

UCML-AULC survey of Institution-Wide Language
Provision in universities in the UK (2012-2013)

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1. Introduction

The survey aimed to obtain a picture of the current availability and demand for Institution-wide Language Provision (IWLP) across the higher education sector in the UK. Also sometimes referred to as 'Languages for All', IWLP typically comprises elective language course units taken for academic credit and language courses studied in addition to and alongside a student's degree programme. Students taking these courses have been referred to as 'non-specialist language learners' since the courses they study are not a compulsory component of the degree programme for which they are registered.

Reliable and comprehensive statistics on current IWLP activity at a national level do not exist. While UCAS data on applications and acceptances are valuable, and HESA statistics are extremely important, they focus on numbers of students studying languages as subject specialists and do not capture other language learning activity in HE. Previous surveys of IWLP activity have been carried out (Marshall, 2001; Byrne and Abbott, 2007¹). Whilst not being able to provide comprehensive data, these have shown that IWLP has been an expanding area attracting increasing numbers of students. This academic year (2012-13) has seen a significant change in the funding regime in UK universities with the introduction of full fees for undergraduate courses. Recruitment of students onto specialist language courses appears to have been affected negatively by this change (UCAS, 2012) – though other factors may also be responsible, but no information is currently available on the effect the new fee regime has had on IWLP activity.

Specific aims of this survey were:

- to gauge availability and demand for IWLP languages across the sector
- to ascertain the proportion of credit and non-credit provision
- to note changing trends in terms of recruitment and demand for particular languages
- to note any issues facing providers of IWLP languages
- to gauge respondents' views on prospects for IWLP for the future.

2. Method

2.1. Surveying the sector

IWLP activity is rather difficult to survey as it is a somewhat diverse phenomenon. In most institutions, it includes credit-bearing provision to non-specialist language learners; in others, it only encompasses non-credit provision to these students. Activity may be managed from within a university language centre or it might be offered alongside specialist degree programmes and managed from within a language department. In some institutions, provision for external students (members of the public/lifelong learning students) may be incorporated as a part of the IWLP provision. In at least one case, language course units are offered by an external provider. The sector is also diverse in terms of the ranges of languages offered, with some institutions offering only three or four languages and others offering up to twenty.

2.2. Questionnaire

A simple electronic questionnaire was devised using Select Survey survey tool (SelectSurvey.NET). It was sent out in the third week of October 2012 to all AULC institutional representatives in the UK using the AULC contacts list. It was also distributed via the UCML contacts list. In addition, where responses were not forthcoming, individuals who were thought to be in a position to provide the data, or who might be in a position to ask others to provide this, were reminded by email, in some cases telephoned. 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. In contrast

¹ Through its members, AULC conducted surveys of non-specialist language learners in 2003/04 and three subsequent years, obtaining an increasing response rate each year largely as a result of methodological improvements.

to the earlier AULC surveys (Byrne and Abbott, 2007), this survey sought to obtain data only on students who were taking a language either as an elective course unit or on a non-credit basis.

2.3. Limitations

The survey did not seek information on the number of students at HE institutions who were taking a language simply as an 'assessed part of their degree (under 50%)', which was the case in the Byrne and Abbot surveys (2007). This is an important difference since, in many institutions, this identifier is likely to encompass languages studied by specialists as part of a joint languages degree. Data was not sought on the range of levels being taught. It was felt that breaking this information down across the languages would be time-consuming for the respondents and would probably 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 earlier interviews, (Byrne and Abbot, 2007), students themselves were not surveyed. Because respondents were asked to indicate numbers at the end October/early November, the survey did not necessarily capture the number of students who might be registering in Semester 2. Finally, because the survey elicited a snapshot of numbers near the start of the academic year, it will not reflect all of the withdrawals that take place.

3. Results

By the end of the survey period, data had been collected from 62 institutions, 20 of which were Russell Group universities. Three of the institutions included in the total number were not running IWLP programmes at the time of the survey. Another three returned incomplete data.

3.1. Number of students on IWLP-type courses

Given the incomplete nature of the data, by itself the overall number of students reported as being engaged in IWLP type courses (49, 637) does not tell us very much. We can say that the figure is somewhat lower than the numbers reported by Byrne and Abbott between 2003 and 2007, but their data is likely to have included students studying a language as part of a joint degree ('up to 50% of the degree'). For 2006/7 Byrne and Abbott reported a figure of 73,339 students obtained from 76 institutions. The figure reported in the Marshall (2001) survey was considerably lower (25,801). Although Marshall's figure was based on returns from only 58 institutions, compared to 62 in the current survey, the huge difference points to almost a doubling of IWLP numbers in just over a decade. The other thing that can be said about the numbers reported in this survey is that they are significantly higher than the numbers studying languages as subject specialisms (UCAS, 2012).

3.2. Proportion of credit and non-credit students

In the current survey, the proportion of students studying an IWLP course for academic credit was around 62% of the total. However, this figure masks a considerable diversity across the sector with several institutions offering their IWLP courses only as a credit option and with several institutions offering IWLP courses only on a non-credit basis.

3.3. Languages offered

Figure 1 below shows all those languages whose total numbers reported reached 1000 students or more. Less-widely taught languages have not been included in the figure.

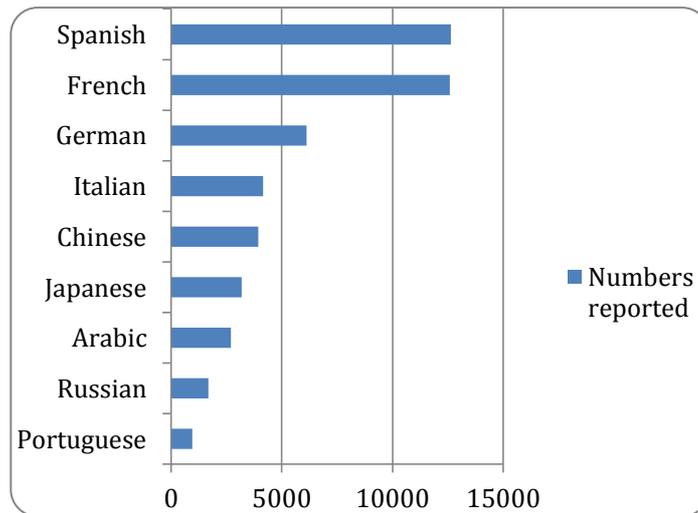


Figure 1. Main languages studied showing student numbers reported

From the chart, it can be seen that by far the most demand is for Spanish and French, with German and Italian following in third and fourth places. Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic also appear to be attracting significant numbers of students. More detailed figures are given in Table I below.

Language	Number of learners per language	No of learners per language as % of all learners	No of HEIs offering each language	No of HEIs offering language as % of all HEIs ²
Spanish	12627	25.44%	54	88.52%
French	12591	25.37%	55	90.16%
German	6128	12.35%	51	83.61%
Italian	4171	8.40%	47	77.05%
Chinese	3938	7.94%	48	78.69%
Japanese	3193	6.43%	45	73.77%
Arabic	2696	5.43%	43	70.49%
Russian	1678	3.38%	35	57.38%
Portuguese	949	1.91%	25	40.98%
Greek	300	0.60%	13	21.31%
Korean	265	0.53%	6	9.84%
Polish	210	0.42%	10	16.39%
BSL	195	0.39%	4	6.56%
Hindi	114	0.23%	2	3.28%
Hebrew	118	0.24%	4	6.56%
Persian	104	0.21%	5	8.62%
Swedish	90	0.18%	4	6.56%
Turkish	89	0.18%	5	8.20%
Dutch	83	0.17%	6	9.84%
Urdu	68	0.14%	4	6.56%

Table I. Numbers and percentages of students doing individual languages; numbers of institutions offering each language³

Because of methodological differences and differing response rates, comparisons of actual figures for particular languages with those of earlier surveys are problematic. More meaningful, however, are

² Three institutions with IWLP programmes did not return any figures for the languages available so these have been excluded from the % calculation. Institutions which do not offer IWLP but which participated in the survey, however, have been included.

³ Not included in the table are the low numbers of students reported as studying Danish, Punjabi, Georgian, Welsh, Brazilian Portuguese, Quaranic Arabic, Norwegian.

comparisons of the proportions of students studying languages with those of previous years. So while French, along with Spanish, is still by far one of the most popular languages, as a proportion of all languages being studied, it seems to be on the decline. In Keith Marshall's 2001 UCML survey of the sector, French accounted for 29% of the student numbers. In the current survey, this had declined to slightly over 25%. This percentage figure, however, is the same as reported by Byrne and Abbott (2008) for a subset of 10 universities in England in 2006/7. One difference between the current survey and the Byrne and Abbott survey is that Spanish, rather than French, now appears to be the language in most demand.

Figures given by Marshall (2001) do not invite straight forward comparison because in his survey, English as a Foreign Language was included as one of the languages being studied by 4015 students and making up 15% of the total numbers. Once this element is factored out of the 2001 figures, the revised percentages are as follows: French: 34%, Spanish: 27%, German: 16%. This suggests that, as a proportion of languages studied, the relative decline for French since 1998-99 (the year when Marshall collected his data) has been notable. These relative falls seem to have been made up by the growth of numbers of students learning non-European languages. For example, Arabic now makes up nearly 6% of all activity compared to only 0.06% (0.07% revised) in the Marshall survey over a decade ago. The current survey also reveals the growing interest in learning Chinese; the number of Chinese learners is recorded as 8% of the total compared to 0.7% (0.85% revised) in the 2001 survey. Another interesting point of contrast is that, in Marshall's 2001 survey, Arabic and Chinese were only offered by two and nine institutions respectively, compared with 42 and 48 in the current survey. Other important languages which have seen an increase in the proportion of students studying them are Japanese, Portuguese and Russian.

3.4. Numbers compared to previous academic year

Respondents were asked to indicate whether the numbers of students recruited onto their IWLP courses this academic year were higher or lower than in the previous academic year. Of the 60 institutions which responded to this question, 25 reported an increase in numbers and 12 reported little or no change. A decline in numbers was reported by 23 institutions. Thus, unlike the languages sector in HE as a whole, recruitment onto IWLP courses generally appear to be relatively buoyant, and in some institutions the increases were highly significant:

- 'they have probably tripled or quadrupled'
- 'numbers have nearly doubled'
- 'approx. 20% up'
- 'higher 21%'
- 'about 35% up'

The first two comments reflect the introduction of new 'Languages for All' policies allowing students of a certain category to study a foreign language free. However, these increases were balanced by similar sized drops at other institutions, and two institutions reported that their IWLP programmes had been suspended or abandoned.

3.5. Changing preferences for languages compared to last year

The figure below shows the four languages most reported as showing an increase in numbers of learners compared to last year. It is notable that the top three languages for this response were all non-European languages.

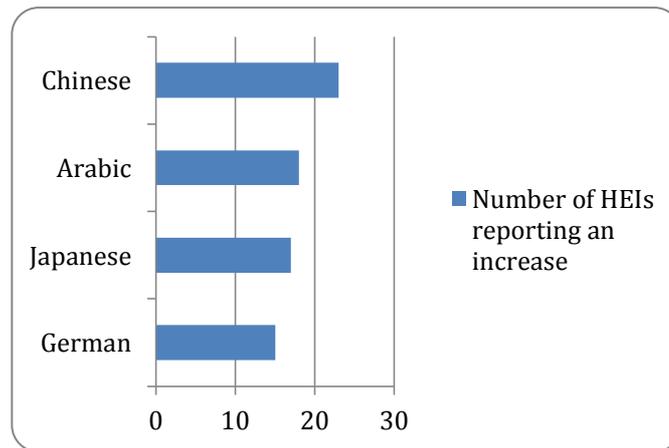


Figure 2. The four languages most reported as showing an increase compared to last year

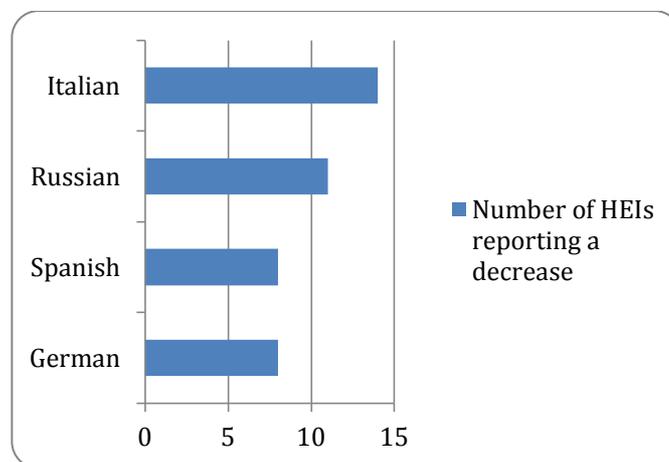


Figure 3. The four languages most reported as showing a decrease compared to last year

Figure 3 above shows the four languages most reported as showing a decrease in numbers compared to last year. Looking at the two charts, it can be seen that, fewer decreases than increases for particular languages were reported. The languages which appear to be in decline most are Italian and Russian. The situation of German is interesting as it registers both as a language for which there is an increasing demand and as a language for which there is a decrease in demand. It is not clear why this should be the case, but it may relate to the types of students who are able to take an IVLP course at certain institutions. So for example, there is some anecdotal evidence that German is very popular amongst international students, especially those from East Asia. Where these students study on programmes which have an elective component, and/or where they are able to study in a not-credit capacity, it may be that this impacts positively on the overall numbers studying German. This is just speculation and additional data will need to be obtained before a clearer picture emerges.

3.6. Issues facing Institution-wide Language Provision

Respondents were asked to list the three issues in order of seriousness that Institution-wide Language Provision was facing at their institution. The total number of responses for this question was 149.

3.6.1. Economics, finance and funding (n = 27)

One of the themes that this question elicited and for which there was a very high number of responses has been identified as ‘economics, finance and funding’. The economic situation and students’ financial constraints were mentioned as having an effect by nine respondents, e.g.:

- ‘Current recession in Europe’
- ‘Fees for non-credited students (internal students and members of the public) are not financially viable’
- ‘Cost of course to students with higher living costs and fees’

Internal financial arrangements were commented on by 10 institutions, e.g.:

- ‘Funding: non accredited courses now have to be offered at market rate’
- ‘Funding model used puts those of us who offer electives in competition’
- ‘Issues with strict finance/HR processes which prevent flexible employment for teachers of lesser-taught languages’
- ‘Maintaining viable student groups in languages with lower registrations’
- ‘Our 20 credit language certificates are no longer HEFCE funded, and we will have to find new funding/ cut provision for next year’
- ‘Resource allocation system which encourages departments to be greedy’

A further five responses just listed ‘(no) funding’, ‘budget’ or ‘financial insecurity’

3.6.2. Logistical problems: timetabling/space/resources (n = 27)

The other main category which attracted a high number of responses has been identified as ‘logistical problems- timetabling/space/resources’. The issue of timetabling was mentioned by the majority of respondents to this question (n = 19). For example:

- ‘Timetabling of language classes taken by students from all subject combinations’
- ‘Timetabling puts a massive constraint on expansion of the type of provision currently on offer’

Staff workloads or patterns of work are also seen as being connected to timetabling (n = 3). Space appears to be a closely-related limiting factor (n = 2):

- ‘Timetabling/rooms - it's very difficult to find suitable teaching times & rooms available at those times’

The lack of availability of learning resources was also raised as an issue by a small number of respondents (n = 3).

3.6.3. Management/re-organisation/institutional support (n = 22)

This theme received the third highest number of responses. A variety of comments reported the effects of institutional changes or priorities on the provision of language learning opportunities. Firstly, some form of re-structuring was mentioned by five respondents, e.g.:

- ‘The UWLP has been discontinued/reduced from two terms to one term’
- ‘Department currently hosting IWLP is being re-structured’
- ‘Restructuring of Science modules means fewer accredited Science students’
- ‘IWLP teaching has been discontinued’
- ‘Amendments to Year Abroad Programme’

The lack of institutional clarity in its objectives or top-level support was mentioned by nine respondents, e.g.:

- ‘Uncertainty surrounding objectives in the short and medium term’
- ‘Lack of a strategy/language policy at University level’
- ‘Relative indifference of university management’
- ‘Internationalisation being viewed as something that is related to Chinese markets primarily, rather than more broadly embedded across language areas’
- ‘Lack of a context in which IWLP is seen as standard component of studies’

Three institutions reported what seems like a positive change in policy or a positive level of support from the university or external recognition, e.g.:

- ‘Step change to our provision given University’s new ‘entitlement for all’ policy’
- ‘Excellent levels of support from Senior Management Team of the University’

3.6.4. Student numbers – decrease/increase/unpredictability (n = 13)

It is interesting to see how changes in student numbers are reflected in language centres. Firstly, six respondents reported a drop in numbers as being an important issue. Some attribute this to A-level takeup, while members of the public are also down (though this survey was not designed to elicit information on this group):

- ‘Drop in both accredited and non-accredited numbers this year’
- ‘Fewer members of the public enrolling on classes’
- ‘Low numbers in higher level (post A Level) groups’

On the other hand, four responses comment on increases, though this may not always be seen as entirely positive, e.g.:

- ‘Increase in take up create issue with access to Language lab facility’

Three institutions identified the difficulty in predicting student numbers as a significant problem:

- ‘Late enrolment / unpredicted numbers raise resources issues (room booking and staffing availability)’
- ‘Uncertainty of applications converted into actual students until the last minute so staffing implications’
- ‘Unpredictable numbers due to the entirely optional nature of the courses’

3.6.5. Internal promotion/support (n = 12)

Some institutions reported on the struggle they face in promoting language learning in the internal market:

- ‘Insufficient marketing including insufficient promotion by staff other than Languages staff’
- ‘The promotion of languages to all students in the university’

A shortage of administrative support was mentioned by six.

3.6.6. Staffing – teachers/workload (n = 12)

The difficulty in recruiting, retaining and supporting suitably qualified teachers was mentioned by some respondents, e.g.:

- ‘Ensuring all teachers are professionally trained language teachers’
- ‘Retaining and training suitable teachers’
- ‘Some difficulty in recruiting qualified, experienced teachers to meet demand e.g. Arabic, Japanese, Russian, German’
- ‘Recruitment of qualified experienced teachers’
- ‘Reliance on part-time tutors’

Related issues were the difficulties associated with arranging teaching cover during periods of illness (n = 1) and the difficulties in staffing classes in the evenings (n = 1).

3.6.7. Academic/proficiency levels (n = 11)

Many of these respondents pointed to the difficulty of matching the levels at which they offer languages for credit and their university’s academic levels and the consequent limitations on student choice:

- ‘Curriculum review has made it harder for some students to be accredited’
- ‘Academic Progression (L4, L5, and L6) has restricted opportunities for stage 2 students to carry on with the language’
- ‘Accredited languages courses are available to students from level 4 and 5 only’
- ‘Accredited units often only available at one Level’
- ‘Balance of studying at degree level versus on an extra curricular level’
- ‘Drop of electives at L4 following the Undergraduate Curriculum Review in our institution’

There was also mention of internal constraints, such as cross-language parity:

- ‘Providing the right kinds of levels according to student interest whilst having large enough classes to cover costs’
- ‘Standardising difficulty levels and progression across the languages’
- ‘Attempting to harmonise the course levels and organisation across languages’

3.6.8. Internal competition for students/credits (n = 7)

For this category, respondents commented on the internal market of elective modules or other form of optional learning:

- ‘Accredited languages courses are not really open to everybody in the university because other schools do not allow students to take languages’
- ‘Other departments may be reluctant to give away credits for language courses after Year 1’
- ‘Programme structure in some faculties makes it difficult for all students to engage in worthwhile language learning’
- ‘Refusal of some programmes to include it as an option in the 120 credits’

3.6.9. Students’ attitudes/expectations/aptitude (n = 7)

These miscellaneous comments speak for themselves:

- ‘Lack of students with prior language learning experience’
- ‘UK students often find it harder to learn a language than international students, who often have more experience in language learning’
- ‘Students need to be aware that language learning does involve some work on their side; retention is always a critical aspect in any language class’
- ‘Low completion rate despite a lot of initial interest from students (the language is in addition to students’ main degree programme and on an evening)’
- ‘Motivation of non-credit students once the demands of their credit modules increase’

3.7. Prospects for Institution-wide Language Provision

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt that the prospects for their area of activity were encouraging, uncertain or poor. The total number of responses for this question was 63 and the numbers for each response are shown in the chart below. It is evident that most respondents felt optimistic about the future.

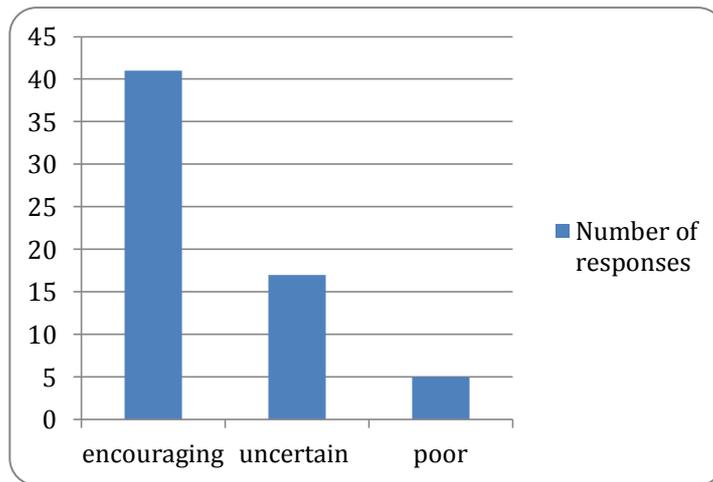


Figure 4. Responses for 'prospects for Institution-wide Language Provision'

3.7.1. Reasons given for positive outlook

Where respondents gave positive responses to the question on 'prospects', they were asked to give reasons for their responses. These fell into two broad categories:

(i) Institutional support stemming from the role that languages can play in enhancing employability and promoting internationalisation (n = 19). Typical comments were:

- 'the provision of languages is seen as an important part of the institution's employability agenda and internationalisation agendas'
- 'There are strong institutional initiatives to develop employability, and language skills feature prominently in this context and enjoy institutional support'
- 'There is great support for IWLP as this forms part of our core institutional objectives, to internationalise in a holistic manner'
- 'The University is committed to internationalisation and language learning plays a key role in the employability agenda'

In some cases the support of senior management was explicitly identified as being a key factor (n = 6):

- On a number of occasions senior officers of the University (VC and others) stressed the importance of such provision for the institution.

(ii) Student demand (n = 8). It was encouraging to note that a number of respondents referred to students choosing to study languages whether for credits or in a not-for-credit capacity, typically for a fee. The picture is of a growing interest in languages amongst students. Typical comments were:

- 'Many students see language learning as an important part of their professional development, a trend that seems to be growing. There has definitely been growing awareness regarding the necessity of foreign languages over the last years'
- 'Languages as free electives remain extremely popular and in fact continues to increase'
- 'No let up in demand from students and staff.'

3.7.2. Reasons given for concerns/negative outlook

Where respondents expressed concerns about the future (n = 10) or gave negative responses to the question on 'prospects' (n = 11), they were asked to give reasons for their responses. These centred around the recent increase in fees and the impact of this on student numbers, the funding of electives and a lack of any positive indication that the future of language provision is secure. Some of the comments were:

- 'increase in fees in 2012-13'
- 'overall drop in student numbers and funding'
- 'lack of institutional support'.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The overall picture of student recruitment onto IWLP courses is quite varied but broadly positive across the HE sector. Continued growth has been seen in non-European languages, particularly Chinese and Arabic. These are languages which have a 'global' dimension. The internationalisation and employability agendas adopted by many HEIs are of relevance to IWLP activity. There is evidence that, in many institutions, the provision of optional language courses is recognised as playing a vital part in supporting these agendas. There is also evidence that students are aware of the value of a language as part of their undergraduate education. These positive developments should be celebrated.

Three broad areas of concern were salient: 'economics, finance and funding', 'logistics: timetabling/space', and management/institutional policy'. With respect to this last point, there is evidence that an institutional policy on language learning can be extremely helpful. Other notable areas of concern were: the unpredictability of student numbers, difficulties in promoting IWLP courses within institutions, finding and retaining professionally qualified teachers, the lack of standardisation of levels of difficulty and learning outcomes across languages.

There is a need for more effective and more comprehensive data collection; in other words, a higher number of HEIs need to be represented in the survey. There is also a need to obtain information on: individual HEI language policies; comparative fees for extra-curricular courses; individual languages and the levels of study available in different institutions; the duration of courses; student progress and retention; types of assessment being used, organisational structures.

It is recommended that this survey be carried out on an annual basis and that institutions are informed in advanced of the importance of the survey and the actual data that will be required. Ideally, at each institution, a nominated person should be given responsibility for submitting the data. AULC should set up a sub-committee to determine which aspects of IWLP activity might be explored in greater depth in different years of the survey.

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. Presentation based on this survey is available here: http://www.celelc.org/docs/byrne_new_multisubject_programmes_0.pdf (accessed on 7th January 2013)
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This survey was carried out on behalf of the University Council of Modern Languages and the Association of University Language Centres by: Dr John Morley (UCML), Caroline Campbell and Dr Peter Howarth (AULC), with the assistance of Dr Filippo Nereo of the Higher Education Academy.

Appendix: List of participating institutions

Aberystwyth University
Aston University
Bath, University of
Birkbeck, University London
Birmingham, University of
Bradford, University of
Bristol, University of
Brunel University
Cambridge, University of
Cardiff University
Central Lancashire, University of
Chester, University of
Coventry University
Durham University
East Anglia, University of
Edinburgh, University of
Essex, University of
Exeter, University of
Glasgow, University of
Hertfordshire, University of
Huddersfield, University of
Hull, University of
Imperial College London
Keele University
Kent University
King's College London
Lancaster University
Leeds Metropolitan University
Leeds, University of
Leicester, University of
Liverpool, University of
London Metropolitan University
London School of Economics and Political Science
London South Bank University
Loughborough University
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester, University of
Nottingham Trent University
Oxford Brookes University
Oxford, University of
Queen Mary, University of London
Queen's University Belfast
Reading, University of
Regent's College London
Roehampton, University of
Royal Holloway, University London
Salford, University of
School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield, University of
Southampton Solent University
Southampton, University of
Stirling, University of
Sunderland, University of
Surrey, University of
Sussex, University of
Swansea University
Teesside University
Warwick, University of
West of England University
Westminster, University of
Wolverhampton, University of