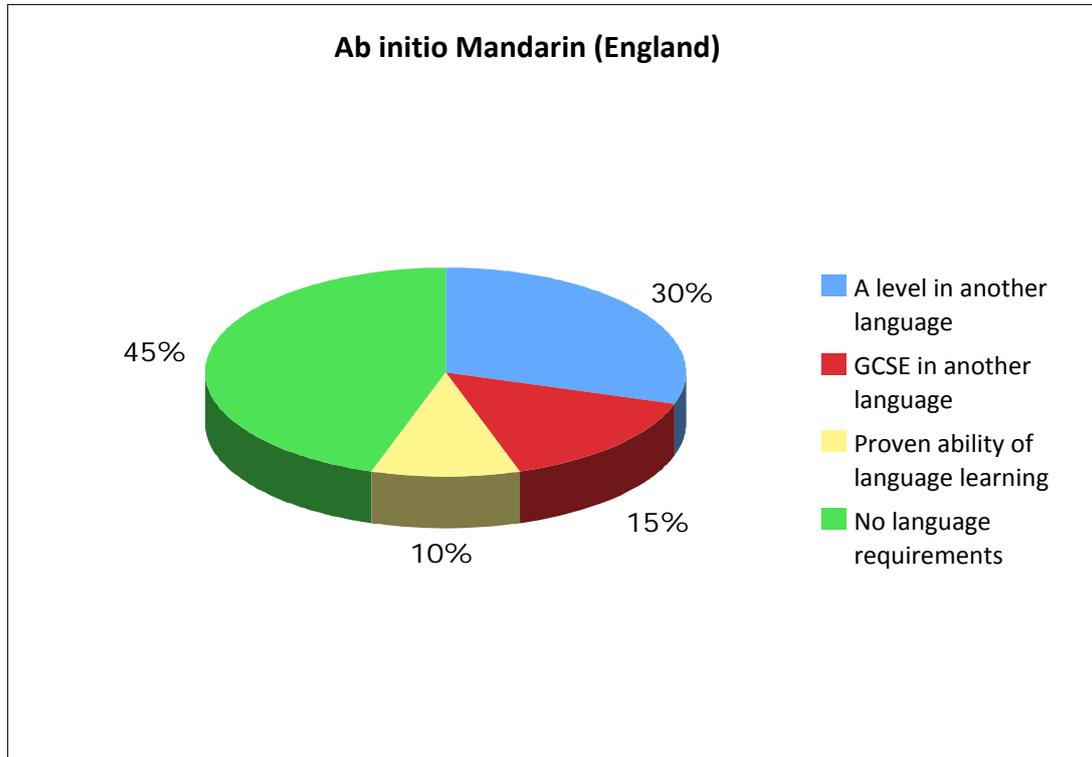


Table 15: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of French in England

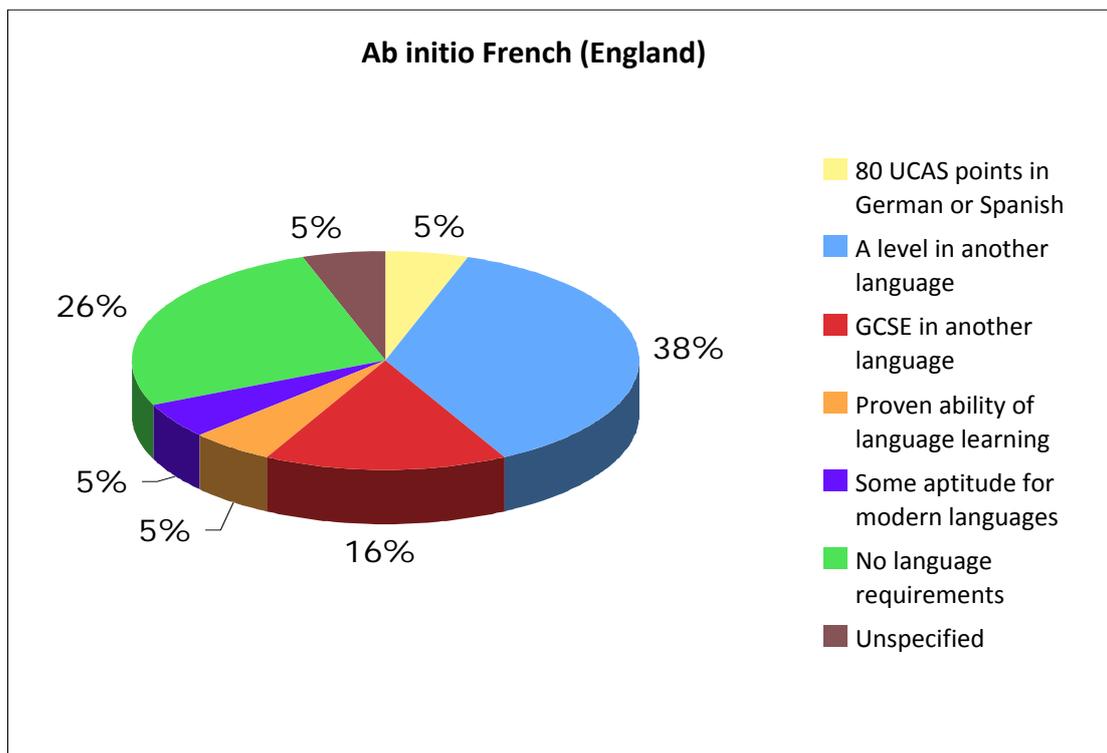


Table 16: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Russian in England

*It includes "speak another language at home or school"

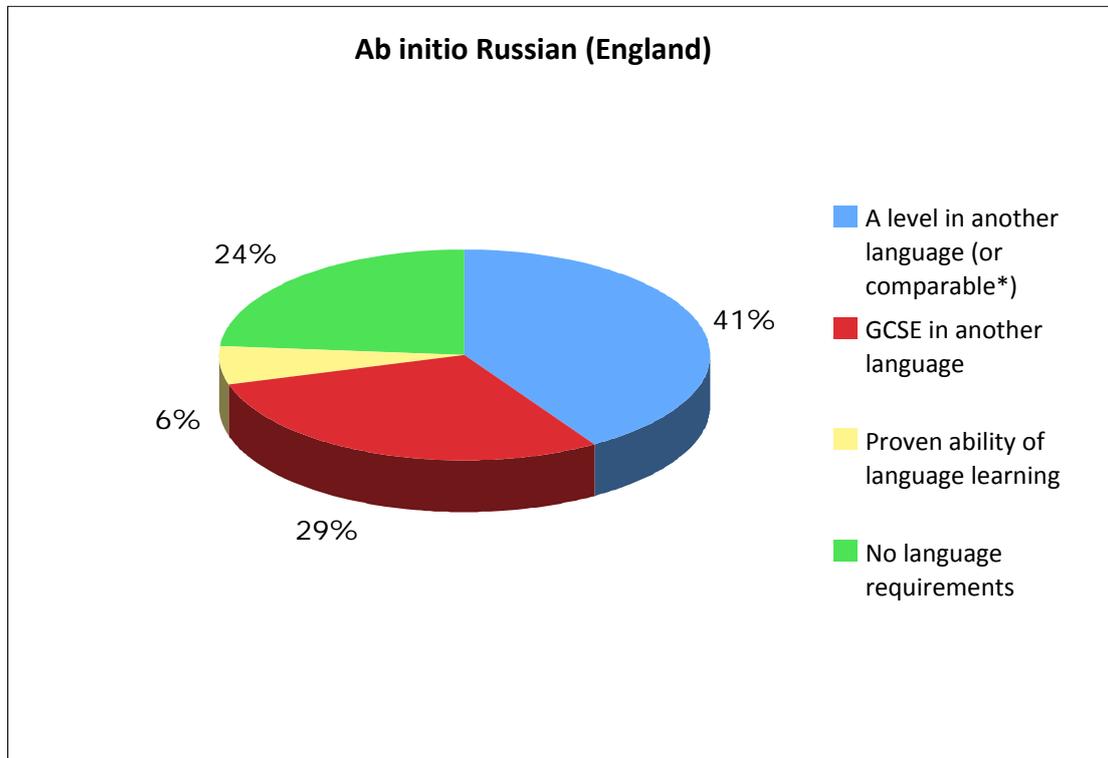


Table 17: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Arabic in England.

*It includes "speak another language at home or school"

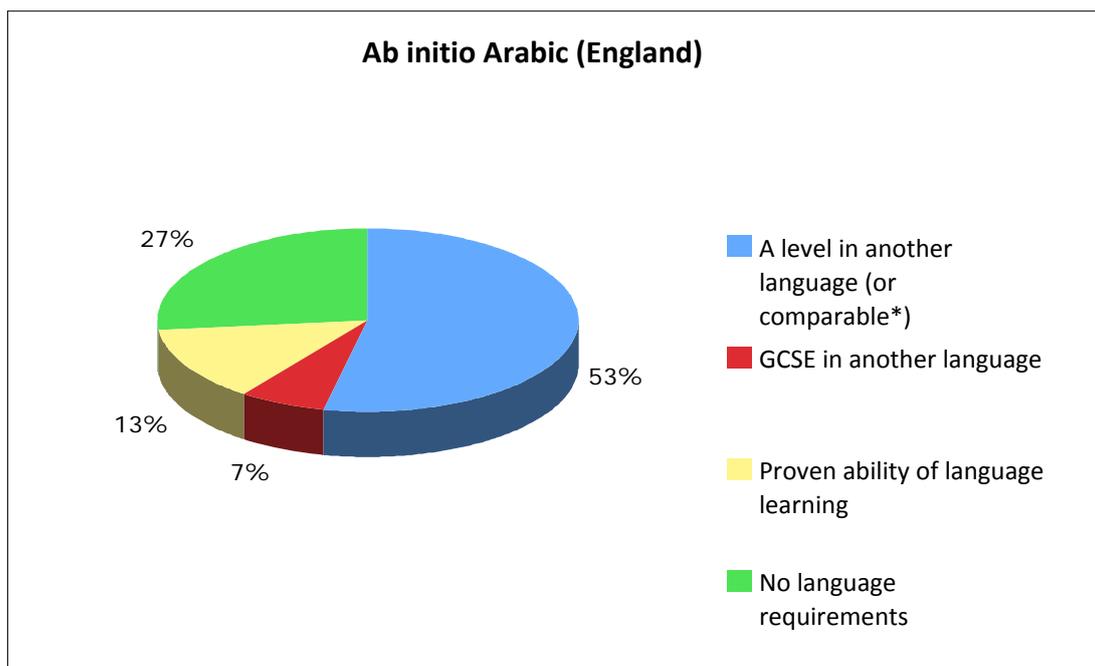


Table 18: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Japanese in England

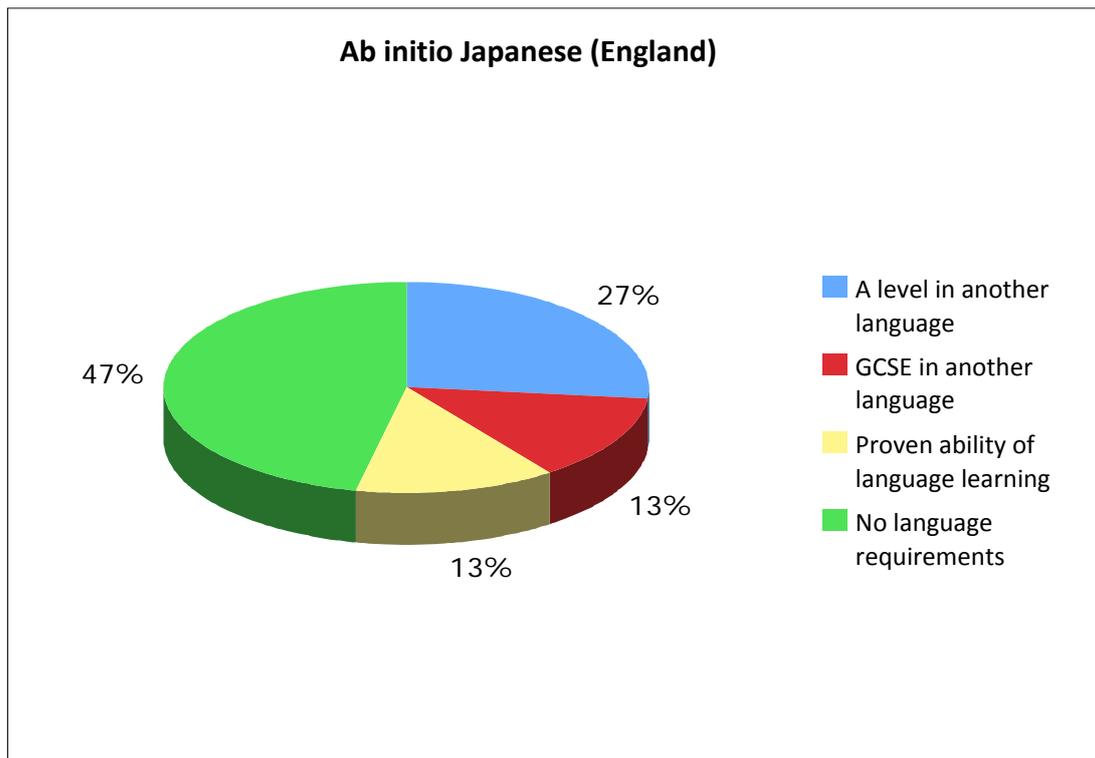
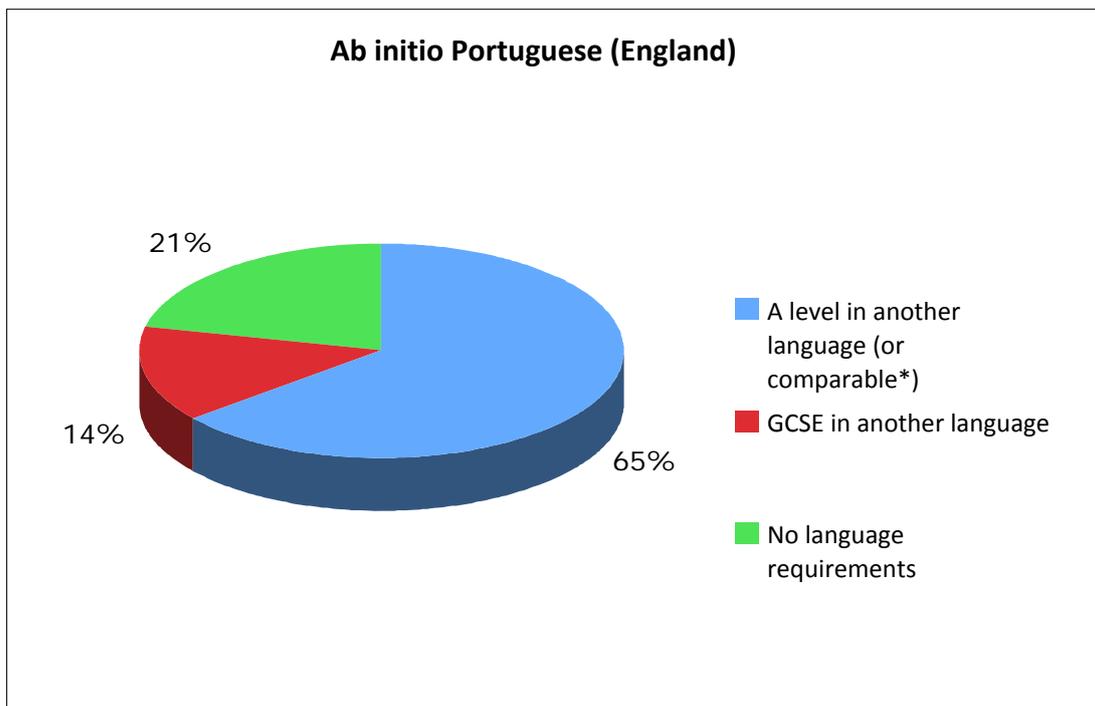


Table 19: Language entry requirements for ab initio degree students of Portuguese in England

*It includes "speak another language at home or school"



The data for the top nine languages offered at ab initio level in English HE institutions reveal a composite picture, where ab initio covers the entire range

that goes from experience of language learning at the highest possible level at secondary school to no experience of foreign language learning whatsoever. An A level in another foreign language remains the most sought after qualification, followed more or less by a GCSE in a foreign language. For the majority of the ab initio languages above, around a quarter of the institutions that offer them have degree programmes open to students who have never studied a foreign language before entering university. For Spanish this figure rises to almost a third of the institutions where it is offered ab initio, and it is close to half of the institutions for Chinese and Japanese.

1.4 Conclusions and some considerations for further research

With the exception of French in England, from the set of data collected in this survey it emerges that all languages at HE level in both Scotland and England are in the majority or in all cases offered at ab initio level. The “upsurge in ab initio [language] teaching offer” at university level mentioned in 2003 in the New Landscape report (Kelly and Jones, 2003: 24) seems, seven years later, to have established itself as a relatively widespread curricular choice. The caveat with which this survey report opens, that is, the classification of a language as ab initio is to be intended as referring to at least one degree programme in that language on offer at any given institution, also reveals the limitations of the results here presented, as they do not allow precise quantification of the extent of the ab initio provision relative to each identifiable programme. Further research, or a rather a set of searches, aimed at single programmes, possibly within a more restricted, and consequently more manageable, geographical area is therefore desirable.

Interestingly, for the two languages that in England have recently shown signs of growth both in terms of provision and in terms of uptake at secondary level, Spanish and Mandarin (Canning, 2008 and Language Trends, CILT 2010), which at HE level can therefore potentially count on a growing number of qualified entrants, there is an extremely high percentage of institutions offering degree programmes at ab initio level (84% for Spanish and 100% for Mandarin in England and 100% for both Mandarin and Spanish in Scotland).

Establishing, not just for Spanish and Mandarin, any existing correlation or disparities between the languages offer and uptake at secondary level and at HE level, and consequently the adequacy in curricular and strategic terms of language provision at HE level in relation to the changing demand defined by recent trends and policy choices, seems at this point to be a priority. Originally triggered by the government choice in 2004 to make languages non-compulsory at GCSE level, the decrease in foreign languages uptake in England at Key Stage 4 (GCSE), confirmed by the latest CILT survey (Language Trends CILT, 2010: down from 73% in 2003 to 43% in 2010) demands close attention to, and an accurate analysis of, the data emerging from surveys of this kind, not just in order for the providers at HE level to be in a position to establish the opportunity or need for an increase in their ab initio provision, but especially to explore and better define the nature of any future or existing ab initio provision.

The data in this survey indicates that all the top languages on offer at degree level in both England and Scotland allow for ab initio provision to include

students who have no previous experience or formal qualification in a foreign language. This seems to happen regardless of the perceived difficulty of the language on offer. To cite one example, Japanese, which in a Western European cultural context is normally classified as difficult, in 47% of the cases in England is open at degree level to students with no previous experience of language learning. While waiting for the impact of programmes such as the English Baccalaureate, with the current documented decrease in the number of secondary-level qualified students of languages, the identity of the average home ab initio student, together with the curricular and strategic choices made by each single institution, may well need to be modified to accommodate a growing percentage of potential students who, especially in England, may have bypassed language learning at school, but may still be willing to be attracted into a degree programme in languages.

Following on from the above considerations, further research seems necessary with a view to establishing a correlation, or lack thereof, between the existence of an ab initio programme and its recruitment rates or its attainment success (i.e. how well students perform). More importantly, though, what seems to be relevant is also any possible correlation between the different degrees of entrance levels to ab initio learning (from high level experience to no experience in language learning) and the success rate of a language degree programme in terms of student performance or recruitment numbers. That is to say, when considering once again languages like Mandarin and Spanish, it is crucial to determine in which way the growth of such languages at secondary level is matched by the emergence of both languages at degree level mostly as ab initio, and what the impact is on such emergence of the high accessibility rate that such programmes offer at degree level to students with no previous language experience (cfr. table 4 and table 14 above: 50% for Spanish in Scotland and 45% for Mandarin in England).

A thorough exploration of the issues related to the ab initio provision within language degree programmes at HE level seems inevitable as it would prove instrumental in allowing HE institutions to determine the viability and suitability of increasing or widening ab initio degree programmes in general, and in particular programmes open to students with no previous language learning experience.

Catering for ab initio language students: languages for all?
Ab initio language learning and the Italian Studies degree programme at the University of Reading

2 Catering for ab initio students: languages for all?

This section of the study intends to explore some of the figures related to the ab initio language undergraduate programme in Italian Studies at Reading in the last two academic years (2009-10 and 2010-11) and reviews the curricular choices that have been implemented in the last nine years as a response to the presence of a composite ab initio cohort, with a view to highlighting relevant issues and proposing further questions for debate.

2.1 The absolute ab initio student

The ab initio mapping survey has confirmed Italian as the fourth-most popular language on offer in undergraduate degree programmes at Scottish and English Higher Education institutions. Italian is also fourth, after French, Spanish and German, in the ranking of modern languages according to provision and uptake at KS 3, GCSE and post-16 level in maintained and independent schools in England (Language Trends 2010 Secondary). At undergraduate level Italian in both Scotland and England is offered to ab initio students by all HE institutions identified in the mapping survey.

Reading is one of seven institutions in England to offer open access to their Italian undergraduate programme to ab initio students from the entire range of the spectrum, including those who have no previous foreign language qualification or learning experience. Furthermore, Reading's flexible progression system allows on to the programme students who are not yet enrolled and who may decide to enroll at the end of the first year. This system gives rise to a particular category of language learner, who can be termed the absolute ab initio student: an English mother-tongue student of British nationality and education, totally devoid of experience in language learning, who attends the course with varying degrees of motivation, clearly with no firm intention of embarking on a language degree but who can, after one year of study, if successful, opt for it.

2.2 Italian Studies at Reading

Italian Studies at Reading was founded in 1948. Initially an integral part of the English department, it became a separate department in 1960 and was in 2010 merged into a new Department of Modern Languages and European Studies, together with French Studies, German Studies and European Studies.

Italian at Reading is offered as a single-honours 4-year degree programme, as a major subject in twelve joint-honours 4-year degree combinations and as a minor subject in two 3-year degree programmes, which do not include a year abroad. In 2002-03 Reading adopted a modular system, which requires students to obtain 120 credits each academic year, corresponding to an average of six 20-credit modules. Modern Languages students, most of who are enrolled on a four-year degree programme, will have to successfully complete modules for a total of 480 credits in order to qualify for a degree in or involving a foreign language.

Entry requirements vary according to degree programmes but in general terms a degree in Italian or involving Italian is offered to qualifying ab initio

students who may have no previous language qualification either in Italian or in any other language. Of the other two languages offered at degree level at Reading, French requires a minimum French GCSE A*, and German, which is also offered ab initio, at least an A level in another foreign language (table 1).

Table 1: Italian Studies degree programmes available at Reading and relative entry requirements

Degree programme	Entry requirements
Italian Studies	<p>UCAS Tariff (Single Honours): Either 280 points from three subjects or 300 points from four subjects, which must include a minimum of two A levels. Total points exclude Key Skills and General Studies.</p> <p>UCAS Tariff (Joint Honours): Either 300 points from three subjects or 320 points from four subjects, which must include a minimum of two A levels. Total points exclude Key Skills and General Studies.</p> <p>International Baccalaureate: Pass Diploma and achieve 6, 6, 5 in three higher level subjects.</p> <p>Additional programme-specific requirements: For French and Italian: either A level French grade C or above. Also candidates with 50 points at AS French or an A* at GCSE French may also take the degree by following an Intermediate French Language module to raise their linguistic skills. For German and Italian: An A level in a modern foreign language is normally required for total beginners. For all other routes, at least an A* in GCSE German is required.</p> <p>All English combinations require grade B in A level English Lit or English Lit/Lang. For combinations with Economics GCSE B in Maths and C in English are required.</p>
Italian and History of Art	
Italian and Classical Studies	
Italian and International Relations	
Italian and Management Studies	
Italian and Politics	
Archeology and Italian	
Italian and History	
French and Italian	
German and Italian	
English Literature and Italian Studies	
English Language with Italian (3 years)	
Italian and Economics	
Philosophy and Italian	<p>UCAS Tariff: 320 points from three A levels or 340 points from 3 A levels and one AS level. Total points exclude Key Skills and General Studies.</p> <p>International Baccalaureate: Pass Diploma and achieve 6, 6, 5 in three higher level subjects.</p>

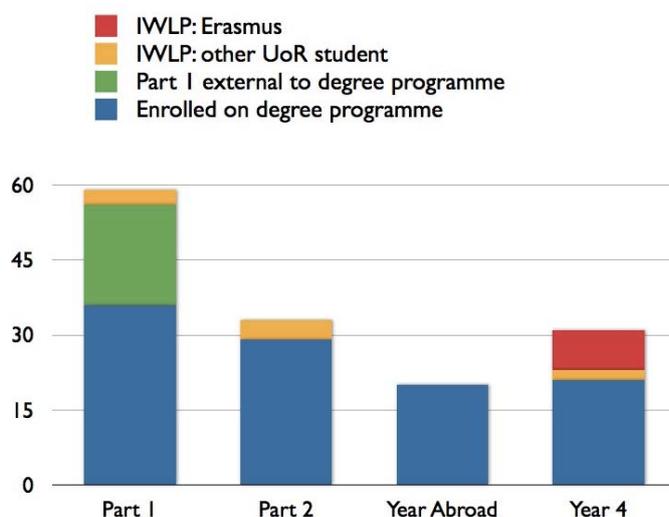
<p>European Studies (with language option – 3 or 4 years)</p>	<p>UCAS Tariff: Either 300 points from three subjects or 320 points from four subjects, which must include a minimum of two A levels. Total points exclude Key Skills and General Studies.</p> <p>Subjects: A minimum of grade A* at GCSE or 50 points at AS level French is normally required if French is to be studied as the major language. An A level in a Modern Foreign Language is normally required if German is to be studied as the major language. No requirement for Italian.</p> <p>International Baccalaureate: Pass Diploma and achieve 6, 6, 5 in three higher level subjects including French or German if either is to be the main language.</p>
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2.3 Italian Studies at Reading: the numbers

Italian Studies at Reading is a relatively average-sized department (now unit) with a total of 107 students enrolled in 2010-11 over the entire four-year programme on either a single or joint-honours degree. There are 11 permanent members of staff, of which one is a full-time language coordinator, one is a *Lettore di Ruolo* – a fully qualified and experienced language teacher sponsored by the Italian Foreign Ministry – and two are language teachers on fractional contracts (approximately 0.5). In 2010-11 the department also employs a teaching fellow on a fixed-term contract and four sessional teaching staff. The teaching fellow and two of the sessional staff are deployed almost exclusively for language teaching.

The total number of students attending Italian Studies language modules in any given academic year is normally in excess of the number of students enrolled on the programme. This is because the modular system at Reading University allows first-year students to choose, alongside the required modules for their stated degree, modules from other programmes. For Italian Studies this translates into a number of students external to the programme attending Italian modules at Part 1 that is at times twice as large as the number of students actually enrolled on the programme. Also, a limited number of students on language modules offered by Italian Studies can be Erasmus students, or University of Reading (UoR) students, accessing the Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP), for which some Italian Studies language modules act as the higher levels (4 to 7) of the IWLP languages ladder. On top of the 107 students formally enrolled on the programme, in 2010-11, there are another 37 students attending one or more Italian Studies – mostly language and mostly Part 1 – modules (table 2).

Table 2: Students on Italian Studies degree programme modules in 2010-2011



The number of students enrolled can potentially vary when students move from Part 1, the first year of study, to Part 2. At the end of Part 1 the University of Reading allows students to change their degree programme, should they wish to, provided they have passed the required number of credits in their new chosen subject or new combination of subjects at the end of Part 1. This means that Part 1 students external to the Italian Studies programme may choose to enter it at Part 2, if they have passed the expected number of credits at Part 1. It also means that students who had initially enrolled can leave at the end of Part 2.

The Reading academic year comprises three terms of 10 weeks. The Autumn Term and Spring Term are when most of the undergraduate courses are run. Undergraduate final examinations are normally held in the Summer Term in each year of the programme of study.

2.4 The Italian Studies ab initio student at Reading: the data

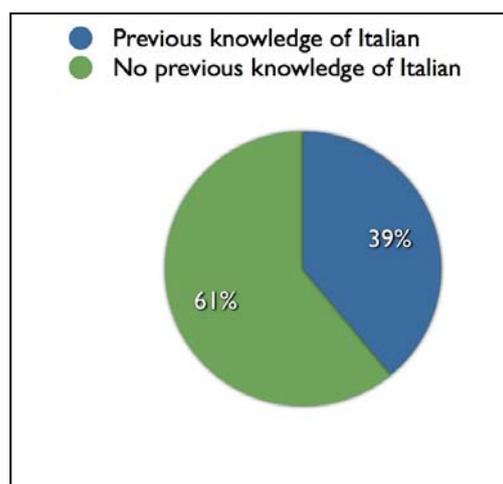
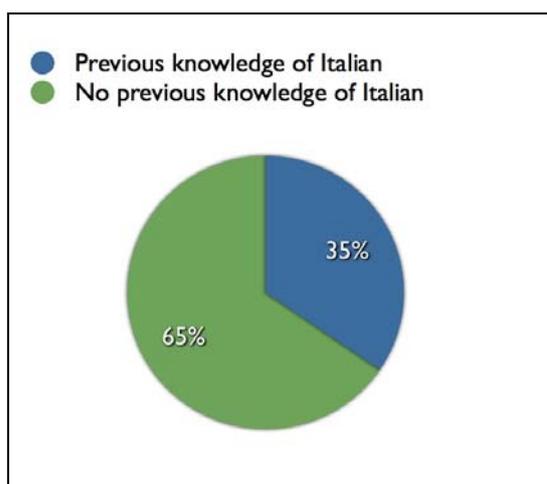
Data extracted from the responses to a Part 1 enrolment questionnaire collected in the academic years 2009-10 and 2010-11 make it possible to trace a relatively detailed profile of the ab initio student of Italian Studies at Reading. The questionnaire, distributed to all Part 1 Italian students in the week before the start of the academic year, asks respondents to state

- (a) Whether they already know or whether they have studied Italian before; which qualifications they have obtained in Italian (including grades) and/or which level they have achieved.
- (b) Whether they already know other foreign languages or whether they have studied any other foreign language before; which qualifications they have obtained in these languages (with relative grades) and/or which level they have achieved.

In each of the two years in question Italian Studies enrolled on its Part 1 language modules a total of 55 (2009-10) and 59 (2010-11) students, both internal and external to the programme. On average slightly less than two thirds of both cohorts declared at entry point no previous knowledge or study of Italian language, with a noticeable increase in the number of non-ab initio students in the 2010-11 cohort (tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Part 1 Italian Studies students in 2009-10

Table 4: Part 1 Italian Studies students in 2010-11



When classifying the different levels of experience of, or expertise in, foreign language learning (other than Italian), declared at entry point by the ab initio students in question, whether it be in a naturalistic or instructional context, the picture appears to be quite fragmented. The students of the current study have been identified according to the highest level of declared experience or qualification in a foreign language other than Italian and have been grouped in the following categories:

Bilingual/multilingual. These are mostly non-British students or students with dual nationalities, one of which is British, with at least one foreign language at very high level or bilingual. Some declare differing levels of knowledge of up to 5 languages, most of them European; all of them state that they possess a variety of foreign language learning experiences in a formal setting which range from British A levels to studies with no qualification.

A level in another European language. This includes Latin and comparable qualifications. Languages declared are, in order of frequency: French, Spanish and German. No non-European languages declared. Students in this category are all English mother tongue speakers of English nationality.

AS level in another European language. This includes Latin and comparable qualifications. Languages declared are, in order of frequency: French, Spanish and German. No non-European languages declared. Students in this category are all English mother tongue speakers of English nationality.

GCSE in another European language. This includes Latin and comparable qualifications. Languages declared are, in order of frequency: French, Spanish and German. Mostly European languages declared (one student in the 2010-11 cohort has declared a comparable qualification in Afrikaans). Students in this category are mostly English mother tongue speakers of British nationality. Two, one in each cohort, have dual nationality.

No previous language qualification/experience. The absolute ab initio students are all English mother tongue speakers of British nationality who declare no formal language qualifications and/or no or extremely limited previous experience of foreign language learning.

Table 5: 2009-10 ab initio students breakdown

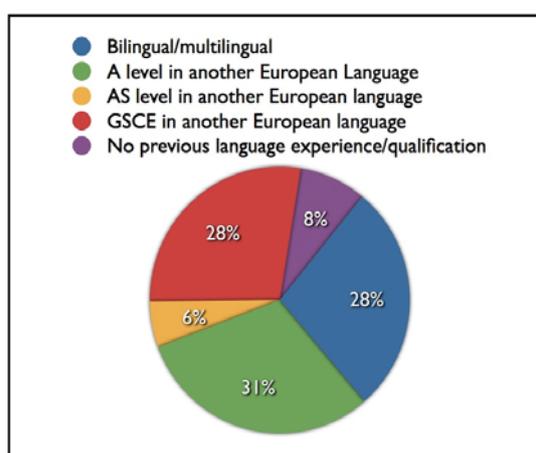
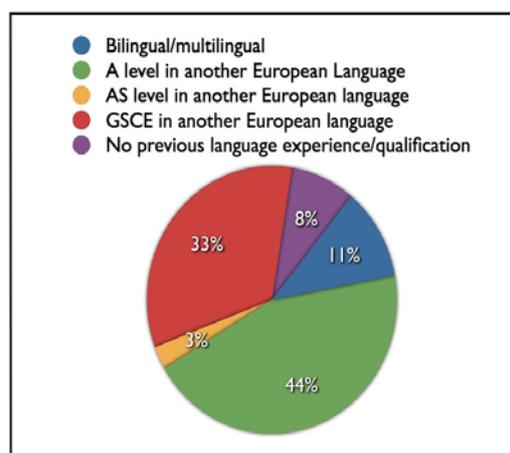


Table 6: 2010-11 ab initio students breakdown



The exact distribution of the 2009-10 and the 2010-11 ab initio students amongst the above categories are reported in tables 5 and 6. Data for the two different cohorts clearly reveal a remarkable difference between the number of bilingual/multilingual students in the two academic years – 2 ½ times larger in 2009-10 – and an equally remarkable increase in the number of students with an A level in another foreign language in 2010-11, followed in the same year by a 5% increase in the number of students with a GCSE in a foreign language other than Italian. What remains constant in the two sets of data is the percentage of ab initio students who have very limited or no previous experience of foreign language learning.

Of the ab initio students in the two cohorts, only 39% in 2009-10 and 50% in 2010-11 were officially enrolled on the Italian Studies programme when they started at Part 1. When the numbers are broken down according to each of the categories proposed above (table 7), it emerges that, when considered together, students with an A level or a GCSE in another European language are the larger group to show an inclination to enroll on an ab initio degree programme in Italian. They are immediately followed by the bilingual/multilingual group and, at some distance, by an extremely limited number of students who have no previous knowledge or experience of any foreign language.

The table also clarifies the extent of the presence of absolute ab initio students at Part 1 and on the programme. Even if the figures point towards an almost negligible impact of the absolute ab initio student on the total of the ab initio group, the projection figure of 3% uptake on the programme may increase and the potential for access is clearly confirmed.

When considering progression from Part 1 and Part 2, the flexibility of the Reading system appears to be working in favour of Italian Studies, as both sets of data (the ones for 2010-11 being, at the time of writing, still a projection based on students' stated intentions at the end of the Spring Term) reveal in most cases an increase or lack of variation in numbers for each category, and an overall increase in the number of students enrolled on the Italian Studies programme when moving from Part 1 to Part 2.

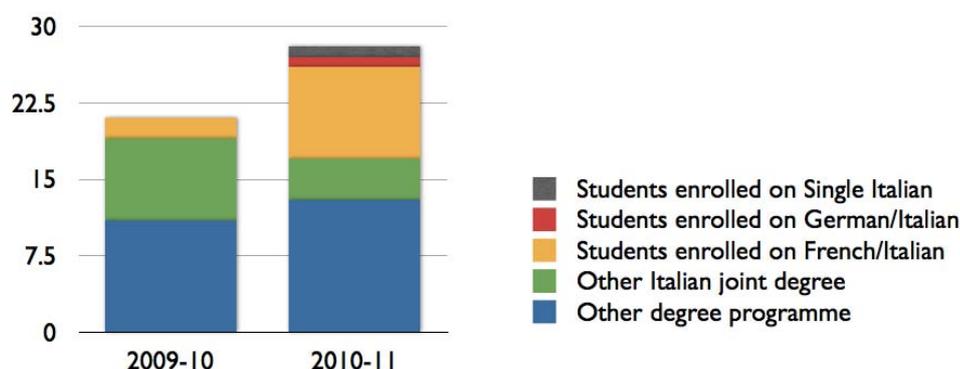
Table 7: 2009-10 and 2010-11 ab initio students on Italian Studies programme: progression from Part 1 to Part 2 (percentages have been rounded up or down).

	<i>Ab initio</i> students		Enrolled on programme at Part 1 (% of total)		Progressed or declared intention to progress to Part 2 (% of total)		Variation in <i>ab initio</i> students on programme from Part 1 to Part 2 (% of total)	
	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010
Bilingual/multilingual	10	4	4 (11%)	2 (6%)	6 (16%)	4 (11%)	+5%	+5%
A level in another European language	11	16	6 (16%)	12 (33%)	7 (19%)	12 (33%)	+3%	0%
AS in another European language	2	1	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0%	0%
GCSE in another European Language	10	12	4 (11%)	3 (8%)	2 (6%)	4 (11%)	-5%	+3%
No previous qualification/experience	3	3	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)	0%	0%
Total (% of students on programme)	36	36	14 (39%)	18 (50%)	15 (42%)	21 (58%)	+ 3%	+ 8%

Based on the above it is possible to conclude that, for the two academic years under examination, foreign language GCSE and A level qualifications are the largest group and possibly the most consistent source of ab initio students for the Italian Studies degree programme at Reading at Part 1 and at Part 2. Also, Italian at Part 1 seems to attract students from this group independently of the offer of classical joint-honours degree combinations with two languages. When breaking down the degree choices of this group as a whole (table 8), it appears that in 2009-10, even though the majority of them would meet the entry requirements of the joint-languages programme, a mere 10% of the total of students with a foreign language A level or GCSE, and enrolled on an Italian Studies degree course at Part 1, was in fact planning at entry

point to study French and Italian. In 2010-11 the number of students from this group who started the academic year intending to study French and Italian or German and Italian is clearly on the increase (36% in total) but still not preponderant.

Table 8: Part 1 degree choices of Italian Studies ab initio students with an A level or GCSE in a language other than Italian



The data accessed in this study are clearly too limited for any of these results to be considered as truly representative or for any definitive conclusions to be drawn. Further data both from before and after the two years under consideration here would provide a more comprehensive picture and possibly allow us to point to clearly significant patterns or changes in the recruitment trends of ab initio students on the Italian Studies degree programme at Reading.

2.5 The Italian Studies language curriculum: the ab initio student progression

The Italian Studies language curriculum at Reading is deeply integrated with the content element of the programme. Students at Part 1, whether they are officially enrolled on or external to the programme, are required to take 40 credits in Italian Studies, 20 of which are allocated to the study of the language at the appropriate entry level, the other 20 being dedicated to the introduction to twentieth-century Italian culture. A further 20-credit module devoted to Medieval and Renaissance Italian culture is available as an option and is open also to students external to the programme who do not wish to study the language.

At Part 2, during the year abroad, and in the final year, the language remains compulsory throughout the curriculum, and is accompanied for joint-honours students and single-honours students respectively by a further two or five optional culture modules. Italian culture modules available as options range from Renaissance to contemporary literature and history and from cinema to linguistics. In the final year students of Italian and Management Studies and of Economics and Italian take a further language module, Italian for Managers, which is also made available as an option to single-honours students. Students on a three-year programme, who do not go on the Year Abroad, attend the Italian as a Minor Language module in their final year.

Within a degree programme offered to students who may have no previous knowledge of any foreign language, the Italian Studies language curriculum at Reading has been designed to cater for a great variety of backgrounds and varying degrees of linguistic experience and/or expertise. Upon their arrival at Reading Italian Studies students are allocated to one of three possible language groups, which correspond to three separate modules:

- the **advanced group**, for students with a previous knowledge of Italian at GCE Advanced or comparable level;
- the **lower-intermediate group**, for students with a knowledge of Italian at GCSE or comparable level or for ab initio students with a good A level (B and above) in another European language;
- The **elementary group**, for ab initio students with no previous language qualifications or with language qualifications that do not meet the requirements of the lower-intermediate group.

Allocation to any of the above groups is not necessarily immediate or problem-free. A certain degree of mobility from one group to the contiguous one is allowed for in the first weeks of the Part 1 academic year, especially for those students whose previous qualifications do not fall neatly into any of the three groups. Particularly resistant to any predefined allocation are students with an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) level in Italian, who in recent years have grown in number and would naturally hover between the advanced and the lower-intermediate group. For them allocation to either group, following a preliminary interview, is provisional and is confirmed only after a review meeting at the end of the first three weeks of the course. The case of ab initio students with a mid-range A level grade (normally C) in another foreign language and whose move to the Lower Intermediate group may be granted on the basis of individual students' motivation and entry status (enrolled or external), may also be problematic.

The separation of ab initio students into two groups is relatively recent and is one of a series of adjustments to the Italian Studies language curriculum in response to the introduction in 2002-03 of the modular system and the concomitant reduction of the number of 'teaching' terms from three to two, with the subsequent compression of the same learning and teaching material into a reduced number of contact hours.

Until 2001-02, the ab initio student of Italian at Reading was taught language in a separate group from the advanced one, but was essentially treated exactly the same as the non-ab initio student, in as much as all Italian Studies students, regardless of their entry level, received three-hours language tuition per week over 3 terms (i.e. 30 weeks) throughout most of their degree course, with the obvious exception of the year abroad.

In order to compensate for the effects of the 2002-03 reduction/compression of contact hours, it was felt that language teaching for ab initio students should be increased to 4 hours per week over the two teaching terms (20 weeks), and that some extra classes (2 hours a week) should be provided in the Summer Term, in the four weeks prior to the examination period. If this adjustment helped preserve the same number of teaching hours as before the introduction of the modular system, it did not address the issues that would

emerge from the grouping together of learners of Italian who have in common their status as *ab initio*, but who in practice displayed the most diverse range of previous linguistic experience, including lack thereof.

The creation in 2007-08 of two separate groups for *ab initio* students of Italian, Lower-Intermediate and Elementary (where Lower-Intermediate seems to refer to the expected exit level of its students rather than their entry point), on the basis of previous linguistic knowledge and experience, has been a clear step towards a better-tailored language teaching provision for the *ab initio* cohort. The main difference between the two groups lies in the intensity of the exposure to and the analysis of the relevant features of the language at beginner or false beginner (as GCSE Italian students are regarded) level. Being able to capitalize on the previously accrued language learning experience, the Lower Intermediate student is therefore expected to progress with the study and practice of Italian language during the first year faster and more deeply.

When moving on to Part 2, the second year of study, the two groups are reunited and both join the Intermediate Italian module, with the chance, though, for students at the top end of the performance range within the Lower-Intermediate group, of joining the Advanced group, who at Part 2 will have progressed to the Italian Advanced II module. At this point of progression, from Part 1 to Part 2, the post-*ab initio* cohort normally retains only a small number of students from the Elementary group¹.

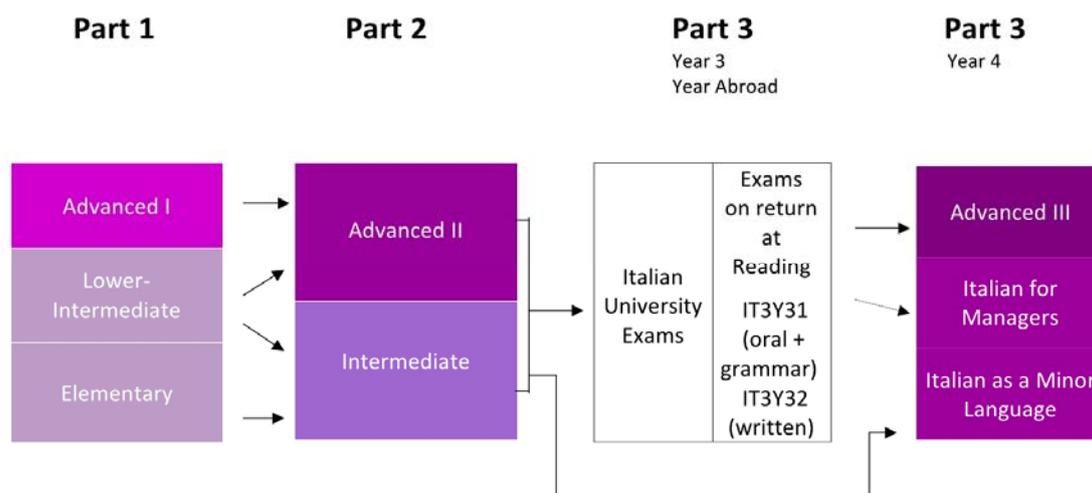
The third year is spent abroad by all Modern Languages students on a 4-year degree programme. Almost all of those studying Italian embark on a period of study abroad, through the Erasmus exchange programme (work placements being at present a rare occurrence and almost exclusively left to the initiative of single students, mostly from the Italian and Management Studies programme). The majority of the Italian Studies students spend a full academic year studying at an Italian university, with the exception of those on the French or German and Italian programme, who spend the first part of the their year in either France or Germany and the remaining half in Italy.

It is at this stage that all *ab initio* and non-*ab initio* students of Italian are effectively 'joined', in as much as no distinction is made on the basis of their entry level in the way the Year Abroad is organized for them: given the same degree programme, they all spend an equal amount of time in Italy, and they are all asked to attend courses and take credited exams at an Italian university. This equality of treatment is further confirmed when students return from the Year Abroad. At this point the length of stay is the only discriminating factor. Therefore, those who have spent a full year will take two Italian language exams, worth 20 credits each, whereas the students who have spent half a year in Italy will take only one of those exams.

¹ The exception to this, since the introduction of the two *ab initio* groups at Part 1, being the 2008-09 cohort, where a striking 40% (6 out of 15) of Elementary students chose to progress from Part 1 to Part 2. The norm seems to be 2 or 3 students each year out of an average of 14.

The equalization process between ab initio and non-ab initio students of Italian is formally completed in the final year, when all students merge into a single compulsory language module, Italian Advanced III. Students on a three-year programme, who do not go on the year abroad, effectively escape the equalization process and the distinction between ab initio and non-ab initio is somehow maintained for them. They will take one of two versions of the Italian as a Minor Language module in their final year, depending on the level reached at Part 2, whether advanced or post-ab initio (intermediate).

Table 9: The Italian Studies language curriculum (academic year 2010-11)



2.6 Special teaching and learning provision for ab initio students in the Italian Studies language curriculum

The introduction of the modular system at Reading in 2002 and the consequent changes to the number and distribution of contact hours within the academic year practically favoured the emergence of the ab initio language student enrolled on a degree programme as an issue at institutional level. The ab initio language degree student was therefore granted the status of special case for which, within the changed context, a special teaching provision was to be offered in the form of an extra weekly hour at Part 1 in order to maintain the pre-2002 total count of contact hours, the reduction of which was accepted instead for the advanced student.

This measure, which was originally presented as a definitive solution to the problem, worked instead as a first move towards a gradual overall readjustment and fine-tuning of the language teaching provision for Italian Studies ab initio students. The number of contact hours – in British HE institutions the canonical three hours per week – has been subsequently increased to four a week also for Part 2 post-ab initio students. The weekly increase was also recently extended to all final year students, of which the post-ab initio remain the largest part.

Last year, for the first time, a summer term 40-hour intensive language course, run immediately after the examination period, was trialed both at the end of Part 1 and Part 2, effectively expanding the number of contact hours for ab initio students in each of the first two academic years by a third. The

trial has been deemed successful and the summer term course has now been embedded in the relevant module specifications.

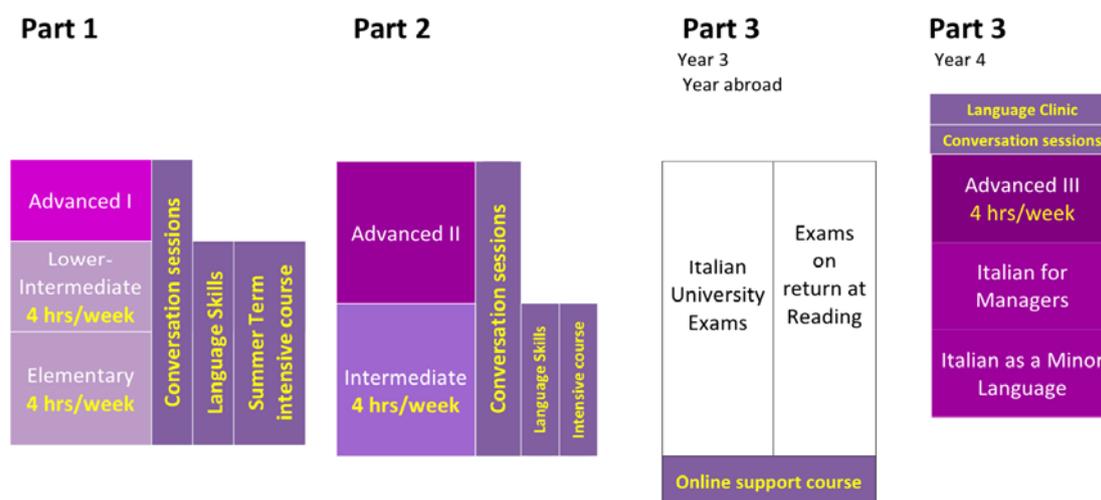
A final addition to the contact hours for all students on the Italian Studies programme is the introduction of conversation sessions in the Spring Term led by trained Erasmus mother-tongue students, which for ab initio and post-ab initio students at Parts 1 and 2 are purposefully designed to encourage and enhance the practice of the language and to provide a structured peer-to-peer exchange. The sessions are also meant to provide high levels of motivation while speeding up the development of relevant intercultural awareness.

The overall increase in contact hours, affecting in particular those parts of the curriculum crossed by ab initio students in the different stages of the programme, also responds to a shift in the general approach to language teaching. Rather than expecting students to master the greatest bulk of the linguistic features and structures of Italian, basic and complex, in the first two years of the programme, and then assigning the practice of such features and structures to the year abroad, and ultimately their consolidation in the final year, the new syllabus for ab initio students has been increasingly redesigned to accommodate a more gradual progression in the acquisition of greater linguistic competence and proficiency. The exposure of the ab initio student to the different features of Italian has been effectively diluted, in density rather than in intensity, throughout the curriculum with the use of a more openly spiral advancement of the syllabus in order to allow for a better paced expansion and deepening of the acquisition process.

Concomitant to this, a new 10-hour course over the first two terms has been introduced, first for Part 1 ab initio students and more recently for Part 2 post-ab initio ones, which runs parallel to the main language course. Its title, Language Skills, reveals the intention of providing ab initio students with general and Italian-specific metalinguistic competence, and with the strategic tools necessary to better engage with the study of Italian at the intensity and depth required by the ab initio undergraduate syllabus. The fundamental aim of the course is to equip the ab initio student with – or further develop in those students who already possess them – skills and tools to be accessed especially during independent study.

Built as an expansion of these same principles, in recent years an online support course has been designed, produced and made available to all students on the Year Abroad. The course has been especially devised to encourage 'on-the-ground' use and, consequently, a more effective reinforcement of the tools and competences introduced by the Language Skills course. A final extension of the concept is the fourth hour added to the final-year language module, the Language Clinic, where the focus is on complex grammatical and syntactical features and relevant highly specialised competences to be deployed especially in the analysis and production of written Italian. Even though these measures are officially set to reach all students on the programme, the post-ab initio student is effectively the main target and, both in terms of frequency of access to the material and of the attendance rate of the course, the most consistent 'user' of the extended provision in the last two years of the programme.

Table 10: Special teaching provision for ab initio students in the Italian Studies curriculum, highlighted in yellow.



It is worth noting, especially in the light of analysis and recommendations contained in the Worton report on Modern Foreign Languages provision in HE in England,² that these changes and adjustments to the curriculum have happened in the presence of a relatively high number of language only – or, at least, mostly – teaching staff within the Italian Studies unit at Reading. The possibility of employing and deploying, with a certain degree of continuity, qualified and/or highly specialized language teaching staff, in particular for the language courses devoted to ab initio and post-ab initio students at Part 1 and Part 2, has effectively coincided with the gradual progression in the curriculum towards an extended provision for ab initio students throughout the programme and with the shift in focus towards student-led and independent learning.

2.7 Issues, problems and questions

The supplementary teaching provision offered to Italian Studies ab initio students at Reading is an attempt to address what have already elsewhere been identified as the main issues linked to the ab initio learning experience in a degree programme at a Higher Education institution in Britain (Weber-Newth 1995; Proudfoot 1998, 2001; Baumann 1999; Bowker and Stuart 2005).

The gap between ab initio and non-ab initio students. The Italian Studies degree programme at Reading, like many others in Britain, is built on the firmly held conviction that ab initio students achieve in the course of a four-year relatively intensive programme of study a level of competence and proficiency in the language comparable to that of non-ab initio students. This is based on the assumption that the large number of years – very often in excess of eight – of formal instruction in a foreign language generally afforded

² “The importance of contextualised language learning should be recognised by the appointment and the continuing professional development of highly trained specialist language teachers, in MFL Departments as well as in Language Centres”. Worton (2009: 38).

to the majority of non-ab initio students who follow the pathway set out by the British Education system, can be condensed into four.

The Italian Studies language curriculum at Reading has adopted a staggered merging of the two groups within the 4-year programme. It all starts at Part 1, when students with an Italian GCSE/low AS – or comparable – level of competence are joined in the same module with ab initio students who exhibit a high level of experience in foreign language learning. At Part 2 this same ab-initio sub-group is offered once again the chance of joining the non-ab initio advanced students, i.e. further up the scale, in those cases where the individual performance indicates a very high chance of comparable progression and success. All ab initio students are in fact merged with non-ab initio students from the third year onwards, in as much as they all receive the same teaching and assessment treatment. When the ab initio and non-ab initio groups are officially joined in the final year language module, it is formally stated that ab initio students have ‘caught up’ with the advanced group. The Year Abroad is expected to be the great equalizer, and those ab initio students who do not have the formalized experience abroad are effectively never merged with their non-ab initio advanced peers.

This system has its merits in as much as, allowing for a faster advancement, it aims to cater for ab initio students’ individual needs and offers a relatively prompt response to accelerations of pace in the linguistic progression of single students. Its limitations lie in the fact that it acts exclusively at the high end of the ab initio spectrum. Ab-initio students with no or a limited experience of foreign language learning, irrespective of the stage they have reached in their linguistic progression, are effectively force-merged with the ab initio students at the high end of the spectrum first, and then with the advanced students after just two years of study. The catching up for them, even though on paper considered as accomplished, in many cases does not occur at all.

The perceived weaknesses of ab initio students. The very ambitious task Italian Studies at Reading has set itself of catering for the entire range of ab initio student categories, forces the language teaching staff who provide and shape the learning experience for these students to constantly try to find ways of addressing the varying degrees of language-related skills and competences exhibited by this group. It is normally expected that students with no or limited exposure to formal language learning prior to accessing a language degree programme are most likely to display some potentially hindering gaps in their range of general linguistic competences, especially when focusing on metalinguistic awareness. As a matter of fact, the Language Skills course, which had originally been designed with this particular sub-group in mind in order to provide them with the necessary remedial practice, has actually revealed, or rather repeatedly confirmed and highlighted, the existence of gaps of a similar nature and with similarly potentially damaging consequences for progression, in the rest of the ab initio cohort too.

As it is possible to hypothesise some linguistic weaknesses in ab initio students at the low end of the spectrum, it is also possible to infer from the above that the existence of strong and successful previous linguistic experience in a formal instructional setting will not automatically guarantee an undergraduate student with the necessary skills and competences to

successfully progress in an intensive ab initio undergraduate language programme. As already hypothesized by Proudfoot (1999), this same consideration can be extended to non-ab initio students, who at times may, even while exhibiting a high level of proficiency in the foreign language in question, not be equipped at entry level with the necessary tools and skills to study it.

Time and resources. The review of the curricular adjustments presented above in the study confirms the need of ab initio students for extra teaching and learning time and specifically-designed resources. All this puts a considerable financial burden on institutions such as Reading which have chosen to open their access as widely as possible to include absolute ab initio students. The potential for long-term benefits embedded in the expansion and structuring of very much needed autonomous learning resources in support of the extended teaching hours is somewhat offset by the labour-intensive and costly investment required in the production stages of such resources and by subsequent serious issues of maintenance and sustainability. Periods of financial instability and insecurity are the least propitious for advancements in the structuring and implementation of a cost-intensive programme and in the development of highly effective resources. Financial uncertainty even risks undoing some of the positive changes introduced in the past, with the ever-present threat to the current number of teaching hours, or the potential distortion of the aims that have supported such changes, such as the self-defeating exploitation of independent learning opportunities in order to minimise the need for extra teaching time.

Underlying this entire study there are a series of questions, some of which reiterate the re-emergence of issues raised already elsewhere which remain still unresolved – the Baumann study (1999) being to date the only one which has attempted to provide a set of measurable data but which has, so far, not been replicated. The questions listed below can be read as an opportunity for research and/or debate, and definitely signal the need for further investigation of the many issues surrounding ab initio language learning.

- a. What is the measurable effectiveness of any curricular adjustment on ab initio students' performance in their degree programme? Are these adjustments justified? Which category of ab initio student is most likely to benefit from such adjustments?
- b. At what point (if ever) is it to be expected that ab initio students on an undergraduate language programme should merge with their advanced counterparts? Is it reasonable to expect that they should merge at all by the end of a four-year intensive programme of study?
- c. In consideration of the above, and as an expansion of the early-days ab initio debate, is it reasonable to allow students representing the entire spectrum of the ab initio classification, as Italian Studies at Reading does, to enter undergraduate language degree programmes as they are currently structured?
- d. Is it practical not to allow them to enter an undergraduate language degree programme? Is it viable for the majority of British HE institutions

not to consider the recruitment of absolute ab initio students, especially after the sharp decline in the numbers of school leavers with language qualifications brought about by the 2004 government decision not to make language GCSEs compulsory?

As Italians would say, buona continuazione di ricerca a tutti!

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