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TITLE

Sustainable language programme design and management at a widening participation university

ABSTRACT

Levels of enrolment on language degree programmes are of concern in majority English-speaking countries. English universities with below average entry tariffs generally do not, or no longer, offer languages to degree level. Yet little research on curriculum design addresses this issue of declining student numbers and unsustainable courses. In this chapter, we reflect on our approach to designing and managing language programmes at York St John University, a small widening participation university. In 2017, 37 different language degree programmes were offered at York St John. However, only 52 first years enrolled, making the average programme size 1.4 students. This caused an unsustainable burden on timetabling, module choices, marketing, and quality assurance, negatively impacting the student experience. We replaced the 37 programmes with five: one for British Sign Language and two each for Japanese and Korean. This led to an increased intake of first year students to 165 in 2021. The new programmes are easy to administer, improving the student experience. We summarise our approach as follows: recognising the administrative burden and financial unsustainability of offering multiple small programmes, we analyse programme and module enrolment data to understand students' preferences, then design one, or two, tailor made programmes per language. In this chapter, we explore what is innovative about this approach, comparing it with research on curriculum/programme design and language education.

INTRODUCTION

We present innovations in programme design at York St John University, a small widening participation university. These innovations transformed our language degree provision: what was complex, financially unsustainable, and at risk of closure, is now a model for sustainable programme design, with one in thirteen undergraduate students joining the university to study a language in 2021. This contrasts markedly with other lower tariff universities, the majority of which do not, or no longer, offer languages to degree level. In this chapter, we reflect on our approach – in our roles as Head of School and previous Subject Director – to designing and managing a language programme at a low-tariff widening participation university.

International, National and Local Context

Levels of enrolment on language degree programmes are of concern in majority English-speaking countries such as the UK, US and Australia (Brown & Caruso, 2016, p. 453). Language learning in these countries is often referred to as being in crisis (Brown & Caruso, 2016, p. 453; Lanvers, Thompson & East, 2021, p. 2-3) resulting in a lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge. English speakers 'face competition on their home labour markets with everyone else in the world, while having no real access to those labour markets in which another language remains required' (Van Parijs, 2004, p. 130) – estimated to cost the UK, for example, 3.5% of GDP in lost export trade (Foreman-Peck & Wang, 2014).

The crisis in language education is perhaps not surprising, given the status of English as a global language. Learners of English can expect 'high return of investment, high motivation […] opportunities to practice [and] strong education policy and support for learning' (Lanvers, Thompson & East, 2021, p. 4). In contrast, language learners in majority English-speaking countries are 'surrounded by a culture of an English monolingual mindset' where it is believed that 'English is enough' (Lanvers, Thompson & East, 2021, p. 4). This belief is underpinned by a wide range of assumptions, referred to by Hall, Smith and

Wicaksono (2017, pp. 4-14) as ‘dead end’ thinking about what language ‘is’ and what it does; including beliefs such as, ‘people who speak two languages are confused’ and ‘a nation has, or should have, one language’. Further examples of this, typically, monolingual mindset include the ideas that formal language learning ‘doesn’t work’, children learn languages better than adults, technology will make language learning redundant (Foster, 2019, pp. 265-266), and that the version of a language used by its so-called ‘native speakers’ is the only legitimate target variety (Wicaksono, 2012; Wicaksono, 2020). These are beliefs which, particularly when they are reinforced by teaching methods and assessment design in schools, can cause young people to hold ‘negative views about their current and future language learning ability’ (Lanvers & Chambers, 2019, p. 434-435).

In England, where, we suspect, these beliefs are held particularly strongly, the percentage of young people entered for a language GCSE, the national exam taken age 16, fell from 76% in 2002 to 40% in 2011 (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018, p. 3), grew slightly to 49% by 2014 (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018, p. 3) and has remained roughly steady since (Collen, 2022, p. 22). This is despite the government’s ambition for 75% of young people to take a language GCSE by 2022 and 90% by 2025 (Department for Education, 2019). The number of young people who study a language A level, the national exam taken age 18, fell from 40,000 in 1996 to 27,000 in 2005 (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018, p. 4), remaining low since (Collen, 2020, p. 5). The resulting fall in the number of undergraduate language students has led to the closure of many university language departments and programmes, with 105 universities offering languages degrees in the year 2000 (Boffey, 2013) but only 64 in 2019 (Polisca, Wright, Álvarez & Montoro, 2019, p. 9).

International, national and local factors are at play here. Whereas a language GCSE in England has not been compulsory since 2004, Wales has a policy of ‘bilingualism + 1’ with Welsh compulsory from age 3–16 (Jones, 2016, p. 1) and Scotland has committed to the

European Union's '1+ 2 model' of teaching two languages in addition to English (Lanvers, Doughty & Thompson, 2018, p. 779). In Germany, despite concern about 'foreign language monolingualism' (Lanvers & Chambers, 2019, p. 430), many schools teach languages other than English, even teaching geography and/or history, for example, in a language other than German or English (Lanvers & Chambers, 2019, p. 433). And while the numbers of entries to language GCSEs or their international equivalents have declined in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and New Zealand, they have not declined in Ireland or Australia (Churchward, 2019). How successful countries have been at rising to the challenge of teaching languages other than English seems to vary. Issues particular to England include a poor transition from primary to secondary school (Collen, 2020, p. 9), and low grades in languages GCSEs that dissuade young people from taking them or schools from offering them (Lanvers, 2017, p. 52). Areas of the country with high social deprivation, especially urban areas in the North of England, are the most likely not to offer languages (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018, p. 5); in Middlesbrough, in the North East, only 29% of young people took a language GCSE in 2017 (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018, p. 3).

The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the UK admissions service for higher education, collects data on university admissions. A recent analysis of UCAS data, by one of the authors of this chapter, showed that English universities with above average entry tariffs, and students from more-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, generally offer languages to degree level, whereas universities with below average entry tariffs, and students from less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, generally do not (Muradás-Taylor, 2023). At the other extreme, most universities with an entry tariff higher than 145 offer a range of five or more languages to degree level (Muradás-Taylor, 2023).

A follow-up study (Muradás-Taylor & Taylor, 2024) showed that there are large areas of the North, East and South West of England that are further than a commutable distance of

60 km from a university offering language degrees at below average entry tariff. This excludes people from studying languages at university, since we know that students from less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, some ethnic minority backgrounds, and students from the North of England, are more likely to commute (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). Figure 1, adapted from Muradás-Taylor & Taylor (2024) illustrates these cold spots, with the number of students accepting places to study languages at below average tariff universities in 2020, and their location, also shown.

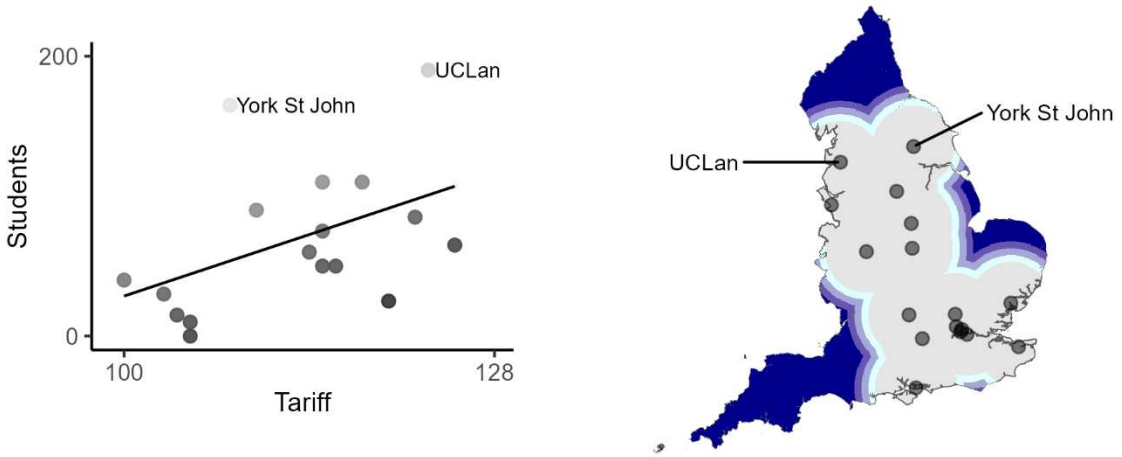

Figure 1. Below average tariff universities offering languages, adapted from Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024)

As a widening participation university, with, in 2019, an average entry tariff of 108 UCAS points (Guardian, 2022) and 40% of students from the least privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (POLAR quintiles 1 and 2, Office for Students, 2022a), York St John is unusual in offering languages to degree level. As can be seen from Figure 1, it is situated in a key strategic position geographically, with cold spots to the north and south, and has a large number of language students for its tariff, exceeded only by UCLan. Languages are thriving at York St John, due to the impact of the programme design which we describe in this chapter.

Curriculum/Programme Design

While much has been written on curriculum design, little directly addresses the key issue at the heart of the language education crisis: declining student numbers and unsustainable courses. Most research into university curriculum design focuses on a particular goal or aspect of the curriculum, for example: retention (Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011) or decolonisation (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020) (although see O'Neill, 2015, for a book-length guide to designing programmes at university). Books on designing 'language' programmes (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Macalister & Nation, 2011; Markee, 1997; Mickan & Wallace, 2020; Nation & Macalister, 2010) – which, despite their titles, focus on English language teaching, not the teaching of other languages – do not need to consider how to attract students, given the global demand for English learning. The same is true of schools, the focus of much research on curriculum design. For example, a recent special issue of the Curriculum Journal explores 'macro-level' issues, such as the interaction between national curricula and policy-making, 'meso-level' issues, such as content selection and continuing professional development for teachers, and 'micro-level' issues, such as classroom interaction between teacher and students (Priestley & Philippou, 2019) but not how to attract students, given that the setting is compulsory education.

Perhaps the most relevant concept from curriculum design research is 'environment analysis' (also called 'situation analysis' or 'constraints analysis', Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 17-18), that is, asking questions about the students, the teachers and the situation such as time, space and materials – especially if 'students' is re-framed to consider young people that are not currently applying to study languages at university, but might if the right programmes were available. We also notice synergies between our approach and 'Design Thinking, 'a human-centered approach to innovation and problem-solving, characterized by trial and error and the integration of people from multiple disciplines taking part in the planning and

decision-making process' (Brown, 2008, cited in Crites & Rye, 2020, p. 2). Design Thinking starts with 'a deep understanding of the needs, motivations and realities of the users or stakeholders', where 'having explicit knowledge of users' needs is more important than having access to numerical data and demographics' (Crites & Rye, 2020, p. 2-3). We will return to the similarities and differences between our approach and Design Thinking in the discussion.

According to Liddicoat (2020, p. 116), there is a 'small body' of research on 'strategies adopted by universities or departments to address declining participation'; he gives Brown and Caruso (2016) as an example. They describe a major overhaul in curriculum design at the University of Western Australia, where 150 undergraduate degrees were replaced with five: Bachelor of Arts, Commerce, Design, Philosophy and Science (Brown & Caruso, 2016, p. 462). Students on the new programmes must take some 'broadening units' outside of the faculty, and students from all faculties, including the Faculty of Arts, can choose a language as a broadening unit. This led to 'much higher' enrolment in language units (Brown & Caruso, 2016, p. 464). While having more students study languages as part of their degree is an excellent outcome, it is not clear that this change had an impact on the number of students specialising in languages, which is the focus of the current chapter.

Of perhaps most relevance to questions of language degree programme design and management are the two joint reports by the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) – now University Council For Languages (UCFL) – and the British Academy (British Academy & UCML, 2022; UCML & British Academy, 2021). These analyse changes in the number of students studying languages. The first report (UCML & British Academy, 2021, p. 4) stated that programmes consisting of a single language (e.g., French) or two languages (e.g., French and Spanish) have been particularly affected by falls in student numbers, declining by 22% between 2012 and 2018. In contrast, they said that joint honours

programmes, where languages are studied in combination with other subjects, have not declined overall, and the number of students studying languages with politics, linguistics, TESOL and translation have increased. UCML and British Academy (2021, p. 5) also looked at the numbers of students studying each language, reporting that French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish have fallen, Japanese and Korean have risen, and Arabic has remained steady. Based on these two findings, they recommended that language departments should 're-examine their course offerings with a view to both expanding the range of courses in combination with other […] subjects [and] a greater range of non-European languages' (UCML and British Academy (2021, p. 4). Note however that their most recent report, analysing the period 2012 to 2021, shows that the trend for joint honours programmes to show less decline is only observed in Russell Group universities; in other universities, student numbers have fallen irrespective of programme type (British Academy & UCML, 2022, p. 13).

Also of relevance to language programme design is Liddicoat (2020), a survey of what university websites in UK and Australia say about their language programmes. He compares the languages offered; the amount of contact time per week; whether ab initio (from beginners) and continuing (e.g., post A level) starting points are offered; whether ab initio students and continuing students are on 'converging' programmes – and if so whether they merge in the second or third year of the programme – or 'sequential' programmes, graduating on different levels; whether beginners language teaching is assigned to teaching fellows and language teaching in later years or literature/area studies content assigned to teaching and research academics; and whether study abroad is compulsory. He concludes that differences between programmes are 'the result of ad hoc decisions' (Liddicoat, 2020, p. 133)', adding that 'pedagogy often does not appear to be the basis on which decisions are made […] it is possible for similar, linguistically close languages, such as Italian and

Spanish, to receive very different time allocations within the same university' (Liddicoat, 2020, p. 129).

PROGRAMME DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT

In this section we describe (i) the language programmes at York St John as they were in 2017, when the first author became Subject Director for languages and the second author was Head of School; (ii) the changes we made between 2017 and 2021; (iii) the positive impact of these changes and (iv) those aspects that were not successful or are still in progress.

Where we were

That York St John offered languages to degree level was unusual given that most widening participation universities – those with below average entry tariffs and high proportions of students from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 – do not. Not only that, but five languages were offered to degree level – British Sign Language (BSL), French, German, Japanese and Spanish; especially unusual given that a range of five or more languages is normally only seen in universities with the very highest entry tariffs. This achievement was the result of innovation by the previous management who validated joint honours language degrees using modules from the institution-wide languages programme. The languages were offered in combination with business management, education studies, English language and English literature, with Spanish also offered with tourism management and BSL also offered with children, young people and families (CYPF). Later, French, German, Japanese and Spanish were launched in combination with TESOL and dual languages (language X and/with language Y) programmes were added.

By 2017, the number of different language programmes had grown to 37. However, only 52 first years entered in total, making the average programme size 1.4 students. German was of particular concern, with only 2 first years joining that year across 10 different programmes. In 2018, York St John went through a university-wide restructure, and the

language programmes were identified as being financially unsustainable due to their high staff costs as a proportion of fee income. At that stage, Japanese had one programme recruiting large numbers of students – TESOL and Japanese – plus 5 other programmes with low or no recruitment. With the introduction of the dual languages programmes, numbers on BSL had grown to 9 from 4 the previous year, French had grown from 7 to 8 and Spanish had grown from 9 to 17. However, these students were spread across multiple programmes: 6 different programmes for BSL, 8 for French and 9 for Spanish. The large number of small programmes was causing an unsustainable administrative burden. This affected timetabling, module choices, marketing, quality assurance, academic leads and the languages and linguistics administration team, as described below.

The timetabling challenge was immense, compounded by language modules also being offered as electives on most other programmes: effectively, no language module could clash with any module on any other programme. The language modules followed a ladder model (referred to as 'sequential' in Liddicoat, 2020): beginners, continuation, intermediate 1, intermediate 2, advanced 1 and 2 and proficiency. First years were allocated to an appropriate starting level, with complete beginners, those post-GCSE and those post-A level starting on different levels. First year post A-level students were taught together with third years who had progressed from beginners, compounding the timetabling challenge.

The large number of programmes impacted the module choice process. At York St John, students are enrolled automatically on core modules, and choose their options online. Centrally-located professional services colleagues generate 'module diets' from the modules detailed in the programme specification and these are signed off by academics. In 2017, when we had 37 different programmes available to first year students, a combination of staff changes and the sheer size of the task meant that these were signed off without proper scrutiny. As a result, every single student was initially given an incorrect module diet – being

offered modules that were not running and not being offered modules that were, requiring huge resource to rectify.

Module choices were also an issue with study abroad. York St John was unusual in having three-year programmes where the second year was study abroad. The credits gained while studying abroad counted toward the degree classification, unlike most, if not all, English universities where the year abroad is in addition to three years. Because of this, it was necessary to: (i) match students carefully with host institutions to ensure that appropriate modules were available; (ii) approve the module choices of each student; and (iii) offer additional independent study modules for students to redeem credits after their return to the UK if insufficient credits had been obtained at the host university.

Other teams around the university who were unnecessarily burdened included the marketing team, who were unable to keep up with the maintenance of 37 different online programme descriptions; the quality assurance team, who were responsible for updating any module or programme amendment across multiple programme specifications; and academic leads and the languages and linguistics administration team, who were the first port of call for queries from students, professional services colleagues and academics.

Most importantly, the issues described above impacted negatively on the student experience in the following ways. Module choice issues meant that students had to change modules at short notice. The second year abroad put students under considerable pressure – not only were they studying alongside students from other universities who had already completed two years of their degree before going abroad, but they were also studying for credits. And some students considered the ladder model for languages unfair, feeling that they could have achieved a higher mark – and therefore degree classification – if they had been allowed to take a lower language level in final year than they were assigned to.

What we did

In order to save languages from closure, we needed to design new programmes that were both attractive and sustainable. We focussed on languages not taught in schools, closing first our German programmes, and, the following year, our French and Spanish programmes. We continued to offer BSL and Japanese and launched Korean as a new language. Although only a small number of universities offer Korean to degree level, we anticipated demand as prospective students were mentioning Korean at open days and in their personal statements. We did not require any previous study of any language, although many prospective students told us they were studying BSL, Japanese or Korean as self-study or outside of school.

We closed all programmes with business management, CYPF, English language, English literature, and tourism management, replacing the 37 programmes that were offered in 2017 with five: British Sign Language, Deaf Studies and Linguistics; Japanese, Intercultural Communication and Linguistics; Japanese, TESOL and Linguistics; Korean, Intercultural Communication and Linguistics; and Korean, TESOL and Linguistics. These all have tripartite titles: a language (either BSL, Japanese or Korean), one of deaf studies (for BSL) or TESOL or intercultural communication (for Japanese/Korean), and linguistics. The deaf studies/intercultural communication/TESOL strand of each programme was designed to be relevant to students' future careers. These strands were developed through a combination of adapting existing modules on our English language and linguistics (ELL) programme and writing new ones. Despite their tripartite content, the programmes are administered as single, not joint, honours, all within the languages and linguistics subject area.

We replaced the old ladder model of beginners to proficiency language modules. First year students now take either a module for complete beginners or a module for students entering with prior knowledge. These two groups come together in second and final year for content-based language learning: Japanese and Korean are taught through topics such as

education, transport, food, minoritized people, CV writing, and academic writing, and BSL students cover topics such as education, employment, recreation and health. Unlike the old programmes, which had study abroad as the second year of a three-year programme, the new Japanese and Korean programmes have study abroad as the third year of a four-year programme, in line with other UK universities.

Lastly, we recruited new staff who were able to teach both a language and linguistics or applied linguistics, with a PhD and a track record of research. We also recruited two graduate teaching assistants (known as academic associates) to work towards a PhD while teaching BSL or Korean.

What worked

The changes we made led to an increased intake of first year undergraduate students from 52 in 2017 to 165 in 2021. To put this in context, only 2165 first years joined the University in 2021 (HESA, 2023), meaning that one in thirteen undergraduates joined on a language programme. This meant more than £1,000,000 in additional income from first year undergraduate students alone in 2021 compared to 2017, allowing for the recruitment of five new members of research-active academic staff and two academic associates. The new programmes attract under-represented students to university: 32% have declared a disability and 29% are mature students, both unusually high for York St John and the sector. They also have wide geographic reach, with 60% of students coming from outside Yorkshire and the North East, compared to only 32% on other programmes in the university.

The changes resulted in a drastically reduced administrative burden, making the programmes more sustainable. The language modules are straightforward to timetable, no longer impacting on other programmes in the university. The module diets are simple to generate and there are no more issues with incorrect module diets. Because modules taken while studying abroad no longer count towards the degree classification, the work involved in

matching students with host institutions and approving students' module choices is reduced, and independent study modules for students returning with insufficient credits are no longer needed. With five programmes, rather than 37, the resource involved in marketing and quality assurance, and the burden on academic leads and the languages and linguistics administration team are all reduced.

The changes also improved the student experience, since programmes run smoothly: module diets are signed off in time, and timetables run clash-free. Study abroad has, of course, been affected by different issues through the pandemic, but we have removed the stress of studying alongside students who have had more years of study before going abroad and of study abroad grades counting towards the degree classification. And we no longer have complaints that the ladder model impacts on the degree classification.

What did not work

At the time of our curriculum review, the University was in a period of upheaval, undergoing restructures and offering enhanced redundancy packages to staff as part of a voluntary severance process. Because of the closure of the French, German and Spanish programmes, some colleagues had no choice but to accept 'voluntary' severance and leave the university. While the increased student recruitment on the new programmes was able to save languages overall from closure, the closures had enormous personal impact on those members of staff. Secondly, we had to close our institution-wide languages programme (previously, all language modules on the degree programmes, and other languages, were open to both students on other programmes and the public). Lastly, our high recruitment numbers may have solved one problem and created another. While recruitment to the Japanese and Korean programmes is high, retention is an issue, with a concerning number of students not continuing into the second year of their programme.

DISCUSSION

Despite the international picture of decline in the learning of languages other than English, and the national context – with below average tariff universities like York St John the least likely to offer languages to degree level – we succeeded in redesigning our language degree programmes in a way that both grew student numbers and was financially sustainable. In this section, we compare our approach to the research on curriculum design described in the introduction, exploring what is innovative about what we did.

There are overlaps between our approach and 'design thinking' described in Crites and Rye (2020, p. 2) as 'a human-centered approach to innovation and problem-solving, characterized by trial and error and the integration of people from multiple disciplines taking part in the planning and decision-making process'. Our approach was driven by a desire to solve the problems we were facing, including low recruitment and complex and resource-intensive programmes. It was characterised by trial and error, making changes iteratively over the period 2017 to 2021. And 'people from multiple disciplines' were involved, including professional services colleagues in the finance, IT, marketing, quality assurance and timetabling teams.

However, we disagree that 'having explicit knowledge of users' needs is more important than having access to numerical data and demographics' (Crites & Rye, 2020, p. 2-3). We argue that it is precisely through data – specifically, programme and module enrolment data – that we gained a deep understanding of students' needs and preferences. Our approach to this data may be unusual in that we used it to inform the design of new programmes to replace programmes that we closed. For example, we originally offered Japanese with TESOL, which recruited strongly, and with business management/education studies/English language/English literature, all with very low recruitment. We designed a Japanese, intercultural communication and linguistics programme – intended for students

who wanted to work in Japan or in a role related to Japan, but did not want to teach English – which recruited more students than all the smaller programmes combined.

We notice that nowhere in the literature is a discussion of a sustainable number of programmes to offer per language. This absence may point to a widespread assumption that if there is a healthy number of students studying a language, it does not matter if they are spread across a number of different joint honours programmes. But once we recognised the administrative burden, and knock-on effect on the students, of multiple small programmes, we decided to take a different approach. Instead of adding joint honours combinations until a sufficient number of language students have been recruited, we asked how many programmes we could sustain per language. For Japanese and Korean, we found we could sustain two decent-sized programmes – one with TESOL and linguistics and the other with intercultural communication and linguistics. For BSL, we found, after some trial and error, that we could only sustain one programme: BSL, deaf studies and linguistics.

UCML and British Academy (2021, p. 4) recommend that 'language departments re-examine their course offerings with a view to […] expanding the range of courses in combination with other […] subjects'. This is based on their analysis that joint honours language programmes are not experiencing the same decline in student numbers as single honours, at least in Russell Group universities (British Academy & UCML, 2022, p. 13). What this advice does not take into account, however, is the negative side to joint honours language programmes which we have set out in detail in this chapter: the drain on resource in terms of timetabling, module diets, marketing, and quality assurance, and the resulting negative impact on students when these processes do not work smoothly. Our innovative solution to these competing demands is to design programmes that look like joint honours from the perspective of the students but are administered as single honours, within one subject area.

We view this as the best of both worlds: catering for students' preference for studying a language with another subject, but sustainable to administer. Most importantly, we were able to design whole programmes, rather than combining two 'half' programmes as is usual for joint honours. This was possible because we had recruited new lecturers with a doctoral-level qualification to teach both language and (applied) linguistics. This contrasts to the practice described by Liddicoat (2020) of having beginners language teaching assigned to teaching fellows and language teaching in later years assigned to teaching and research academics. We designed the modules taken alongside the language to be relevant to students' future careers: 'key concepts for TESOL', 'TESOL theories and methods' and 'TESOL decisions, dilemmas and design' for those students planning to teach English; 'language and society', 'intercultural communication' and 'language, identities and cultures' for those students wanting to work internationally or cross-culturally in a non-teaching role; and, for those students wanting to work with d/Deaf people, modules on 'deaf history', 'deaf cultures', 'deaf social theory', 'linguistic diversity in schools', and phonetics – with the latter two relevant to future careers in education or speech and language therapy.

UCML and British Academy (2021, p. 4) recommended that universities offer more non-European languages. We had notable success with Korean, which we were motivated to start offering because many applicants to our Japanese programmes were mentioning an interest in Korean at open days and in personal statements. While Korean is only offered to degree level at a small number of universities in the UK, the number of students studying it trebled from 2012 to 2018 (UCML & British Academy, 2021, p. 5), and it has also gained popularity in the USA, due to the 'increasing visibility of South Korea on the international stage […] and increasing involvement of the Korean government in the teaching of Korean internationally' (Byon, 2008). Launching Korean was only viable, however, because of the changes to programme design that we had made, in particular the tripartite programmes

administered as single honours and the removal of the ladder model, so that students in multiple years were no longer timetabled together. Adding Korean to our old programme design (Korean and business management/English language/English literature/education studies plus all combinations of dual languages) would not have been possible due to the complexity of timetabling and module diets. Streamlining our programme design to just one or two programmes per language was therefore an important prerequisite to the launch of Korean, meaning that we could add a new language without causing an unsustainable administrative burden and resulting negative student experience.

We noted above that most research on curriculum design does not address the question of how to attract students, given that the majority of work has been carried out on compulsory education, English language teaching, or university courses where this is not an issue. We suggested that when considering students as part of an 'environment analysis' (Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 17-18), this could be re-framed to consider people who are not currently applying to study languages at university, but might if the right programmes were available. This is vital in the context of languages at widening participation universities, where programmes are closing due to low demand. Rather than assuming that prospective students do not want to study languages, our approach was to design programmes that they wanted to study. Key to this was offering languages not taught in schools. Due to the status of English as a global language and the myths around language and language learning described in the introduction, young people in majority English-speaking countries can hold 'negative views about their current and future language learning ability' (Lanvers & Chambers, 2019, p. 434-435). By offering languages not taught in schools, we mitigate against this, reaching students who have been self-studying due to an interest or personal connection with the language or culture. Offering languages not taught in schools also means that the disparities in access to formal language study – with schools in less-privileged areas of the North of

England less likely to offer languages, especially in Middlesbrough where York St John has several feeder schools (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018) – do not prevent students accessing university language programmes. We suggest, therefore, that when UCML and British Academy (2021, p. 4) recommend that universities offer more non-European languages, the key consideration here is to offer languages that young people want to study, rather than whether languages are European or not.

Summary and next steps

As we stated above, according to Liddicoat (2020, p. 116) there is a 'small body' of research on 'strategies adopted by universities or departments to address declining participation'. However, in the example he gives, Brown and Caruso (2016), the changes resulted in more students taking languages as a 'broadening unit' as part of their degree, rather than more students taking language degrees. As far as we are aware, we are the first to describe changes to programme design and management that led to a dramatic increase in the number of students taking a language degree and financially sustainable programmes. This success is particularly notable because York St John is a low tariff university with a large proportion of students from the least privileged socioeconomic backgrounds – the type of university which is unusual in offering languages to degree level.

The above comparison with previous research has allowed us to reflect on what is innovative about our approach and articulate the key points as follows:

1) Recognise the administrative burden of offering multiple small programmes, and the impact on students when processes such as timetabling do not work smoothly, and only offer as many programmes per language as can be sustained by the number of students – for us this was one for BSL and two each for Japanese/Korean – designing programmes to replace small programmes that are being withdrawn;

2) Design tailor-made programmes that are administered as single honours but appear to students to be joint honours, with the modules taken alongside the language relevant to students' future careers – for us these were TESOL, intercultural communication, working with d/Deaf people – recruiting additional staff to teach both a language and a related subject in which they hold a PhD;
3) Rather than assuming that students applying to low tariff universities do not want to study languages, design programmes that meet their needs and preferences by analysing programme and module enrolment data, as well as what prospective students mention at open days and in personal statements. For us this meant focussing on languages not taught in schools, mitigating against disparities in access to formal language study at school level and reaching students who had been self-studying due to an interest or personal connection with the language or culture.

More concisely, we summarise our approach as follows: recognising the administrative burden and financially unsustainability of offering multiple small programmes, analyse programme and module enrolment data to understand students' preferences, then design one, or two, tailor made programmes per language.

Now that the programmes are in a financially sustainable position with a design that can easily be rolled out to other languages, the intention is to once again broaden the range of languages offered. In addition, a new nine-week not-for-credit BSL course was launched in 2022 (https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/courses/professional-and-short-courses/languages/introduction-to-british-sign-language/), offering a model for not-for-credit language teaching that could be expanded out to other languages.

We now need to turn our attention to retention. Universities where fewer than 80% of students progress to the second year of their programme may be subject to sanctions – such as monetary penalties, suspension or deregistration – by the Office for Students (OfS), the

independent body who regulates the higher education sector (Jack, 2022). While continuation rates on our languages programmes are safely above the OfS threshold of 80% (Office for Students, 2022b), they are cause for concern. Our first years face a double transition – the transition into higher education, and the transition from language as hobby to language as a subject of formal study. Moreover, as language learners in a majority English-speaking country, they are surrounded by unhelpful beliefs and assumptions about language and language learning that can affect confidence. With this in mind, we are currently reviewing our assessment strategy in order to support students and improve retention.

CONCLUSION

Given the decline in language enrolments nationally, and to a large extent internationally, plus the fact that access to language study is unequal, with students from less-privileged backgrounds less able to access formal language study, it is imperative that we design programmes that are attractive to potential students and financially sustainable. While much has been written on curriculum design, little focus has been given to this question, probably because most curriculum design focuses on contexts where student demand is not an issue. In order to attract sufficient students, the previous approach at York St John, and, we suspect, elsewhere, was to offer multiple small joint honours programmes. However, the resulting administrative complexity meant that this approach was not sustainable. Here we present an alternative approach – one, or two, tailor made programmes per language – which resulted in increased recruitment and sustainable programmes. Future research needs to explore the extent to which this might be applicable to other universities in the sector.

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