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A cold spot analysis of language degrees in England by language: implications for sector leaders, government and universities

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ABSTRACT

England has a language education crisis: only around 40% of people study languages beyond age 14, and many universities have stopped offering language degrees. For English universities with below average entry tariffs there are 'cold spots' – areas of the country where there is no university offering language degrees within a commutable distance – a social justice issue because it excludes under-represented groups from studying languages at university. But the geographic spread for individual languages has not been accurately described: are some languages clustered in universities in certain parts of the country, leaving cold spots in others? This research focused on degree programmes in the ten most widely-taught languages – Arabic, Chinese, Classics (Ancient Greek and Latin), French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, plus British Sign Language and Korean - gathering more accurate data than that available through public data sets. The analysis showed generally good geographic dispersion with some cold spots in Arabic, British Sign Language, German, Italian, Japanese and Korean. Most worryingly, the entry tariff below which cold spots are a concern has risen to a tariff of grades AAB at A level. Recommendations are made for sector leaders, government and universities, including a fund for lower tariff universities in cold spots.

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Introduction

There is both an economic and a social need for language study in the UK (see e.g. All-Party Parliamentary Group for Modern Languages 2019, Ayres-Bennett et al. 2025, Bowler 2025, British Academy 2025, British Academy et al. 2020, Coussins 2025). On the plus side, there is 'unmistakeable enthusiasm' for language learning (Forsdick 2023): the UK is the country with the second highest number of people learning three or more languages on Duolingo (Blanco 2024) and many cities have hosted successful City of Languages events (Association for Language Learning 2025) including, most recently, Leeds, where over 10,000 people attended language and culture activities. However, there is marked decline in language study in schools and, particularly, universities, the focus of the current study.

For GCSEs, the national exam taken in England and Wales at age 16, only 370,000 entries were in languages in 2024 compared to 878,000 for maths (Stollhans 2024). This implies that only 42% of people are studying languages beyond the age of 14 – probably fewer given that some take two languages – and this figure has fallen from 76% in 2002. The fall at GCSE has been mirrored by

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falls at A level, the national exam taken at age 18, and at university, with many universities closing their language degree programmes (Muradás-Taylor 2023, Muradás-Taylor and Taylor 2024). While this is reflective of an international trend of falling enrolments for the study of languages other than English in schools and universities - influenced by global English, machine translation and free online learning tools such as Duolingo (Lanvers, Thompson, and East 2021) - it also reflects local issues: the fact that language GCSEs are graded lower than other subjects, dissuading young people from taking them or schools from offering them (Lanvers 2017: 52, Thomson 2024); a disconnect in language teaching practice between primary and secondary school (Collen 2020: 9); language teacher shortages (Koglbauer 2018); and poor uptake of language GCSEs in areas with high social deprivation (Tinsley and Doležal 2018).

The closure of language degree programmes in England has been concentrated in universities which accept students with lower grades from their A levels or equivalent qualifications (Muradás-Taylor 2023). Muradás-Taylor (2023) showed that universities with entry tariffs below 128 UCAS[1] points – the average tariff for universities in England – were less likely to offer language degrees. There are 'cold spots' for lower tariff universities – areas of the country where there is no university offering language degrees within a commutable distance (Muradás-Taylor and Taylor 2024). Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) investigated the location of cold spots for languages as a whole, but the geographic spread for individual languages is not known: are some languages clustered in universities in certain parts of the country, leaving cold spots in others? This is the subject of the current study.

Literature review

Language degrees in England will be considered here from two angles: first cold spots, then higher education policy.

Languages in higher education: cold spots

Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) identified cold spots: areas of the country where there is no university offering language degrees within a commutable distance, defining commutable distance as 60 km. The key findings are shown in Figure 1, where areas of England that are further than 60 km from a university are shaded in blue, with the darkest blue indicating areas further than 90 km. All the universities in England are shown in the first map. The second map shows all those universities offering languages. Although fewer than half of all English universities offer language degrees,

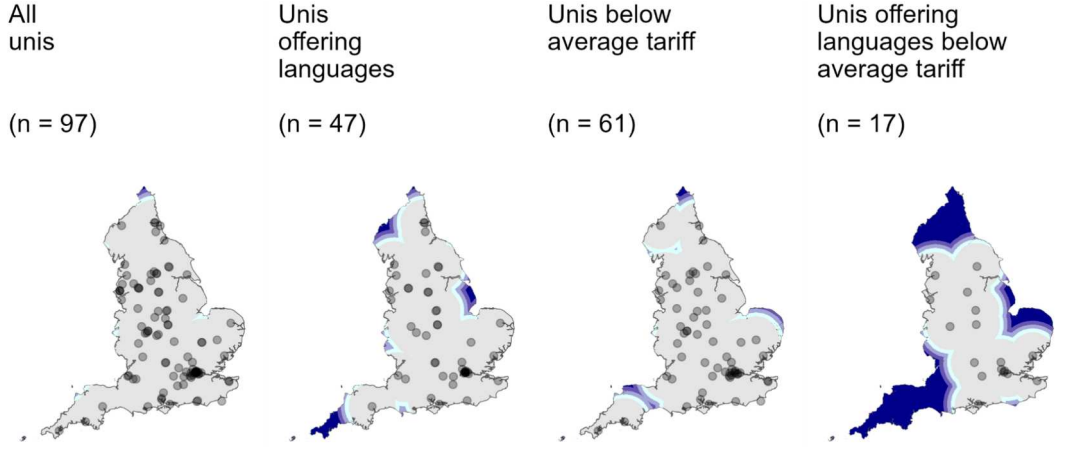


Figure 1. Cold spots in language degree provision. From Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024).

the geographic coverage is quite good, with only small cold spots on the coasts and borders. The third map shows all universities with an entry tariff below 128 UCAS points, the average tariff for universities in England. The final map, that of universities with below average entry tariffs that offer language degrees, is where cold spots appear: there were only 17 universities, with cold spots in the North, East and South West of England.

That few lower tariff universities offer language degrees is a social justice issue: people applying to these universities, who are more likely to come from socio-economically less-privileged backgrounds or an under-represented group such as mature students, disabled students and care leavers, have fewer opportunities to take language degree programmes (Muradás-Taylor 2023). The regional cold spots compound the social justice issue, because students from less-privileged socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to commute (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018, Muradás-Taylor and Taylor 2024).

The British Academy, the national academy for the humanities and social sciences, recently made cold spots maps available on their website for individual SHAPE (social sciences, humanities, and arts) subjects (British Academy 2025, 2026). These build on Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) in taking 60 km as a commutable distance to calculate cold spots, and displaying cold spots for both 'any tariff' and 'below average tariff' universities. The latter is important because it is tariff that determines access, and is therefore a more informative metric than university type (e.g. Russell Group, post-92) which previous analyses have used (see e.g. British Academy and the University Council of Modern Languages 2022).

These maps (British Academy 2026) and accompanying report (British Academy 2025) do an important job of raising awareness of regional cold spots, and are an excellent resource for most SHAPE subjects. However, the details of the cold spots themselves are misleading for languages, because these maps draw on Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, which does not code language programmes with sufficient accuracy for cold spot mapping. This is partly because there is no way of accessing data for Portuguese and Spanish separately, or Chinese/Japanese/Korean separately, as these languages are combined as 'Spanish and Portuguese Studies' and 'East Asian Studies' (the same is true for 'African and Middle Eastern Studies', 'German and Scandinavian Studies', and 'Russian and East European Studies', although there is probably relatively good overlap with Arabic, German and Russian programmes). But even for the categories 'French Studies' and 'Italian Studies' which each cover one language, not all French and Italian degree programmes are included in the HESA data - a topic I will return to in the discussion.

Languages in higher education: policy

Higher education in England is market-driven: each university decides which programmes to offer and how many students to accept (Hillman 2014). Because of this, low recruiting programmes close; a process that has been exacerbated due to the tuition fee for home undergraduate students not rising with inflation between 2017 and 2024. Languages at lower tariff universities are particularly vulnerable to closure because their students are more likely to come from deprived areas where languages are not offered at school, such as Middlesbrough where only 29% of pupils took a language GCSE in 2017 (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 3). Furthermore, a market-driven system is vulnerable to regional cold spots. As the British Academy pointed out recently, 'no public body now has the responsibility for monitoring and ensuring subject-level provision in English universities, leaving gaps in strategic oversight – particularly in relation to regional or disciplinary needs' (British Academy 2025: 11).

There is growing momentum in the UK behind a national languages strategy, as proposed in a joint report in 2020 by the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK (British Academy et al. 2020; hereafter I will refer to this as the '2020 joint report'). The 2020 joint report pointed out that 'there is currently no entity with responsibility for overseeing strategic planning of provision in higher education, including for individual subjects', adding 'while recognising that higher education

is a market-driven sector […] some coordination and sharing of intelligence is essential […] for the availability of degrees in languages to be strategically spread across the UK to avoid "cold spots"' (British Academy et al. 2020: 14). Similar calls for oversight of language provision can be seen in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2019: 5) who recommended 'strategic oversight of MFL [modern foreign languages] provision to ensure changes in provision are implemented with due consideration on regional and national impact', the Higher Education Policy Institute, an independent think tank for higher education, which recommended 'improved oversight of languages in higher education', arguing that 'diverse language provision tends to result from coordinated government support and should not just be left to the vagaries of student demand' (Bowler 2025: 10) and the British Academy (2025: 6) who suggest that 'sector regulators should monitor subject-level provision through an "at risk" regional subject register'.

As well as oversight, these reports recommend additional government funding. The 2020 joint report recommended that 'funding models for undergraduate education cover the full costs of provision for language degrees' (British Academy et al. 2020: 11); the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2019: 5) recommended a 'bespoke funding formula' for languages; the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages recently recommended more funding 'on the grounds that they are of strategic importance and cost more to provide' than other subjects (Coussins 2025).

In addition to calls for more funding for language degrees overall, these reports recommend targeted funding. The 2020 joint report called for the creation of '"Languages Challenge Funds", central funding pots in each jurisdiction into which higher education institutions can bid where they wish to expand or create new provision' (British Academy et al. 2020: 11) and British Academy (2025: 39) recommends an '"at risk" subject premium, targeted at providers where course closures in particular subjects would create regional "cold spots"'.

Research questions

The 2020 joint report also highlighted the need for data analysis 'to provide evidence on which recommendations would be based' (British Academy et al. 2020: 21). While we know more than we did when that report was written – crucially knowing about the cold spots in the North, East and South West for below average tariff universities – further analysis is needed to know whether we have cold spots at the level of individual languages. Are some languages clustered in universities in certain parts of the country, leaving cold spots in others? This is what this paper aims to answer, through the following research questions:

RQ1. Have the cold spots for language degree provision changed from 2023 to 2026 entry?

RQ2. Which languages are offered as degree programmes in English universities and which are the most widely-taught languages in English universities, by number of universities?

RQ3. How well are the most widely-taught languages dispersed around England and where are the cold spots in provision?

RQ4. For universities with lower entry tariffs, how well are the most widely-taught languages dispersed around England and where are the cold spots in provision?

Method

Data collection

A list of English universities and the location (longitude and latitude) of their main or only campus was taken from the data collected for Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024). The average entry tariff for each university was updated from 2019 entry to 2023 entry by taking data from the Guardian league table (The Guardian 2025). Note that 2019 was the last year that data were available for

Muradás-Taylor (2023), and 2023 is the last year that is available now (Hiely-Rayner 2025). Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) did not update the entry tariff data because A level grades fluctuated during the pandemic (Prior and Leckie 2024). This has now settled and the average entry tariff is effectively unchanged: 128 UCAS points in Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) and 127 UCAS points now.

Data on whether each university offers language degrees were taken from Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024), and updated from 2023 entry to 2026 entry by checking university websites. Similarly, data on which languages are offered as degree programmes at each university were taken from Muradás-Taylor (2023) and updated from 2022 entry to 2026. In some cases, the websites were not clear or, in the case of recent closures, out of date, and the information was checked on the UCAS website and/or by asking clarification questions over email.

Languages, defined broadly to include all oral, signed, ancient and modern languages, were counted if they were offered on their own (e.g. French) or with another non-language subject (e.g. German and Politics) and if language study was compulsory in every year. If the language could only be taken in combination with another language, then it was not counted, except for Classics (Ancient Greek and Latin), which was counted as one language.

For the purposes of this research, therefore, a language degree is considered to have the structure [language modules] + [modules taught in English], whatever the content of the modules taught in English, and without distinguishing between single and joint honours. This reflects a deliberate stance to map *language* degree provision, rather than that of cultural or area studies. I will use degree programmes at two universities to illustrate this. The degree programme in Japanese, TESOL and linguistics at York St John University has 40 credits of Japanese language study a year, a year abroad, and modules, taught in English, on linguistics and TESOL. The degree programme in Japanese at the University of Leeds has 40 credits of Japanese language study each year except for the final year, where 20 credits are compulsory and 20 credits in translation are optional; a year abroad; and modules, taught in English, on East Asian history, culture and politics. A focus on the amount of language study, therefore, means these degrees are comparable – roughly 40 credits of Japanese language per year plus a year abroad.

I debated whether to include Chemistry with a Modern Language, which is the only way to study Chinese and Japanese at Birmingham, and Biochemistry with French/German/Spanish for Science at Imperial College London. I decided to include these, because any argument about science subjects being less accessible than humanities or social sciences depends on what other subjects each individual student studies prior to entering university. Because of its location in London, the inclusion of the programmes at Imperial College London has no impact on cold spots. This is not the case for Birmingham and I will return to this when analysing the cold spots by language.

While I required language study to be compulsory in all years, the languages modules themselves were often coded as optional. This is because many universities have modules with different language proficiency levels (usually for students who enter the university with an A level in the language versus those starting as beginners), or because of umbrella programmes like Modern Languages where students choose which language to study. Note that I made one exception to this requirement and that was the programmes in International Business with French/Spanish at Nottingham Trent University. This was because although the final year does not include compulsory language study, students on this programme study the language in first year and then have two years abroad.

University websites

Determining which languages were offered as degree programmes at each university was not easy. For several universities, this proved impossible to determine solely through information on the website, and I had to request additional information by email. Here are some of the difficulties I encountered.

First, some websites were not clear regarding which languages can be studied in combination with which other subject. For example, the University of Birmingham has a list of impossible combinations but not possible combinations (University of Birmingham 2026) and the University of Sheffield had two different lists of languages as possible combinations with Business Management which they resolved when I emailed to enquire.

Second, searching for a language sometimes returns no results even when it is offered. For example, at Manchester Metropolitan University, Arabic/Chinese/Japanese return no results despite being offered on the Business Management with a Modern Language programme; at the University of Portsmouth, Chinese/French/German/Spanish return no results despite being offered on the Modern Languages programme; at the University of Birmingham searching for 'Chemistry Japanese' returns no results and searching for Japanese does not return the Chemistry with a Modern Language programme; and at the University of Liverpool searching for 'languages Chinese' returns 'Mathematics with Languages' as the only joint honours combination, but there are in fact many joint honours combinations with Chinese (see University of Liverpool 2026).

Third, it is often not clear that language study is a compulsory part of a programme, either because language modules are coded as optional or because they do not appear in the course structure. University College London (UCL) is particularly unclear here, with Finnish and East European Studies showing Finnish as optional in first and second year and nothing in final year, Polish and East European Studies showing no Polish in first year and optional in second year, and Romanian and East European Studies showing optional Romanian in first year and nothing subsequently. But in all these cases, the text says 'As you progress through the degree, compulsory language modules are tailored to your existing knowledge' (UCL 2026). In some cases, it is not clear that language study is compulsory because students choose between languages on umbrella programmes such as Modern Languages or similar, for example at the Universities of Essex, Kent, Newcastle, Portsmouth, and Sussex. In others, it is not clear that language study is compulsory because students have a choice of language levels, studying a language ab initio or post A level, for example at the Universities of Chester (Business Management and French/Spanish) and Leeds (Chinese at first year, German at first and second year). This is also true for many programmes at the University of Manchester (Chinese/French/German/Italian/Japanese Studies and Linguistics and Spanish in first and second year, Classics, Linguistics and Portuguese, and Russian Studies in all years) although there is text that reads 'Although language units may show here as optional, they are a mandatory part of your modern languages degree and you will take the units relevant to your level of language in each year of study' (University of Manchester 2026).

Fourth, module names are not always clear. Some universities have modules that combine the teaching of language with culture or linguistics, and while pedagogically this is an exciting innovation, it is not always clear from the module titles that they include language study – for example the module 'The French World and the Word' at the University of Westminster and 'Languages Lab Project' at the University of Kent.

Scope

Muradás-Taylor (2023) and Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) focus on England only, rather than the UK. It is not possible to use the same methodology for Scotland because my analysis centres on entry tariff, and Scottish universities have higher entry tariffs than English universities. To illustrate the scale of the difference, let us compare entry tariff data for Scottish universities with data for English universities from Muradás-Taylor (2023), drawing on the same year of entry (2019/2020) to be comparable. There are 14 Scottish universities in the Guardian league table (The Guardian 2022) and their average entry tariff is 171 UCAS points – much higher than the 128 UCAS points of English universities. There are 61 English universities with an average entry tariff below 128 UCAS points and none in Scotland – the lowest is the University of the West of Scotland with an entry tariff of 136 UCAS points.

So if we were to map Scottish universities according to my methodology, the whole of Scotland would become a cold spot for below average tariff universities. In part, this is because Scottish Higher/Advanced Higher tariffs are higher than A levels (Hiely-Rayner 2021); in part, it is also because Scottish universities have a system of 'articulation' where students enter higher education from further education with 'non-tariffable qualifications' (British Academy 2026). The British Academy SHAPE cold spot maps used a workaround to include Scotland by calling all Scottish universities with a high rate of articulation 'lower tariff' (British Academy 2026). However, because my research maps to actual tariff, this is not possible here. In the end, I decided to maintain parity with previous papers and map only universities in England.

Note that as with previous studies, neither the Open University nor Birkbeck, University of London, are included because neither publish entry tariffs. This does not affect the analysis of cold spots, since the Open University is a distance learning provider and Birkbeck is in London, where several other universities offer languages. However, it does mean that two more universities offer languages than are reported in this paper: the Open University offers French, German and Spanish, while Birkbeck offers Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean and Spanish.

Cold spot mapping

I adapted the method of mapping cold spots used in Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) to map individual languages. I used the same cut-off for a cold spot of more than 60 km away from a university. I carried out the cold spot mapping in the programming language R (R Core Team 2021) using the packages sf (Pebesma 2018), raster (Hijmans and van Etten 2012) and ggplot2 (Wickham 2016).

Results

RQ1: have the cold spots for language degree provision changed from 2023 to 2026 entry?

Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) showed that 47 universities offered language degrees for 2023 entry; of these, only 17 offered languages below the average entry tariff of 128 UCAS points, leading to cold spots in the East, South West and North of England, with the cold spot in the South West extending up to 150 UCAS points. Updating the data to 2026 entry showed that three universities no longer offer language degrees: the University of Leicester, which previously offered Chinese/French/Italian/Spanish; Middlesex University, which previously offered Business Management and International Tourism Management with Mandarin/Spanish; and Northumbria University, which previously offered programmes in International Business Management with French/Spanish. Note that the University of Nottingham, which is not recruiting to French/German/Russian/Spanish in 2026 (Ayres-Bennett et al. 2025), shows as offering languages in my data because it still offers Classics.

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in the cold spots from 2023 to 2026 entry. Although the number of universities offering language degrees has dropped by three, this has had no impact on cold spots overall, nor at below 160 or below 150 UCAS points. However, there is a new cold spot below 140 UCAS points in the North of England, due to the closure of language degrees at the University of Northumbria. The cold spot in the East of England at below average entry tariff has expanded, because the entry tariff for the University of Essex has gone up from 115 to 130 UCAS points, meaning that it is no longer below average tariff. The closure of language degrees at Middlesex University has not impacted cold spots because of its position in London, nor has the closure of languages at Leicester, because De Montfort University, which is also in Leicester, still offers Chinese.

One point stands out from this analysis: the tariff below which cold spots are a concern has risen. Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) identified the average entry tariff of 128 UCAS points as being a source of concern due to the three cold spots in the North, East and South West; above this, only the cold spot in the South West was present. However, in the present analysis we can see that

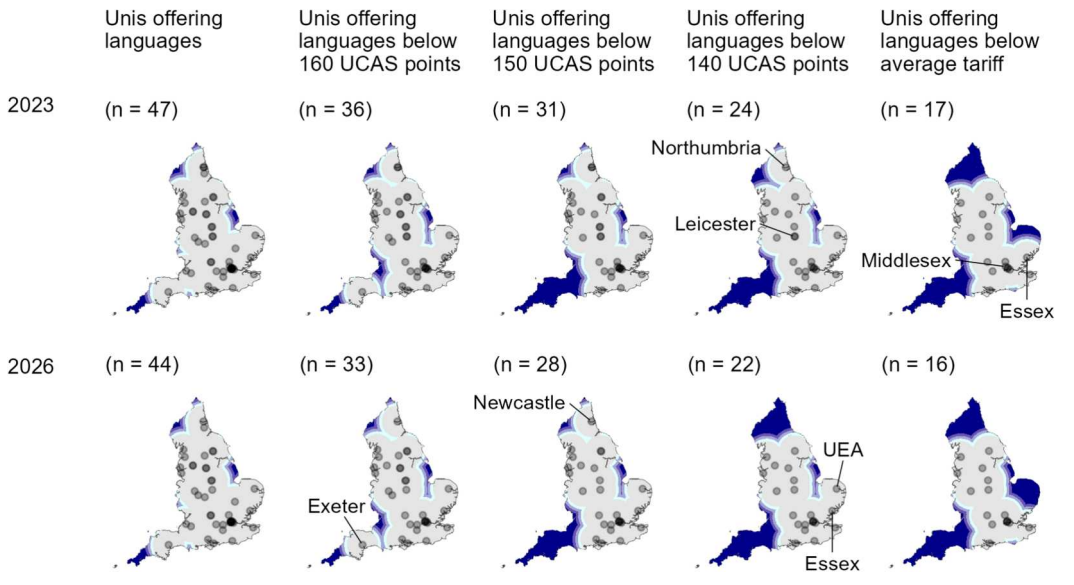


Figure 2. Changes in cold spots from 2023 to 2026 at different tariffs.

two of the three cold spots are present at an entry tariff of 140 UCAS points. The cold spot in the North is actually present up to 143 UCAS points, which is the average entry tariff for the University of Newcastle; the cold spot in the South West is present up to 153 UCAS points, the average entry tariff for the University of Exeter. In contrast, the cold spot in the East is only present below 128 UCAS points, the average entry tariff for the University of East Anglia (UEA). So we have two cold spots below 143 UCAS points with a third below 128 UCAS points. In terms of A level grades, ABB corresponds to 128, AAB to 136 and AAA to 144 UCAS points. In the analysis that follows, I will consider universities with 'lower' entry tariffs to be those with an entry tariff below 136 UCAS points, that is below grades AAB. This both emerges from the analysis so far – because at this tariff there are two cold spots – but also has meaning in terms of A level grades.

RQ2: which languages are offered as degree programmes in English universities and which are the most widely-taught languages in English universities, by number of universities?

Table 1 shows the 36 languages offered as degree programmes in English universities for 2026 entry. More details are in the Appendix: this includes the full list of languages offered at each university, with an example programme for each language. Ten languages are the most widely-taught, offered at twelve or more universities: Arabic, Chinese, Classics, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. In the remainder of the paper, I will analyse cold spots for these ten languages, plus British Sign Language (BSL), our only signed language, and Korean, referring to these as the twelve most widely-taught languages, for convenience. I decided to include

Table 1. Languages offered as degree programmes at English universities.

Offered at 12 or more universities	Arabic, Chinese, Classics, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish
Offered at 2-3 universities	Ancient Egyptian, BSL, Catalan, Czech/Slovak, Dutch, Hebrew, Korean, Polish
Offered at one university	Akkadian, Ancient Greek, Bulgarian, Danish, Finnish, Greek, Hungarian, Icelandic, Latin, Norwegian, Persian, Romanian, Sanskrit, Serbian/Croatian, Swedish, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian

Korean because there is some evidence it is growing, with the University of Birkbeck (as noted above, not included in my data), launching Korean in 2025.

RQ3: how well are the most widely-taught languages dispersed around England and where are the cold spots in provision?

Figure 3 shows a cold spot analysis for the twelve most widely-taught languages. A visual reading of the maps shows that most languages have good geographic coverage. Cold spots are small for Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Classics. The latter three have surprisingly good coverage given that only 12 universities offer Classics and only 13 offer Portuguese and Russian.

In contrast, Japanese, Arabic, BSL and Korean have large cold spots. Japanese has a cold spot in the South West, because it is not offered by the University of Exeter. BSL and Korean also have a cold spot in the South West, because Exeter does not offer these languages, illustrating the key role the University of Exeter plays in making language degrees available in the region. Arabic has a cold spot in the Midlands, not being offered by the Universities of Birmingham, De Montfort, Nottingham, Nottingham Trent, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, Warwick or Wolverhampton. Note that Japanese does not have this cold spot because it is offered by the University of Birmingham. But this is the programme that I debated whether to include or not: Chemistry with a Modern Language. Without it, Japanese would also have a cold spot band in the Midlands. BSL and Korean, each being offered by only 3 universities, obviously have cold spots. For BSL, this is in the South West and the whole of the East. For Korean this is in the Midlands and the South outside of London.

RQ4. For universities with lower entry tariffs, how well are the most widely-taught languages dispersed around England and where are the cold spots in provision?

Following the analysis for RQ1, I will consider universities with 'lower' entry tariffs to be those with an entry tariff below 136 UCAS points, that is, below A level grades of AAB. There are 22 universities that have an entry tariff below 136 UCAS points and that offer language degrees. They are the Universities of Chester, De Montfort, Essex, Greenwich. Hertfordshire, Kent, Lancashire, London Metropolitan,

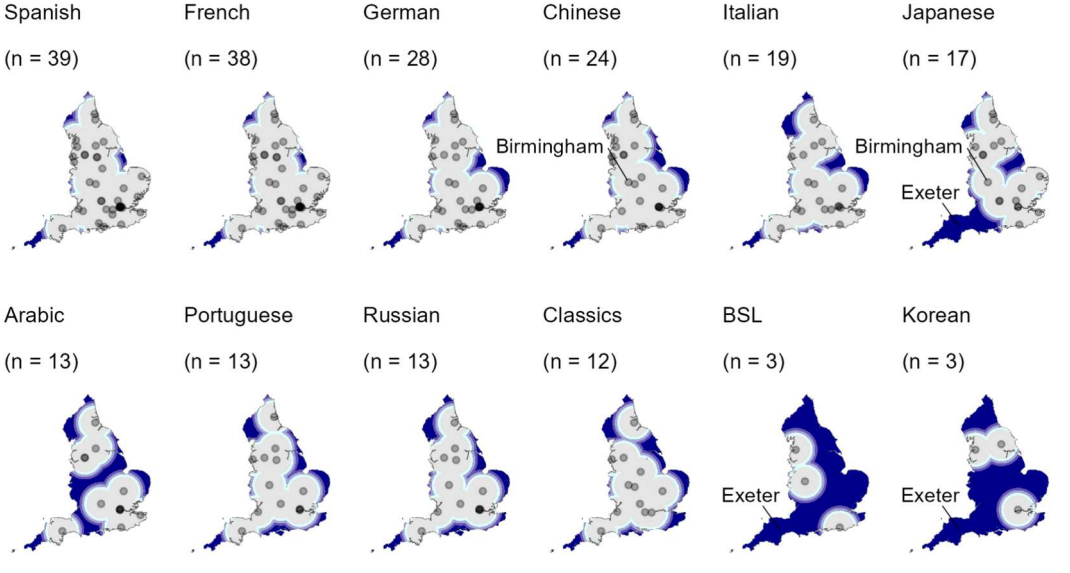


Figure 3. Cold spot analysis for individual languages.

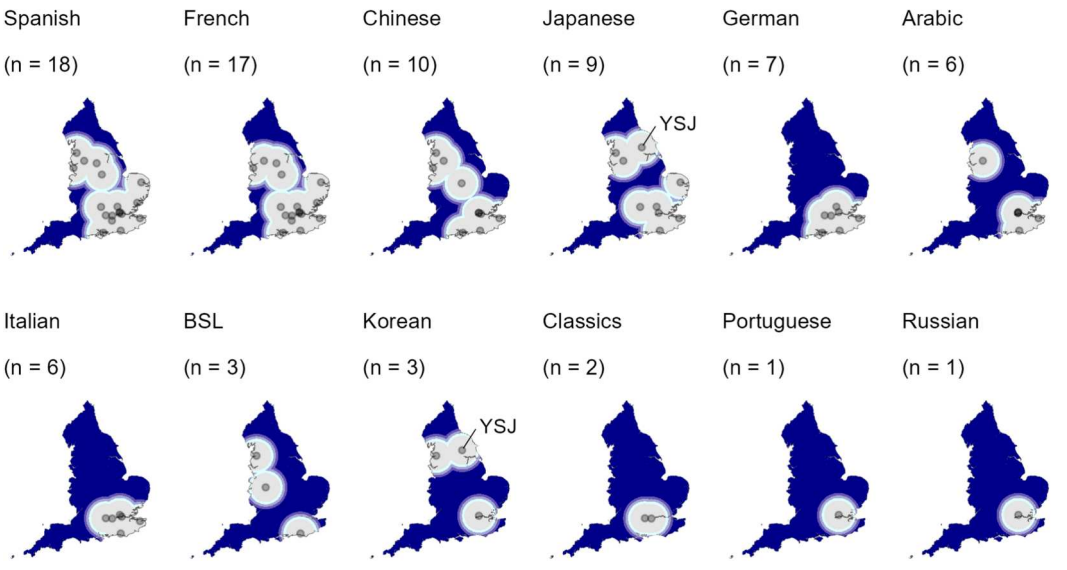


Figure 4. Cold spot analysis for individual languages below 136 UCAS points.

Manchester Metropolitan, Nottingham Trent, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth, Reading, Royal Holloway, Sheffield Hallam, SOAS, Surrey, Sussex, UEA, Westminster, Wolverhampton and York St John.

Figure 4 shows a cold spot analysis at lower entry tariffs for the twelve most widely-taught languages. While all languages have cold spots, these are exacerbated for a small number of languages by having poor geographic dispersion. This is most notable for German and Italian, where all the universities are clustered in the South East. It is also the case for Classics, Portuguese and Russian, but with much smaller numbers of universities. In contrast, the universities offering Spanish, French, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, BSL, Korean are dispersed relatively well throughout England, minimising cold spots, although it is notable that the North East has very poor provision apart from Japanese/Korean at York St John University (YSJ) and there is no provision at all in lower tariff universities in the South West.

Discussion

Summary of findings

RQ1 asked whether the cold spots for language degree provision have changed from 2023 to 2026 entry. Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024) showed that there were cold spots in the North, South West and East of England below the average entry tariff of 128 UCAS points. Three universities have stopped offering language degrees: Leicester, Middlesex and Northumbria. There are now two cold spots below 143 UCAS points with a third below 128 UCAS points. I argue that we should now be concerned about cold spots up to a UCAS tariff of 136 UCAS points, which is equivalent to AAB in A level grades.

RQ2 asked which languages are offered as degree programmes in English universities and which are the most widely-taught languages in English universities, by number of universities. Thirty-six languages were found to be offered as degree programmes. Ten of these are more widely-taught, being offered at twelve or more universities: Arabic, Chinese, Classics, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. I decided to analyse these, plus BSL and Korean.

RQ3 asked how well the most widely-taught languages are dispersed around England and where the regional cold spots in provision are located. The analysis showed that most languages have good geographic coverage, but Arabic, BSL, Japanese and Korean have cold spots. There is a cold spot in

the South West for BSL, Japanese and Korean because the University of Exeter does not offer them, illustrating the key role the University of Exeter plays in making languages available in the South West. There is a cold spot in the Midlands for Arabic; the only reason Japanese does not have this cold spot is because it is offered as part of the Chemistry with a Modern Language programme at Birmingham.

RQ4 asked, in relation to universities with lower entry tariffs, how well the most widely-taught languages are dispersed around England and where the regional cold spots are in provision. I took 'lower' to mean below 136 UCAS points, that is, below A level grades of AAB. The analysis showed notable clustering for German and Italian, each offered only by universities in the South East. The North East has very poor provision apart from Japanese/Korean at York St John and there are no lower tariff universities offering languages in the South West.

Comparison to British Academy maps

The 2020 joint report recommended the launch of the Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education and highlighted the need for data analysis 'to provide evidence on which recommendations would be based' (British Academy et al. 2020: 21). Five years on, this committee has been founded, co-chaired with the University Council for Languages (UCFL) (British Academy 2021) and cold spot maps for SHAPE subjects have been published (British Academy 2026). However, due to the way that HESA codes language programmes, the cold spots maps for SHAPE subjects produced by the British Academy (British Academy 2026) overestimate the cold spots for languages.

A comparison between my map for French and the latest British Academy map for French Studies (British Academy 2026 – which is for 2024 entry) shows that the British Academy map includes only 27 of the 38 universities that offer French degrees, excluding the Universities of Cambridge, East Anglia (UEA) and Exeter, for example, leading to apparent cold spots in the East and South West. This is because French is offered in each case under the umbrella programme of Modern Languages and so these universities do not appear under a 'French Studies' HESA code. This would also explain why the report that accompanies the maps claims that six universities closed French programmes between 2022 and 2023 (British Academy 2025: 24); however, three of the universities that show as closing on the cold spot maps (Birkbeck, Leicester and Portsmouth) in fact offered French as part of their Modern Languages degree in 2023.

For the same reason, the British Academy maps overestimate cold spots for Italian, showing only 12 of the relevant 19 universities; Arabic ('African and Middle Eastern Studies'), showing only 10 of the 13 universities; German ('German and Scandinavian Studies'), showing only 19 of the 28 universities; and Russian ('Russian and East European Studies'), showing only 9 of the 13 universities. On the other hand, my map for Classics differs from the British Academy map in the opposite direction; I include fewer universities (12 instead of 22) because I only include programmes where Ancient Greek and Latin are compulsory due to my focus on languages. This has a limited effect on cold spots, however: the only difference is that my map shows a small cold spot in the South East, which does not appear in the British Academy map because Ancient Greek/Latin are optional at the University of Kent.

My analysis therefore complements the British Academy maps by providing a more accurate picture for languages, making available maps for languages that do not exist as separate categories in the British Academy maps (BSL, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish) and highlighting the overestimation of cold spots for Arabic, French, German, Italian and Russian due to the way languages are coded in the HESA data.

Recommendations to sector leaders, government and universities

The finding from the first research question (RQ1) that there are now two cold spots up to 136 UCAS points (AAB at A level), and the details of the cold spots for individual languages (RQs 2-4) can be

used to make recommendations to sector leaders, government and universities on how to reverse the cold spots.

The 2020 joint report said 'some coordination and sharing of intelligence is essential in order […] for the availability of degrees in languages to be strategically spread across the UK to avoid "cold spots"' (British Academy et al. 2020: 14). With the support of UCFL, academics at the Universities of Aberdeen, Cardiff and Kent, where language programmes have been under threat, have run successful or partially successful campaigns using cold spots as an argument against closure. There have been unfortunately unsuccessful campaigns against closures at Leicester and Essex (except for French and Spanish, Godfrey-Evans 2026), and an ongoing campaign at Nottingham (Ayres-Bennett et al. 2025). However, even this level of 'coordination and sharing of intelligence' is not enough: the findings of this study (RQ1) show that closures continue and the cold spots are growing.

There have been multiple calls for more oversight of language degree provision (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages 2019, British Academy et al. 2020), with the Higher Education Policy Institute recommending oversight from 'government' (Bowler 2025: 10) and the British Academy recommending oversight from 'sector regulators' (British Academy 2025: 6). At present, universities are free to open and close programmes according to demand (and even when the number of students each university could accept was capped, this was not at the level of individual programmes; Hillman 2014). The findings of this study (RQs 2-4) do not suggest that we need a central body to mandate which languages are offered at each university. To a large extent, the free market is working: rather than having one language clustered in one part of the country and another in another, most languages are well-dispersed. There is also evidence of programmes opening where there is demand, for example Korean at Birkbeck, as well as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese at the University of Kent, after their successful campaign to avoid closure. This is good news, because it is hard to imagine universities accepting extensive external control over their language provision. It is also consistent with the 2020 joint report, which recommended coordination and sharing of intelligence 'while recognising that higher education is a market-driven sector' (British Academy et al. 2020: 14). Sector leaders such as the British Academy, UCFL, and Strategic Committee for Languages in Higher Education play an important role in raising awareness of cold spots and campaigning against them, while leaving the details of which languages to offer to individual universities.

On the other hand, the social justice issue of students at lower tariff universities not having access to language degrees – now up to a higher tariff of 136 UCAS points i.e. AAB at A level (RQ1) – cannot be addressed by universities and sector leaders alone. People might think that having higher tariff universities lower their tariffs is the solution, both in order to attract sufficient students to keep their own courses viable, and to widen access to students. But while having some thriving languages departments is clearly a good thing, doing so risks exacerbating the problem if the programmes at the lower tariff universities become unviable. In 2023, university vice chancellors warned that they would take fewer UK students as their fees did not cover the cost of teaching them (Fazackerley 2023). There was a turn-around, however, and in 2024, higher tariff universities accepted more UK students than in 2023 (Adams 2024) and were predicted to expand again in 2025 (Eccles and Smart 2025). When this pendulum swings back, and higher tariff universities start taking fewer UK students, there will be nowhere for students with lower grades to go if provision has closed at lower tariff universities.

A strong case, therefore, can be made for a targeted government fund for lower tariff universities (below 136 UCAS points) in cold spots. Figure 5 maps the change in cold spots that could be achieved if just three universities opened language courses. I chose to include Plymouth in the figure because I am aware they have a small amount of extra-curricular languages provision; Cumbria and the University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol are chosen in an illustrative fashion here purely because of their geographical position. Just one additional lower tariff university offering languages in the North, and two in the South West would eliminate cold spots for lower tariff universities.

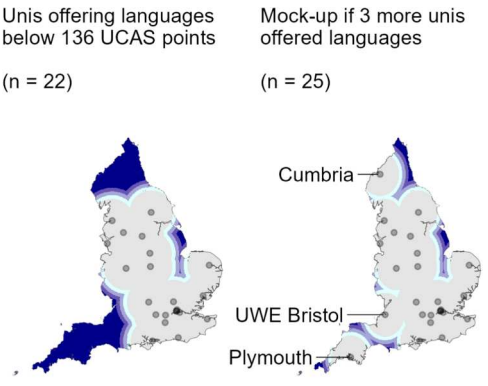


Figure 5. An illustration of how the cold spots could be eliminated.

The findings from this paper support calls for targeted funding (British Academy et al. 2020, British Academy 2025) rather than additional funding for languages more broadly (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages 2019, British Academy et al. 2020, Coussins 2025), going beyond previous literature in modelling how cold spots could be eradicated. This fund could eliminate the cold spots, improving access for students at lower tariff universities who are more likely to be from underrepresented groups such as disabled students, care leavers, mature students and from less-privileged socio-economic backgrounds. There is potential for a virtuous cycle here, as such a fund could remedy teacher shortages in the North and South West allowing more schools to offer languages to GCSE and A level, improving the pipeline into university (Koglbauer 2018, Tinsley and Doležal 2018).

If a government fund were available for lower tariff universities in cold spots to open language programmes, which languages should be offered? The findings of RQs 2-4 help us answer this question. The most popular languages across England, and therefore perhaps the most likely to have demand, are French and Spanish. This would seem the safest option for the university in the North West. The universities in the South West could also consider BSL, Japanese, or Korean, given the South West is a cold spot for these languages overall, not just among lower tariff universities. I expect there might be concern that, despite the cold spots, such programmes would not recruit sufficient students. In the co-authored chapter 'Sustainable language programme design and management at a widening participation university', Muradás-Taylor and Wicaksono (2024) detail how they tripled the number of students on language programmes. They argue that, in order to survive, language programmes must be attractive to students who have had little experience or a negative experience with languages at school, with a streamlined design that is viable financially, and offer one model for doing this, which could be emulated here.

In addition, the details of the cold spots for each language (RQs 2-4) provides a useful guide to any university either considering expanding their languages provision or having to campaign against closure, particularly: (i) a cold spot in the South West for BSL, Japanese and Korean; (ii) a cold spot in the Midlands for Arabic and Japanese (with the exception of the Chemistry with a Modern Language programme at Birmingham for Japanese); (iii) marked clustering in the South East for German and Italian for lower tariff universities; and (iv) no provision in the South West and North East for lower tariff universities apart from Japanese/Korean at York St John. In addition, comparing Figures 3 and 4 shows that all three universities that offer BSL and Korean degrees are lower tariff, so there may be scope for a higher tariff university to offer these. For Korean, which is a growing language – with the University of Birkbeck launching it for 2025 – there is a cold spot in the Midlands and the South outside of London.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that it took a large amount of detective work to determine which languages were offered in combination with which subjects at each university. Based on this experience, I have the following recommendations for universities offering languages:

1) Be clear about which languages can be combined with which subjects.
2) Ensure that searching for individual language names returns information about joint honours courses and umbrella programmes such as Modern Languages.
3) Include language modules in the list of compulsory modules in the course structure (with a choice of two levels or various languages as appropriate): applicants don't need to know that the modules are actually coded as compulsory, but they *do* need to know that they will study their language(s) in each year of their programme
4) If language teaching is delivered as part of an integrated language and culture/linguistics module, ensure that module titles reflect this.

Conclusion

Building on Muradás-Taylor and Taylor (2024), which showed cold spots for language degree provision for below average tariff universities in the North, South West and East of England, this paper analysed cold spots for the ten most widely-taught languages, Arabic, Chinese, Classics, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, plus BSL and Korean. These complement the British Academy SHAPE maps (British Academy 2025, 2026), making cold spot maps available for languages that do not exist as separate categories in the HESA data (BSL, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish) and providing a more accurate landscape for those languages that do (Arabic, Classics, German, French, Italian, Russian).

Generally good dispersion around England was found, with the most notable exception being the clustering of Italian and German in the South East for lower tariff universities. There does not seem, therefore, to be a need for a central body mandating which languages should be offered by each university. However, the tariff at which cold spots are a concern has risen to 136 UCAS points, equivalent to AAB at A level. A targeted government fund for language degrees at lower tariff universities in cold spots is recommended. A model was presented showing that if just three universities offered language degrees, this would eliminate the cold spots, improving access to language study. A cold spot analysis was carried out for each of the twelve most widely-taught languages, providing data for any university either considering expanding their languages provision or campaigning against closure.

Based on the difficulties I had finding information about which languages were offered at which universities in combination with which subject, recommendations were also made for improving the clarity of university websites in relation to language study.

I started this article by talking about the enthusiasm for informal language learning in the UK. We need to harness this enthusiasm in our schools and universities to reverse the decline that is currently leading to regional cold spots in provision that unfairly impact people who cannot move away for university due to caring responsibilities, disabilities, or for financial or other reasons. My hope is that the findings from this study can motivate a strategic government fund that could eliminate cold spots for lower tariff universities, making languages accessible to all.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study is either available within this article or derived from the following resources available in the public domain: The Guardian best UK universities 2026 – rankings (https://www.theguardian.com/education/ng-interactive/2025/sep/13/the-guardian-university-guide-2026-the-rankings) and HESA Unistats Dataset (https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/tools-and-downloads/unistats).

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Note

1. UCAS points are named after the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, the UK admissions service for higher education.

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Appendix

Languages and example degree programmes offered at English universities.

Language	University	Example programme
Akkadian	Oxford	Assyriology
Ancient Egyptian	Liverpool	Egyptology
	Oxford	
Ancient Greek	Royal Holloway	Greek
Arabic	Cambridge	Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Exeter	Arabic and Politics
	Kent	Modern Languages
	Leeds	Arabic, Islamic, Middle Eastern and North African Studies
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	Manchester	Arabic Studies
	Oxford	Arabic
	SOAS	
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	International Social and Political Studies
	Westminster	Arabic and Linguistics
	Manchester Metropolitan University	Business Management with a Modern Language
BSL	Lancashire	British Sign Language and Deaf Studies
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	Wolverhampton	British Sign Language (Interpreting)
Bulgarian	UCL	Bulgarian and East European Studies
Catalan	Liverpool	English with Catalan
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
Chinese	Bath	International Politics and Modern Languages
	Birmingham	Chemistry with a Modern Language
	Cambridge	Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
	Chester	Chinese and Global Affairs, Politics and International Relations
	De Montfort	Education Studies with Mandarin
	Durham	Chinese Studies
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	Greenwich	Languages and International Relations
	Kent	Modern Languages
	Lancashire	Chinese Studies
	Lancaster	Psychology and Languages
	Leeds	Chinese (Modern)
	Liverpool	English with Chinese
	LSE	Language, Culture and Society
	Manchester	Chinese Studies
	Manchester Metropolitan University	Business Management with a Modern Language
	Newcastle	Chinese Studies
	Oxford	Chinese
	Portsmouth	Modern Languages
	Sheffield	East Asian Studies
	SOAS	Chinese
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	International Social and Political Studies
	Warwick	Politics and International Studies with Chinese
	Westminster	Chinese and Linguistics
Classics	Birmingham	Classics
	Bristol	
	Cambridge	
	Durham	
	Exeter	
	Liverpool	
	Manchester	
	Nottingham	
	Oxford	

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Language	University	Example programme
	Reading	
	Royal Holloway	
	Warwick	
Czech/Slovak	Oxford	History and Czech
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	UCL	Czech (with Slovak) and East European Studies
Danish	UCL	Scandinavian Studies
Dutch	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	UCL	Dutch
Finnish	UCL	Finnish and East European Studies
French	Bath	International Management and Modern Languages (French)
	Birmingham	Modern Languages and English Literature
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Chester	Business Management and French
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Essex	Modern Languages
	Exeter	
	Greenwich	Languages and International Relations
	Hertfordshire	International Business with Modern Languages
	Imperial College	Biochemistry with French for Science
	Kent	Modern Languages
	KCL	Management & Modern Languages (French, German, Portuguese or Spanish)
	Lancaster	Psychology and Languages
	Leeds	French
	Liverpool	
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	LSE	Language, Culture and Society
	Manchester	French Studies
	Manchester Metropolitan University	French and Linguistics
	Newcastle	Linguistics with French
	Nottingham Trent	International Business (with French)
	Oxford	French
	Oxford Brookes	Modern Languages with Translation
	Portsmouth	Modern Languages
	Queen Mary	French and Linguistics
	Reading	Modern Languages and Business
	Royal Holloway	Modern Languages
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	Sheffield Hallam	International Business with French
	Southampton	Modern Languages (1 language: French, German or Spanish)
	Surrey	Business Management and French
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	French
	UEA	Modern Language
	Warwick	French Studies
	York	Linguistics with French
	Westminster	French and Linguistics
German	Bath	International Management and Modern Languages (German)
	Birmingham	Modern Languages and English Literature
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	Hertfordshire	International Business with Modern Languages
	Imperial College	Biochemistry with German for Science
	Kent	Modern Languages
	KCL	Management & Modern Languages (French, German, Portuguese or Spanish)
	Lancaster	Psychology and Languages
	Leeds	German

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Language	University	Example programme
	Liverpool	
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	LSE	Language, Culture and Society
	Manchester	German Studies
	Newcastle	Linguistics with German
	Oxford	German
	Portsmouth	Modern Languages
	Queen Mary	German and Linguistics
	Reading	Modern Languages and Business
	Royal Holloway	Modern Languages
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	Southampton	Modern Languages (1 language: French, German or Spanish)
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	German
	Warwick	German Studies
	York	Linguistics with German
Greek	Oxford	History and Modern Greek
Hebrew	Cambridge	Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
	Oxford	Hebrew
Hungarian	UCL	Hungarian and East European Studies
Icelandic	UCL	Icelandic
Italian	Bath	International Politics and Modern Languages
	Birmingham	Modern Languages and English Literature
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	Kent	
	Leeds	Italian
	Liverpool	Italian
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	Manchester	Italian Studies
	Oxford	History and Italian
	Reading	Modern Languages and Business
	Royal Holloway	Modern Languages
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	Italian
	Warwick	Italian Studies
	York	Linguistics with Italian
	Greenwich	Languages and International Relations
Japanese	Birmingham	Chemistry with a Modern Language
	Cambridge	Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
	Durham	Japanese Studies
	Hertfordshire	International Business with Modern Languages
	Kent	Modern Languages
	Lancashire	Japanese Studies
	Leeds	Japanese
	Manchester	Japanese Studies
	Manchester Metropolitan University	Business Management with a Modern Language
	Newcastle	Japanese Studies
	Oxford	Japanese
	Oxford Brookes	Modern Languages with Translation
	Sheffield	East Asian Studies
	SOAS	Japanese
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	International Social and Political Studies
	UEA	Modern Language
	York St John	Japanese, TESOL and Linguistics
Korean	Lancashire	Korean Studies
	Sheffield	East Asian Studies
	SOAS	Korean
	York St John	Korean, TESOL and Linguistics

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Language	University	Example programme
Latin	Royal Holloway	Latin
Norwegian	UCL	Scandinavian Studies
Persian	Oxford	Persian
Polish	London Metropolitan University	Translation
Polish	UCL	Polish and East European Studies
Portuguese	Birmingham	Modern Languages and English Literature
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	KCL	Management & Modern Languages (French, German, Portuguese or Spanish)
	Leeds	Modern Languages and History
	Liverpool	English with Portuguese
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	Manchester	Linguistics and Portuguese
	Newcastle	Modern Languages and Business Studies
	Oxford	History and Portuguese
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	UCL	International Social and Political Studies
Romanian	UCL	Romanian and East European Studies
Russian	Birmingham	Modern Languages and English Literature
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	Leeds	Modern Languages and History
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	LSE	Language, Culture and Society
	Manchester	Russian Studies
	Oxford	Russian
	Queen Mary	Russian and Linguistics
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	UCL	Russian Studies
Sanskrit	Oxford	Sanskrit
Serbian/ Croatian	UCL	Serbian/Croatian and East European Studies
Spanish	Bath	International Management and Modern Languages (Spanish)
	Birmingham	Modern Languages and Linguistics
	Bristol	Modern Languages
	Cambridge	History and Modern Languages
	Chester	Business Management and Spanish
	Durham	Modern Languages and Cultures
	Essex	Modern Languages
	Exeter	Modern Languages
	Greenwich	Languages and International Relations
	Hertfordshire	International Business with Modern Languages
	Imperial College	Biochemistry with Spanish for Science
	Kent	Modern Languages
	KCL	Management & Modern Languages (French, German, Portuguese or Spanish)
	Lancashire	TESOL and a Modern Language
	Lancaster	Psychology and Languages
	Leeds	Spanish
	Liverpool	English with Spanish
	London Metropolitan University	Translation
	LSE	Language, Culture and Society
	Manchester	Linguistics and Spanish
	Manchester Metropolitan University	Spanish and Linguistics
	Newcastle	Linguistics with Spanish
	Nottingham Trent	International Business (with Spanish)
	Oxford	Spanish
	Oxford Brookes	Modern Languages with Translation

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Language	University	Example programme
	Portsmouth	Modern Languages
	Queen Mary	Hispanic Studies and Linguistics
	Reading	Modern Languages and Business
	Royal Holloway	Modern Languages
	Sheffield	Business Management and Modern Languages and Cultures
	Sheffield Hallam	International Business with French
	Southampton	Modern Languages (1 language: French, German or Spanish)
	Surrey	Business Management and Spanish
	Sussex	International Relations with a Language
	UCL	Spanish and History of Art
	UEA	Modern Language
	Warwick	Hispanic Studies
	Westminster	Spanish and Linguistics
	York	Linguistics with Spanish
Swedish	UCL	Scandinavian Studies
Thai	Leeds	Thai Studies
Turkish	Oxford	Turkish
Ukrainian	UCL	Ukrainian and East European Studies

KCL = King's College London, LSE = The London School of Economics and Political Science, UEA = University of East Anglia, UCL = University College London, YSJ = York St John.