



AULC-UCML survey of Institution-Wide Language Provision in universities in the UK (2019-2020)

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1. Introduction

This survey, carried out by members of the Association of University Language Communities in the UK (AULC), sought to obtain a snapshot of Institution-wide Language Provision (IWLP) activity across the Higher Education sector in the UK in the academic year 2019-2020.

Sometimes referred to as ‘Languages for All’, IWLP typically comprises elective language modules/course units taken for academic credit as minor components of a degree, and language courses studied in addition to and alongside a student’s degree programme. Students taking these courses are sometimes referred to as ‘non-specialist language learners’ since some of them may have little background in foreign language learning, and the courses they study are not a compulsory component of the degree programme for which they are registered.

This is the eighth successive year that the AULC-UCML survey has been conducted. As there is no other mechanism or agency in a position to compile this data¹, the AULC-UCML survey is of particular importance for planning and strategic purposes, and to give an indication of trends in language learning via institution-wide language programmes.

The surveys undertaken during the period from 2012-2013 to 2016-2017 showed that IWLP has been an expanding area, attracting increasing numbers of students in UK universities. This trend is the continuation of a pattern originally identified in earlier surveys (Marshall, 2001; Byrne and Abbott, 2007). Data collected between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 are more variable in nature due to variability in the response rate and the responding institutions. However, the perceived trends continue to be positive.

Specific aims of the survey for 2019-2020 were to:

- gauge availability and demand for different IWLP languages in UKHE and note changing trends
- obtain an overview of staffing profiles
- gain a sense of the nature of the community of language teachers
- determine the scope or type of provision of courses in Languages for Specific Purposes

2. Method

2.1. Surveying the sector

IWLP activity is rather difficult to survey. In most institutions, it includes accredited provision offered to non-specialist language learners; in others, the provision carries no academic credit. Many institutions offer both forms of provision, in some cases separately, in others in an integrated way. Activity may be managed from within a university language centre or it may be offered alongside degree programmes within a language department, while in others, language centres and language departments may be intertwined. In some institutions, provision for external learners (members of the public/lifelong learning students) is incorporated as a part of the IWLP provision. The sector is also diverse in terms of the range of languages offered - with some institutions offering only three or four languages and others offering up to twenty - and in the ways these languages are offered to students e.g. length of courses, number of contact hours per course. All these variables may also change from one year to the next, simply due to local factors affecting capacity and demand for teaching and learning.

¹ Registrations for IWLP course units are not recorded in UCAS or HESA statistics.

2.2. Questionnaire

For the 2019-2020 survey, a simple electronic questionnaire was devised using *Online Surveys*. The survey was circulated in the second week of November 2019 to all AULC institutional representatives in the UK using the AULC members' list, and to contacts on the UCML members' list. Thus, the survey was sent to institutions with language centres and to those with IWLP activity in modern languages departments, even though in the latter case the activity might not be formally identified as IWLP.

2.3. Limitations

As with recent surveys, this survey only collected information on: i) students studying a language course as a free choice, or 'elective', accredited course option and ii) students studying a non-accredited language course in addition to and alongside their degree programme. Thus, data was not collected for students who were studying a language which, though comprising a minor part of their degree (less than 50%), was not a 'free-choice option'. As a result, it is likely that a number of what might be termed 'non-specialist language students' have not been included in the figures reported here. This differs from the approach used in the Byrne and Abbot surveys (2007) which were designed to collect figures on the number of students at HE institutions who were taking a language simply as a minor 'assessed part of their degree (under 50%)'.

The survey did not collect information on the range of levels offered for each language. It was felt that breaking this information down across the languages would be time-consuming for the respondents and would result in a lower response rate. Likewise, data was not sought on the numbers progressing in a particular language across the years of study. Unlike in the earlier surveys (e.g. Byrne and Abbot, 2007), students themselves were not surveyed.

While every effort is made to involve the same institutions in the survey year-on-year, it is not always possible to obtain a response from each university. A degree of caution must therefore be exercised when analysing the results, and especially when comparing the data.

3. Results

By the end of the survey period, data had been collected from 46 institutions (out of 62 AULC UK university members). Most of those who completed and submitted the questionnaire were directors of language centres or coordinators of IWLP programmes. However, there were also some responses from heads of academic departments and a small number of responses from programme administrators. This latter group responded to the part of the survey which asked for quantitative data, but most did not include qualitative responses. The response rate in this survey was somewhat lower than in previous surveys and this means that comparison with the earlier figures is difficult.

3.1. Number of students on IWLP-type courses

The number of students reported as being enrolled on IWLP courses in this survey was significantly lower than the number reported in 2018-2019. The total number of enrolments reported for the end of October/early November period in the 2018-2019 academic year was 53,772 (55 HEIs reporting). The total number of enrolments reported for the end of October/early November period in the 2019-2020 academic year was 45,164 (46 HEIs reporting). In the table below, the number of enrolments reported is the lowest over the last eight years. It is important to note that year to year comparisons have to be treated cautiously because the number of respondents varies from year to year, and the actual institutions which return data in the survey also vary. It is perhaps relevant to note that the timing of the survey coincided with a period of strike action in HEIs.

Table I. Number of enrolments reported in the AULC-UCML surveys

Year	Number	Number of HEIs reporting	Average number of registrations per institution
2012-2013	49,637	61	814
2013-2014	53,971	64	843
2014-2015	54,975	61	901
2015-2016	55,354	61	907
2016-2017	62,455	62	1 007
2017-2018	53,200	56	950
2018-2019	53,772	55	978
2019-2020	45,164	46	982

It is not possible to directly compare the recorded numbers above, since the survey receives responses from different institutions with differently-sized IWLPs. However, after a period of sustained growth, it does appear that the number of students registered to IWLPs in the UK has stabilised.

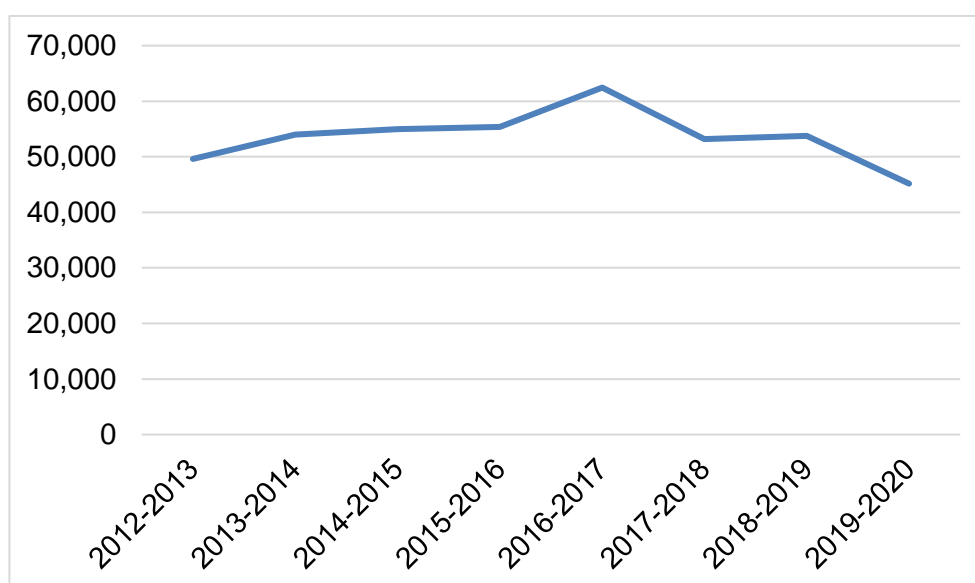


Figure 1. Number of registrations to IWLP 2012 - 2020

In the years prior to 2017-2018, the figures obtained showed evidence of a gradual overall increase in IWLP enrolments at the national level. The drop in numbers which appears for 2019-2020 is largely due to fewer respondents returning the questionnaire. That said, there was a 20% decrease in the number of institutions reporting data, and this includes five larger institutions which would normally account for about 10,000 registrations.

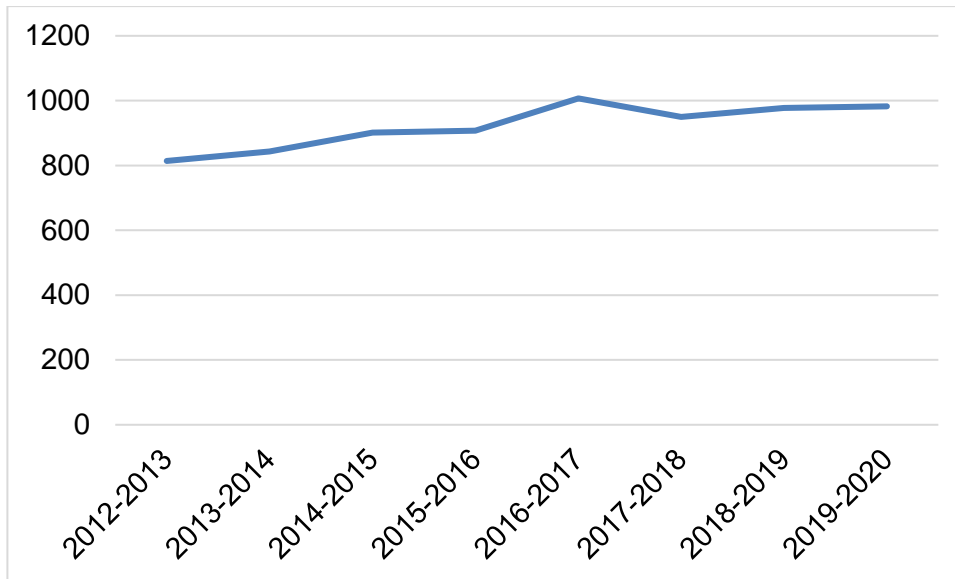


Figure 2. Average number of registrations per responding institution

3.2. Languages offered

Question 2 of the 2019-2020 survey asked respondents to indicate which languages their HEI offered. Our survey data indicates that, whilst some institutions are only able to offer students three or four languages, more typically an average of nine different languages are available to study. Some of the larger universities are able to offer up to 20 languages. Figure 3 below shows the number of responding institutions offering each language.

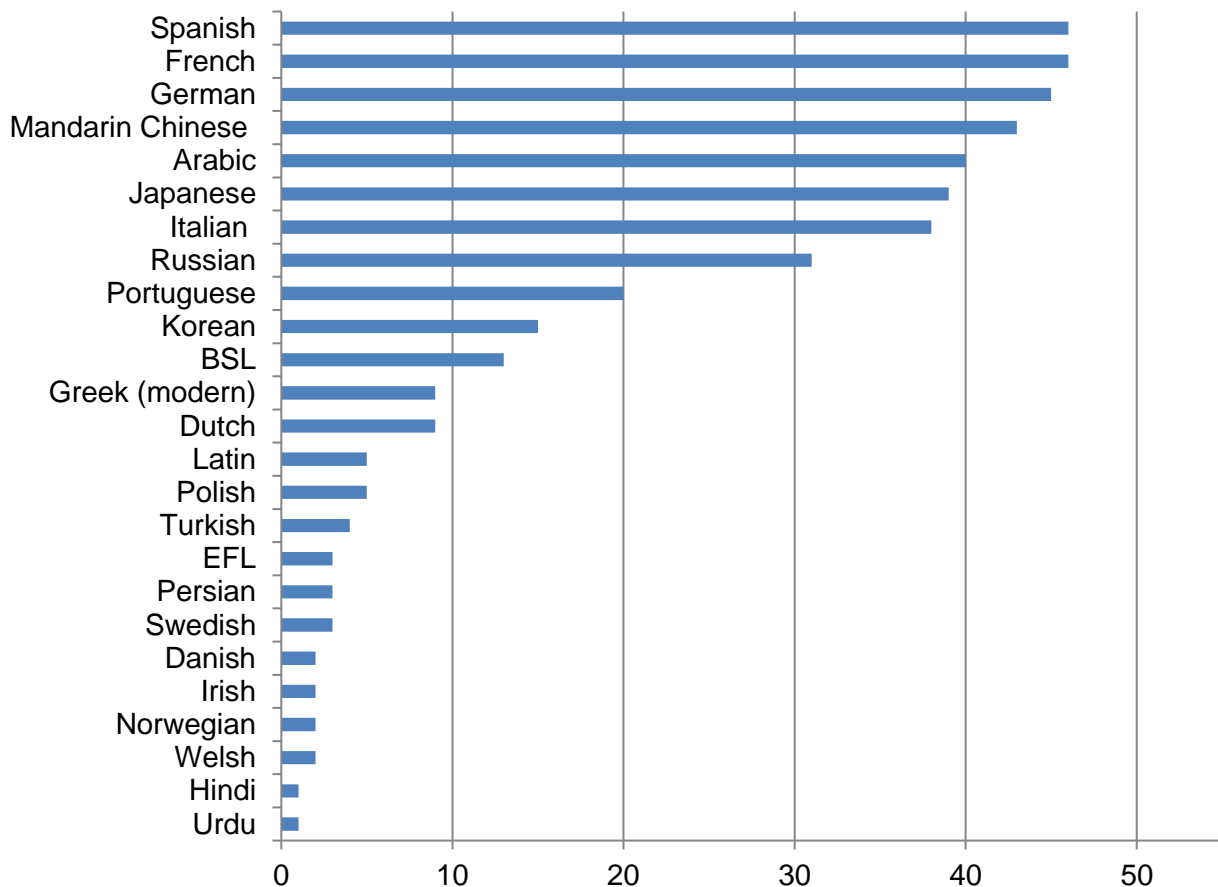


Figure 3. Number of HEIs surveyed offering different languages (no. reporting = 46)

The figure shows that provision is dominated by the three main western European languages. However, other widely-taught languages including Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Italian, Arabic and Russian are offered by the majority of HEIs, with just under half of those surveyed also offering Portuguese. The data also tell us that around, or just over, 25% of the responding institutions offer classes in English as a Foreign Language, British Sign Language and Korean. This is the first year that EFL has been included in the data returned.

3.3 Changing preferences for languages

The survey asked respondents to indicate which languages have experienced an increase in demand and which languages have experienced a decrease in demand at their institutions. Figure 4 below shows the six languages most reported as registering an increase in numbers of learners compared to last year. About half of the respondents reported that there had been an increase in the number of students taking Japanese. It is significant that for Japanese a steady increase in uptake had been reported in the four previous years surveyed. In contrast to last year’s survey, no increase was reported for German or Italian. In fact, a decrease in uptake was reported for both language (Figure 5). While most respondents reported that it was difficult to know the reason for the increase, the most popular reason cited was ‘improved marketing’, followed by an ‘increase in capacity’ of the provision offered. Respondents also cited an increase in student enrolment at the institution, timetable improvements to support IWLP recruitment, and higher levels of interest from students. While most respondents reported not knowing the reasons for the decrease, the most popular reason cited was ‘staffing reductions’. This suggests that fewer courses or groups were offered due to cuts in staffing levels. Other reasons cited included a reduction in IWLP capacity, lower student interest, restrictions on student choice at institutional level, and changes in departmental policy. As is frequently the case, the survey results show both an increase and a decrease in the same language (e.g. Chinese, French). This usually reflects local circumstances in individual institutions.

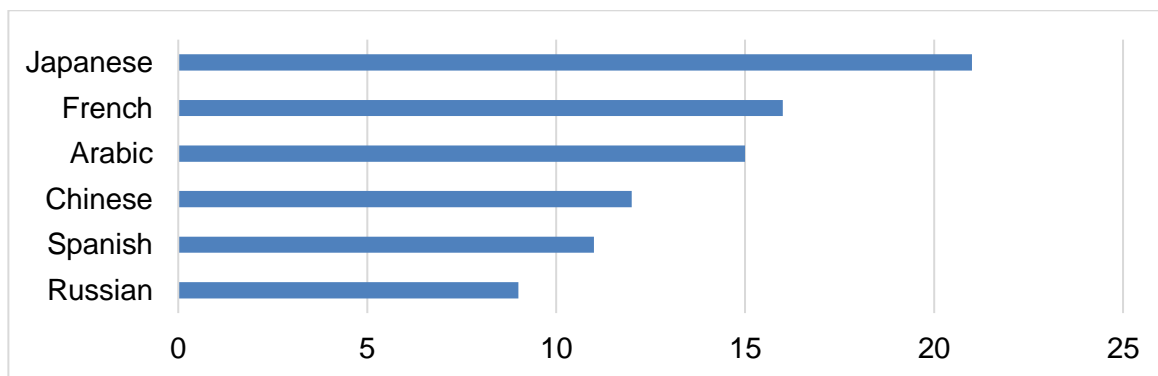


Figure 4. Languages which have shown an increase in student numbers (no. of HEIs reporting)

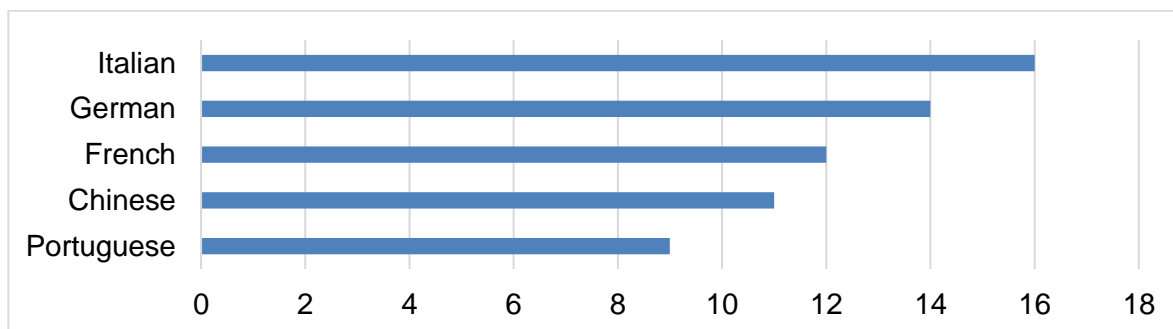


Figure 5. Languages which have shown a decrease in student numbers (no. of HEIs reporting)

3.4 Outlook for IWLP

As in previous surveys, respondents were asked how they felt about the prospects for non-specialist language learning at their institution. The overall pattern of responses remains moderately optimistic with 54% indicating that prospects were ‘encouraging’, around 40% indicating that prospects were ‘uncertain’, and around 4% indicating that prospects were ‘poor’. These responses are similar to responses to the same questions asked last year, though it must be noted that it is difficult to draw a direct comparison given the change in the institutions which responded. However, looking at the trend over the last five years, there is an increase in the sense of uncertainty in the sector.

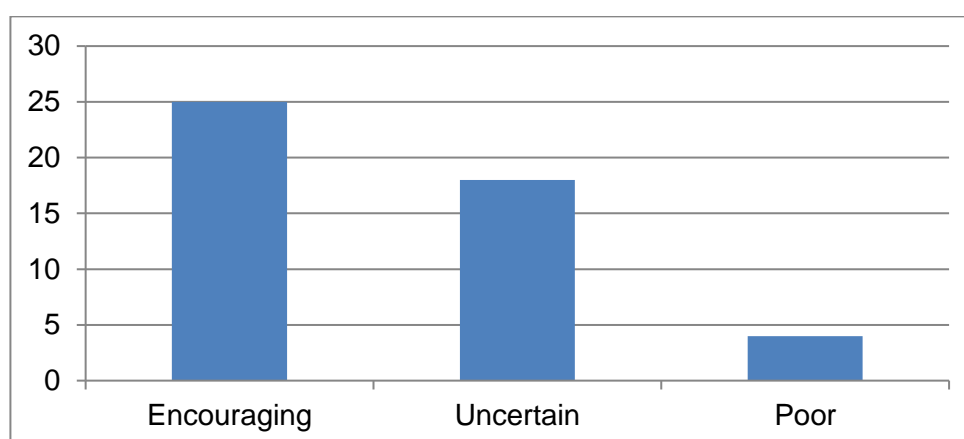


Figure 6. Prospects for IWLP (no. of responses)

The main reasons cited by those indicating that the prospects are ‘encouraging’ are an increase in student enrolment at institutional level which has resulted in an increase in student enrolment on IWLP. Several respondents cited an increase in student demand indicating the value that students place on the provision of IWLP. Institutional support in terms of strategy, support at Faculty and School level, and “planned growth” were also cited as key factors. One respondent reported that raising the profile of IWLP both within the institution and externally seemed to have resulted in increased enrolment.

Those indicating that the prospects are ‘uncertain’ cited internal reorganisation, changes at institutional level, financial uncertainty and a lack of clear strategy as factors. The main reasons cited by those indicating that the prospects are ‘poor’ were linked to a change in institutional policy and/or changes to funding, suggesting less support for the provision of IWLP.

The 2019-2020 survey also asked whether the institution had a language learning policy or strategy. Of those who responded, 61% said there was no such policy, while 33% said there was a policy at their institution. This may be an area which the AULC would like to pursue as part of developing the profile and sense of purpose for IWLP institutionally. A number of institutions that have a formal language policy are in the devolved nations of the UK linked for example, to Welsh or Gaelic.

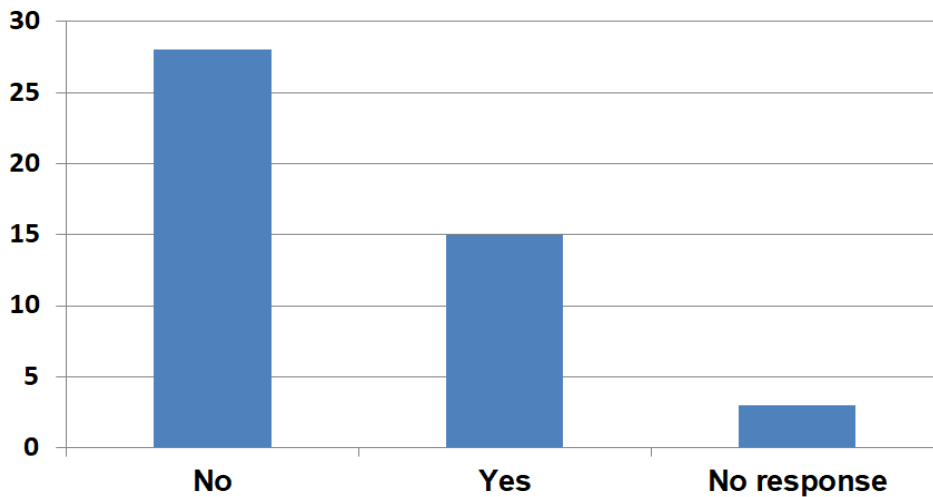


Figure 9. Does your institution have a language policy/strategy regarding language learning?

3.5 Languages for Specific Purposes in IWLP

One of the important areas explored in the survey for the first time was the provision of languages for specific purposes (LSP). The survey sought to investigate the number of institutions that offer this, which languages are offered, how many students are enrolled on this provision, the focus of the course and the disciplines represented.

The data shows that courses in LSP are offered by 30% of responding institutions. The most popular languages offered are French, German and Spanish, in that order. Courses are also offered in Italian, Chinese, Arabic, Japanese, Russian, Portuguese, Dutch, Latin and British Sign Language. This probably reflects the availability of teachers with the requisite skills being concentrated in the major languages. Respondents indicated that these courses are usually offered exclusively as LSP although in around 20% of institutions they are offered in a hybrid form embedded within the general language courses. Enrolment appears to be healthy with about 2 100 students enrolled on hybrid courses and about 1 500 on exclusively LSP courses. This figure accounts for approximately 10% of all IWLP registrations.

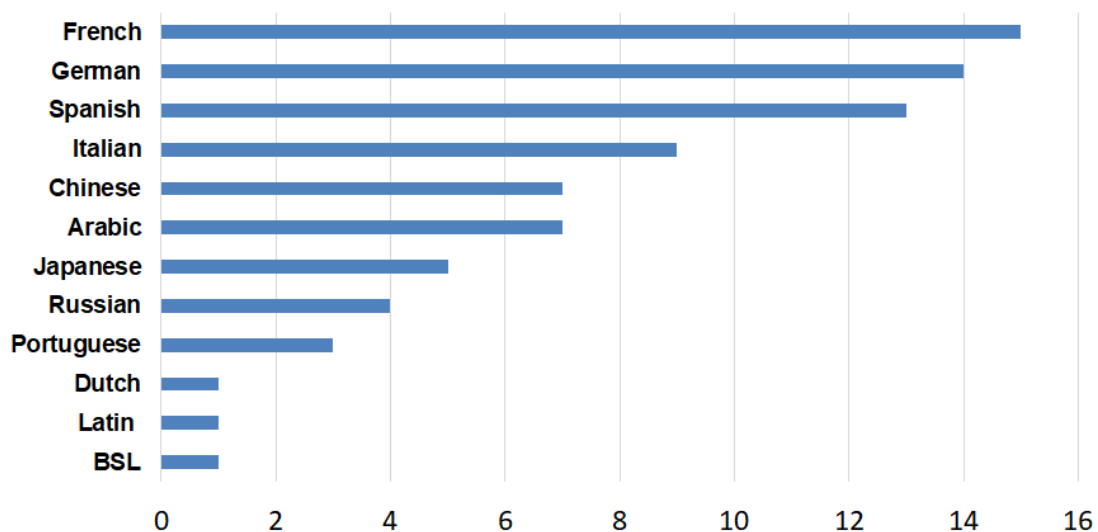


Figure 8. LSP languages on offer

In terms of the focus of these courses, four key areas were identified: skills-based, academic, discipline-specific and vocational. There is some crossover between these categories. Of the responding institutions, about 45% offer both skills-based and academic courses, about 40% offer discipline-specific courses and about 28% offer vocational courses. Courses are offered in a range of disciplines - the majority are offered in the Arts and Humanities (50%), followed by Medicine (about 40%), Business (33%), Social Sciences (20%), Physical Sciences and Engineering (20%), and Law (10%). This could be an area of provision that institutions might like to explore where there is student demand for language provision which will help them in their professional lives.

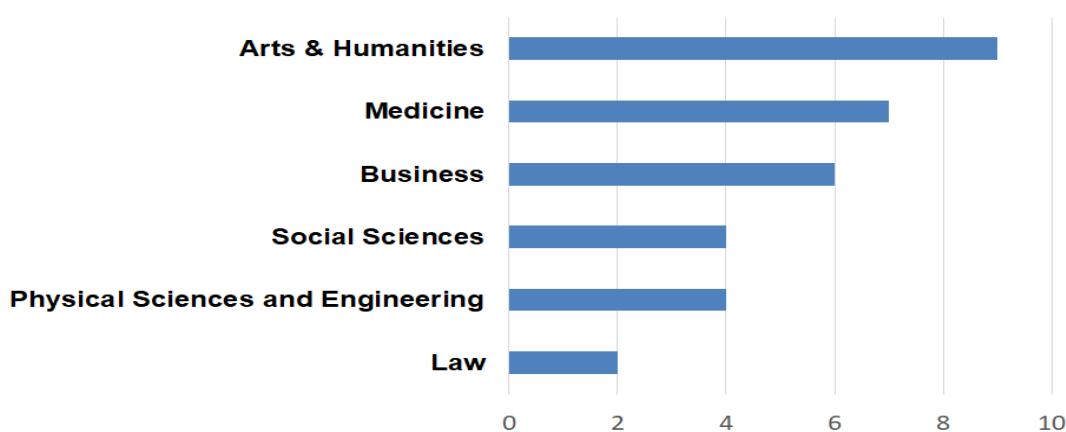


Figure 9. Speciality areas represented

4. Conclusion

While the overall picture of IWLP student enrolment continues to be broadly positive across the Higher Education sector, for the first time since the survey was introduced, there is a growing sense of uncertainty. The data this year has probably been impacted by national strike action. AULC is also aware that 7 HEIs have closed IWLP provision in the period 2017-2019, with a further 9 known to be closing, under review, or experiencing a significant reduction in scale. It is therefore expected that the results will change in the coming years. These local decisions are being made against the national grain, where more students are requesting access to language courses during their UG and PG degrees as they understand the importance of cultural competency for their personal and professional development. The increase in provision of Languages for Specific Purposes is further evidence that students are aware of the added value of having language skills in their chosen discipline, and a meaningful programme of language learning is important to any university in order to support the language learning needs of staff and students, especially in the context of internationalisation.

This survey was carried out on behalf of the Association of University Language Communities and the University Council of Modern Languages by: Caroline Campbell, Mark Critchley and Dr. Ana de Medeiros.

5. References

Byrne, N. and Abbot, J. (2007) Survey on university students choosing a language course as an extra-curricular activity. *Results from the second year of a planned three-year survey conducted by AULC on behalf of the DIUS*. November. Unpublished.

UCML-AULC (2019) *AULC-UCML survey of Institution-Wide Language Provision in universities in the UK (2018-2019)* http://www.aulc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/AULC_UCML_2018-2019.pdf (accessed on 10th October 2020)

Appendix: List of participating institutions

Aberystwyth University
Aston University
Bath, University of
Birmingham, University of
Bristol, University of
Cambridge, University of
Cardiff University
Durham University
East Anglia, University of
Edge Hill University
Edinburgh, University of
Essex, University of
Hertfordshire, University of
Hull, University of
Imperial College London
Keele University
King's College London
Lancaster University
Leeds, University of
Leeds Beckett University
Leicester, University of
Liverpool, University of
London School of Economics and Political Science
Loughborough University
Manchester, University of
Newcastle, University of
Northumbria, University of
Nottingham, University of
Nottingham Trent University
Oxford, University of
Portsmouth, University of
Queen Mary, University of London
Queen's University Belfast
Reading, University of
Regent's University London
Salford, University of
St Andrews, University of
Surrey, University of
Sussex, University of
Swansea University
University of the Arts London
Warwick, University of
Westminster, University of
Wolverhampton, University of
Worcester, University of
York, University of