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AULC-UCML survey of Institution-Wide Language Provision in universities in the UK (2018-2019)

May 2019

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1. Introduction

This survey, carried out by members of the Association of University Language Communities[1] in the UK (AULC) and the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML), sought to obtain a snapshot of Institution-wide Language Provision (IWLP) activity across the Higher Education sector in the UK in the 2018-2019 academic year.

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

This is the seventh year in succession that the AULC-UCML survey has been conducted. As there is no other mechanism or agency in a position to compile this data[2], the AULC-UCML survey is of particular importance.

The surveys covering the period from 2012-2013 to 2016-2017 showed that IWLP has been an expanding area attracting increasing numbers of students in UK universities. This trend is the continuation of a pattern originally identified in earlier surveys (Marshall, 2001; Byrne and Abbott, 2007[3]). Although the overall figures for 2017-2018 showed a decrease in numbers, this appears to have been due to incomplete data collection.

Specific aims of the present survey were to:

- gauge availability and demand for different IWLP languages in UKHE and note changing trends
- obtain an overview of summative assessment used at CEFR levels A1, B1 and C1
- determine the nature of collaboration between IWLP and Modern Foreign language degree providers
- explore the provision of Less-Widely Taught Languages

2. Method

2.1. Surveying the sector

IWLP activity is rather difficult to survey as it is a somewhat diverse phenomenon. In most institutions, it includes accredited provision offered to non-specialist language learners; in others, it may only encompass provision which carries no academic credit. Many institutions offer both forms of provision, in some cases separately, in others in an integrated way. Activity may be managed from within a university language centre or it might be offered alongside degree programmes within a language department, and in others language centres and language departments may be intertwined. In some institutions, provision for external students (members of the public/lifelong learning students) may be incorporated as a part of the IWLP provision. The sector is also diverse in terms of the ranges of languages offered, with some institutions offering only three or four languages and others offering up to

[1] Previously 'Centres'
[2] Registrations for IWLP course units are not recorded in UCAS or HESA statistics.
[3] Through its members, AULC conducted surveys of non-specialist language learners in 2003/04 and three subsequent years, obtaining an increasing response rate each year largely as a result of methodological improvements.

twenty, and in the ways these languages are offered to students, e.g. length of courses, number of contact hours per course.

2.2. Questionnaire

For this year's survey, a simple electronic questionnaire was devised using *Online Surveys* (formerly *Bristol Online Surveys*). It was sent out in the third week of October 2018 to all AULC institutional representatives in the UK using the AULC members' list. It was also sent to contacts on the UCML contact list. Thus, the survey was sent to institutions with language centres and to those with IWLP activity in modern languages departments, even though in the latter case the activity might not be formally identified as IWLP.

2.3. Limitations

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

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

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

3. Results

By the end of the survey period, data had been collected from 55 institutions, 21 of which were Russell Group universities (out of 24). One institution[4] did not complete the questionnaire but submitted data on overall numbers; thus, only 54 questionnaires were actually fully analysed. Most of those who completed and submitted the questionnaire were directors of language centres or coordinators of IWLP programmes. However, there were also some responses from heads of academic departments and a small number of responses from programme administrators. This latter group responded to the part of the survey which asked for quantitative data, but most did not complete the entire questionnaire. The response rate in this survey was somewhat lower than of previous surveys and this means that comparison with the earlier figures is difficult.

[4] Not listed on page 16

3.1. Number of students on IWLP-type courses

The number of students reported as being enrolled on IWLP courses in this survey was very slightly higher than number reported in 2017-2018. The total number of enrolments reported for the end of October/early November period in the 2017-2018 academic year was 53,200 (56 HEIs reporting). The total number of enrolments reported for the end of October/early November period in the 2018-2019 academic year was 53,772 (55 HEIs[5] reporting). In the table below, for this academic year we can see a similar overall figure to that reported for 2017-2018. It is important to note, however, that year to year comparisons have to be treated cautiously because not only does the number of respondents vary from year to year, but the actual institutions which return data in the survey also vary slightly.

Table 1. Number of enrolments reported in the AULC-UMCL surveys

Year	Number	Number of HEIs[5] reporting
2012-2013	49,637	61
2013-2014	53,971	64
2014-2015	54,975	61
2015-2016	55,354	61
2016-2017	62,455	62
2017-2018	53,200	56
2018-2019	53,772	55

In the years prior to 2017-2018, the figures obtained were showing evidence of a gradual overall increase in IWLP enrolments at the national level. The drop in numbers which appears for 2017-2018 and also for this year is largely due to fewer respondents returning the questionnaire. It should be pointed out that once figures from universities which returned data on numbers last year, but which did not return data in this year's survey, were added to the total, an overall figure of 62,236 is obtained - this is almost the same as the figure obtained for 2016-2017 when 62 HEIs returned data. Thus, extrapolating in this way, it would not seem unreasonable to conclude that the overall numbers for IWLP appear to be stable.

3.2. Languages offered

Question 2 of this year's survey asked respondents to indicate which languages their HEI offered. Our survey data indicates that, whilst some institutions are only able to offer students three or four languages, more typically around nine different languages are available to study. Some of the larger universities are able to offer up to 20 languages. Figure 1 below shows the number of institutions offering each language, where the number of providers is four or greater.

[5] HEI = higher education institution

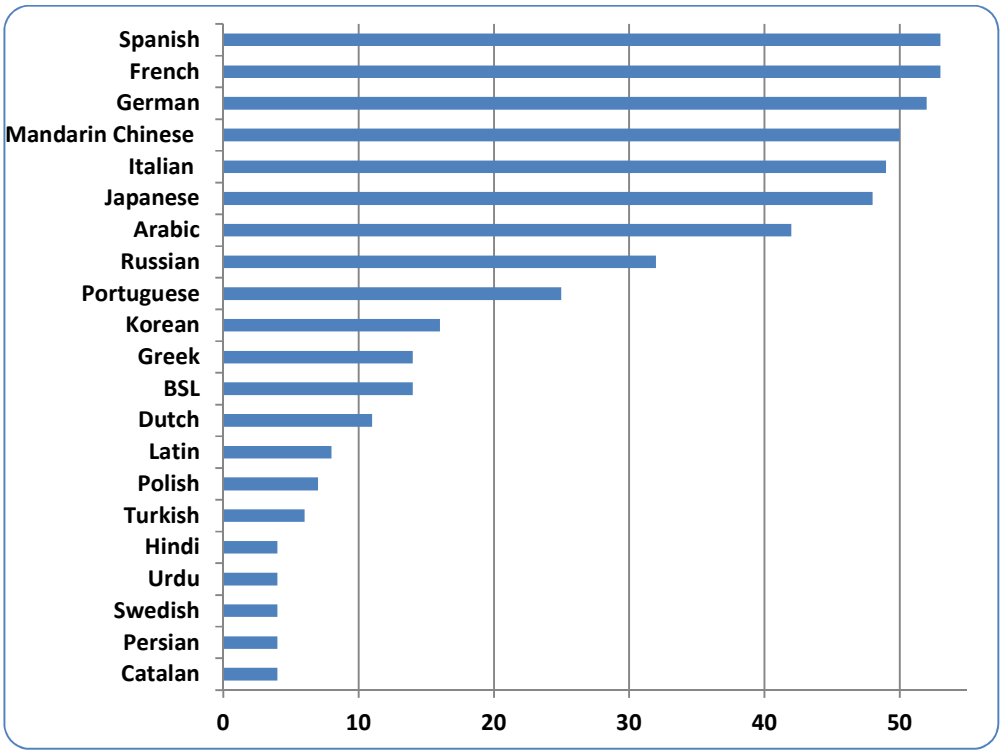

Figure 1. No. of HEIs surveyed offering different languages (no. reporting = 54)

The figure shows that provision is dominated by the three main western European languages. However, other widely-taught languages including Mandarin Chinese, Italian, Japanese and Arabic, are offered by the majority of HEIs, with more than half or around half of those surveyed also offering Russian and Portuguese respectively. The data also tell us that around just over 25% of the responding institutions offer classes in Korean, British Sign Language and Greek.

We asked respondents to rank the main languages according to their popularity among learners. The following chart reveals the relative levels of popularity based on an average of their ranked positions:

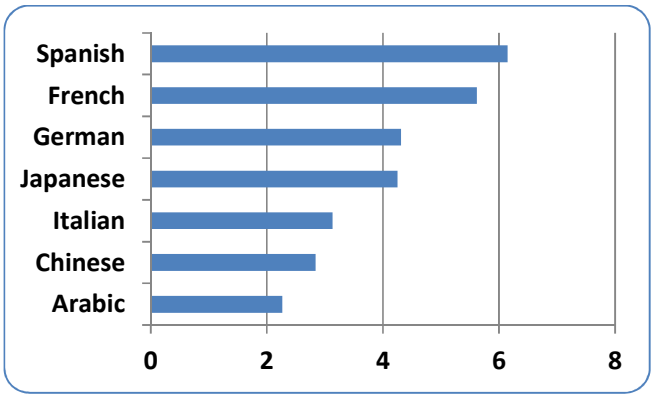

Figure 2. Main languages ranked according to popularity (no. of HEIs reporting)

As in previous surveys, the first three rankings are for Spanish, French and German. In contrast to last year, however, Mandarin Chinese is shown to be in sixth place, down from fourth last year. The relative popularity of Mandarin Chinese shown in Figure 2 may be an underestimation since the survey did not collect data on the numbers on UK students learning Mandarin Chinese on a non-accredited basis at the Confucius Institutes located on UK university campuses (n = 11).

3.3. Changing preferences for languages

The survey asked respondents to indicate which languages have experienced an increase in demand and which languages have experienced a decrease in demand at their institutions. Figure 3 below shows the six languages most reported as registering an increase in numbers of learners compared to last year. About one third of the respondents reported that there had been an increase in the number of students taking Japanese and Spanish. It is significant that for Japanese a marked increase in uptake had been reported in the three previous years surveyed, along with a marked uptake in German; however, in the case of the latter language the strong positive trend does not seem to have been maintained. In fact, in a subsequent question in this survey, German was reported as showing a decrease in uptake by more respondents than for any other language (Figure 4).

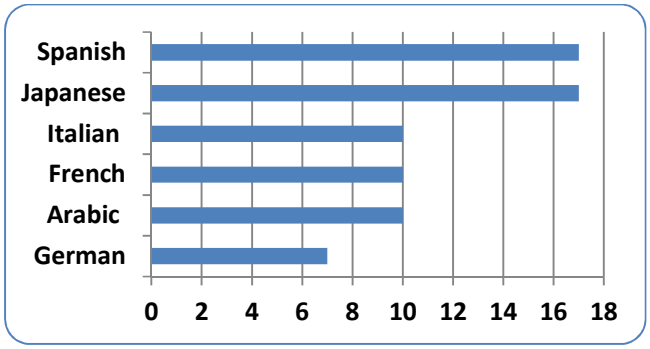

Figure 3. Languages which have shown an increase in student numbers (no. of HEIs reporting)

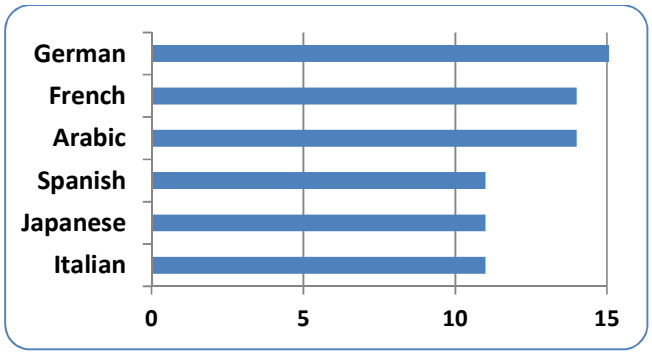

Figure 4. Languages which have shown a decrease in student numbers (no. of HEIs reporting)

3.4. Outlook for IWLP

As in previous surveys, respondents were asked how they felt about the prospects for non-specialist language learning at their institution. The overall pattern of responses gave a moderately optimistic picture with around 50% indicating that prospects were 'encouraging', 40% indicating that prospects were 'uncertain' and around 10% indicating that prospects were 'poor'. These responses contrast markedly to responses to the same questions asked last year, in which showed that 70% of respondents felt the prospects were 'encouraging' and that only 5% of respondents felt they were 'poor'.

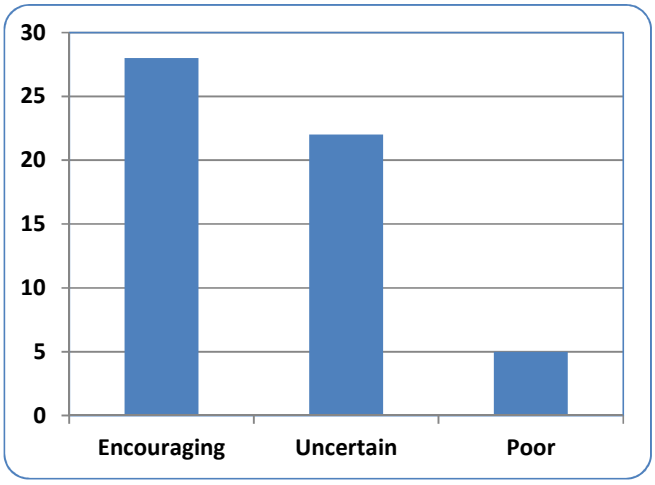

Figure 5. Prospects for IWLP (no. of responses)

This year's survey did not ask respondents to give reasons for their answers to this question, so it is not clear why there has been such a marked change in outlook. However, one of the reasons given in last year's survey for the prospects being 'poor' was:

- There are ongoing reviews and budget cuts, including decreasing administrative support for languages and discussions around cutting the number of languages offered.

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that a greater number of IWLP providers are now operating against this kind of background as many UK HEIs are facing more challenging times.

3.5. Assessment in IWLP

One of the important areas explored in this year's survey was summative assessment. Respondents were initially asked to indicate the modes of assessment that are employed to assess their students' language learning.

The figure below shows the number of responses (as a percentages of the total number of all responses) for five different modes of summative assessment. Respondents were able to indicate more than one mode of assessment. In the survey data were obtained separately for different levels of study (CEFR A1, CFER B1, CEFR C1), but since no significant differences were apparent, the information has been conflated.

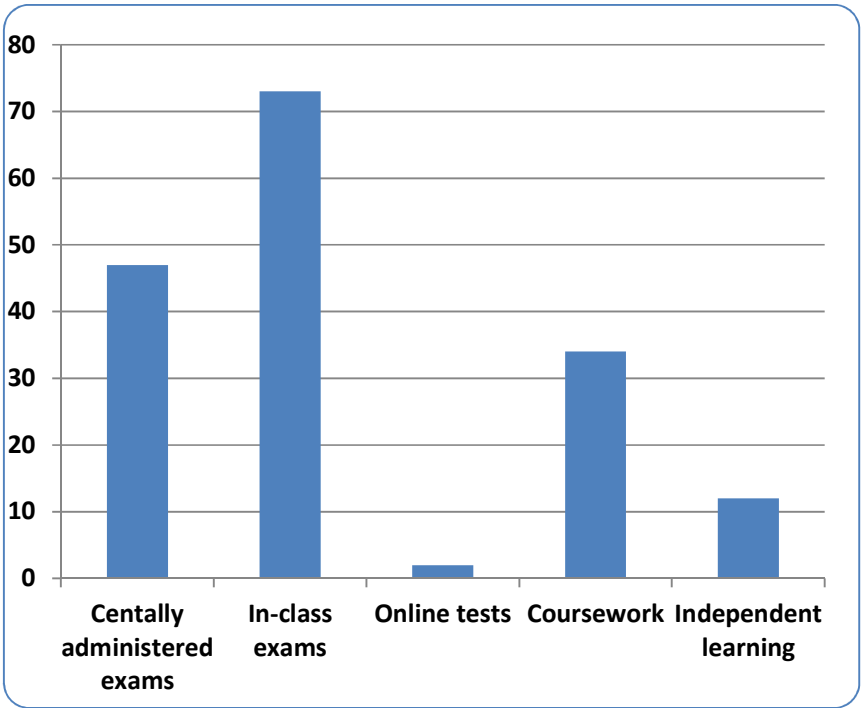

Figure 6. Modes of assessment as % of responses (A1, B1, C1 levels combined)

The data shows that most IWLP providers employ in-class examinations for summative assessment as the only means of assessment or in combination with other forms. In fact the majority of respondents (61%) indicated that they use a combination of different types of assessment, the most frequent combination being in-class examinations and centrally administered examinations. Where coursework and independent learning were employed, these were combined with either in-class examinations or centrally administered examinations, or both. Three respondents indicated that only centrally administered examinations were employed. One respondent indicated that online tests were used for summative assessment but this was in combination with in-class examinations, coursework and 'continuous oral and aural assessment'.

The survey asked respondents to indicate which aspects of language proficiency are summatively assessed at their institutions. The data presented in Figure 7 below shows that the productive skills of speaking and writing are assessed by 95% of respondents. Listening is assessed by 80% of respondents but this drops to around 70% for higher levels. The other difference that emerges is that explicit assessment of grammar is more common when lower levels of language are assessed (over 50% of respondents for A1 and B1 compared to 35% of respondents for C1).

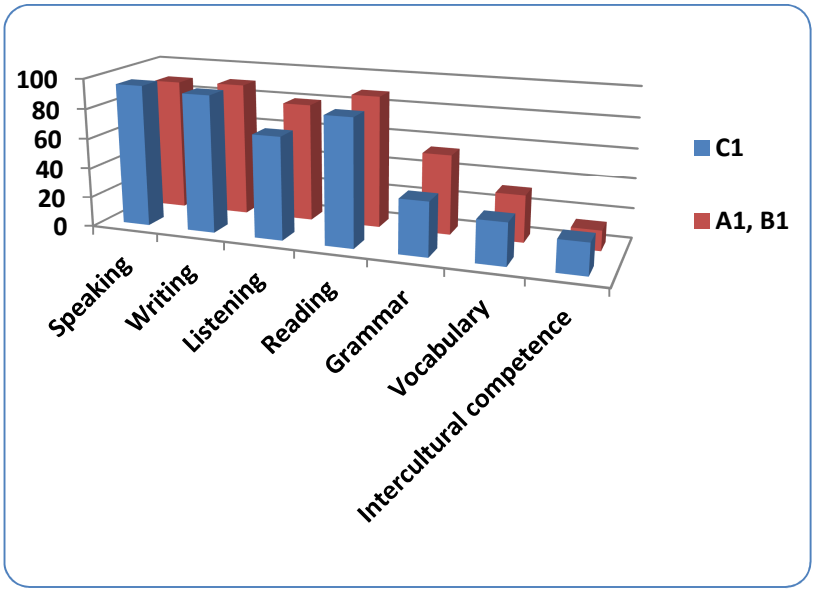

Figure 7. Discrete aspects of language proficiency assessed (% of respondents)

The subsequent question on assessment sought to elicit more information about the challenges and issues related to this area. The main themes that emerged from respondents' comments are presented in Figure 8 below.

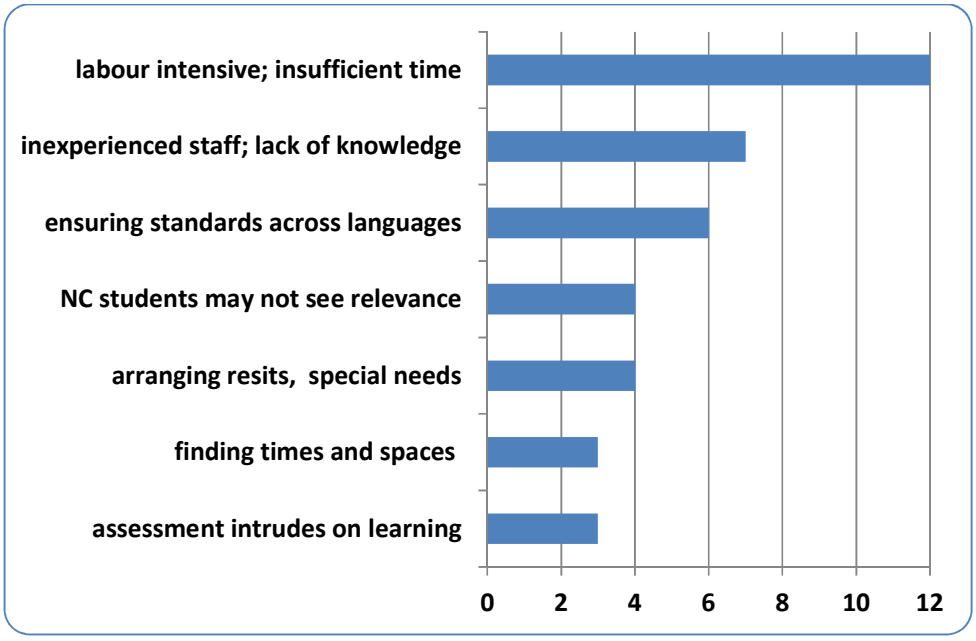

Figure 8. Assessment on IWLP programmes: main issues (no. of responses)

The dominant theme to emerge related to the labour-intensive nature of preparing assessments and marking them. Some respondents felt that insufficient time was made available for this. The results for this question might encourage members to consider ways of reducing the amount of assessment and the amount of time devoted to assessment. Other significant themes to emerge were i) the perception that some or all members of the teaching staff lacked experience and knowledge in this important area and ii) ensuring that the same standards were applied across languages presented a particular challenge. There were a number of comments suggesting that students who do not study for academic credit (NC = non-credit in Figure 7) do not see assessments as being relevant.

The final question in this section sought respondents' ideas on ways that they felt AULC could play a role in addressing some of the challenges which emerged in response to the previous question. The suggestions are summarised in Figure 9 below. The responses indicate that many members would welcome an initiative to share best practice in assessment, whether through workshops, online sharing or by making guidelines available.

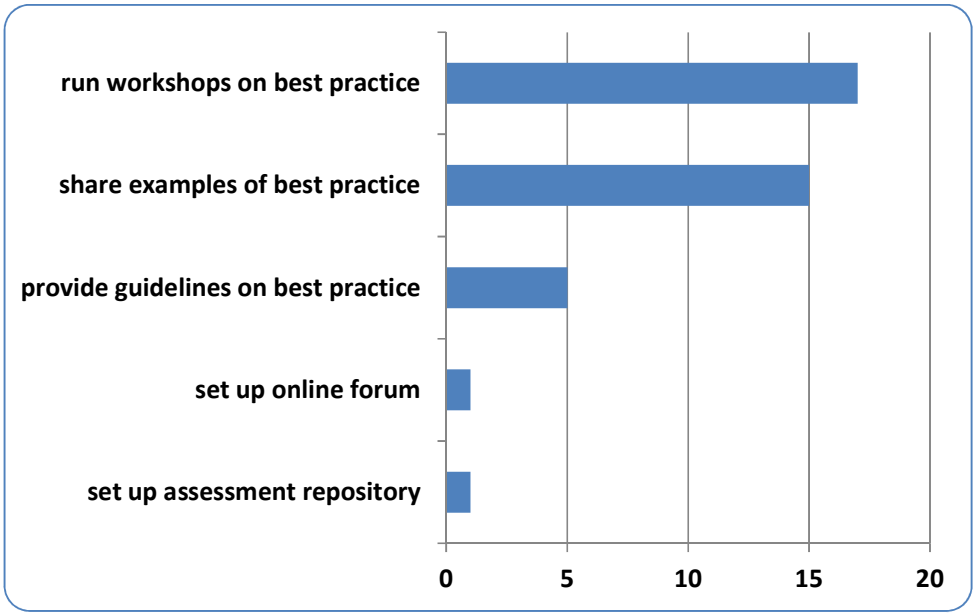

Figure 9. Ways AULC could help members in assessment (no. of responses)

3.6. Working with Modern Foreign Language (MFL) degree providers

In parallel with the Language Provision in UK MFL Departments Survey 2018, this year's survey sought to gauge the perception of IWLP staff regarding the extent of collaboration between IWLP and MFL departments.

The first question in this part of the survey sought to ascertain the ways in which IWLP teachers and those teaching on language degrees collaborate. The figure below shows the principle ways in which collaboration was reported to take place. Significant is the fact that over two thirds of respondents indicated that in their institutions, teachers are deployed across the two areas. Also interesting is that

around half of respondents indicated that teachers on IWLP courses and teachers on degree programmes work under a single line of management.

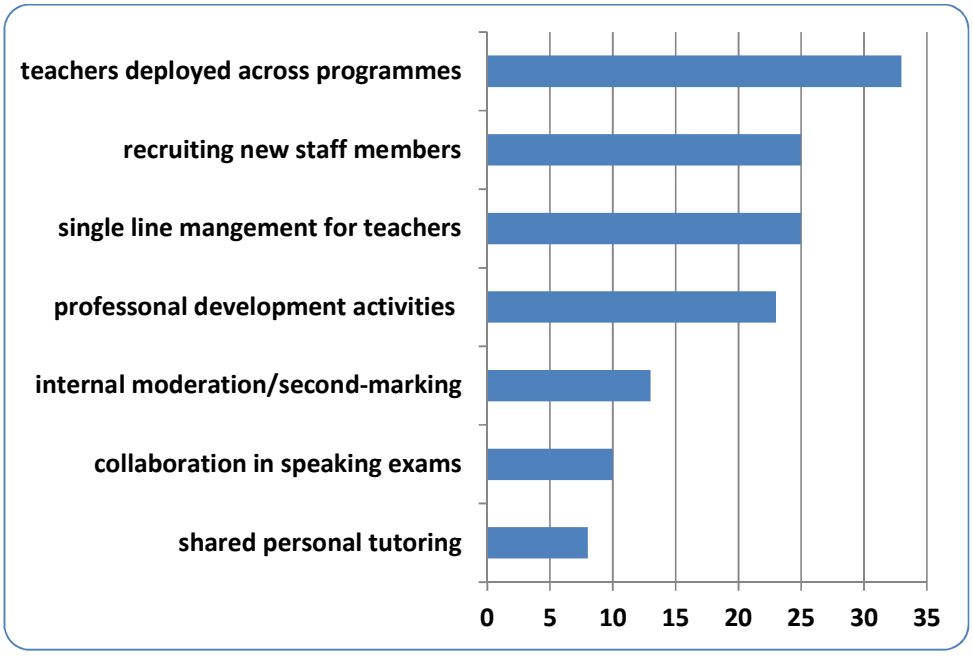

Figure 10. Types of collaboration between IWLP and language degree providers (no. of responses)

The benefits of collaboration between IWLP teachers and those teaching on language degrees appear to be quite numerous and suggests that there is much to be gained from IWLP and MFL departments working together more closely. These are shown in Figure 11 below. The most frequently cited benefit of collaboration was the sharing of good practice and ideas.

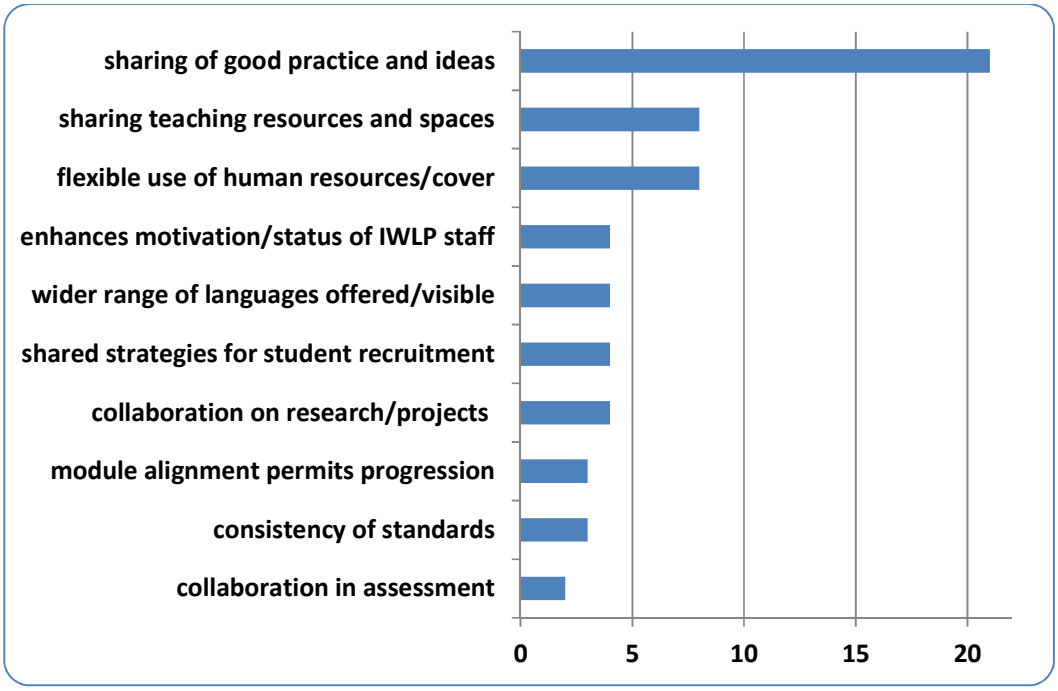

Figure 11. Benefits of MFL and IWLP collaboration (no. of responses)

A follow-up question sought to explore some of the impediments to collaboration. The major themes to emerge were the 'perceived low status of IWLP staff' and the fact that 'MFL programmes are afforded greater importance'.

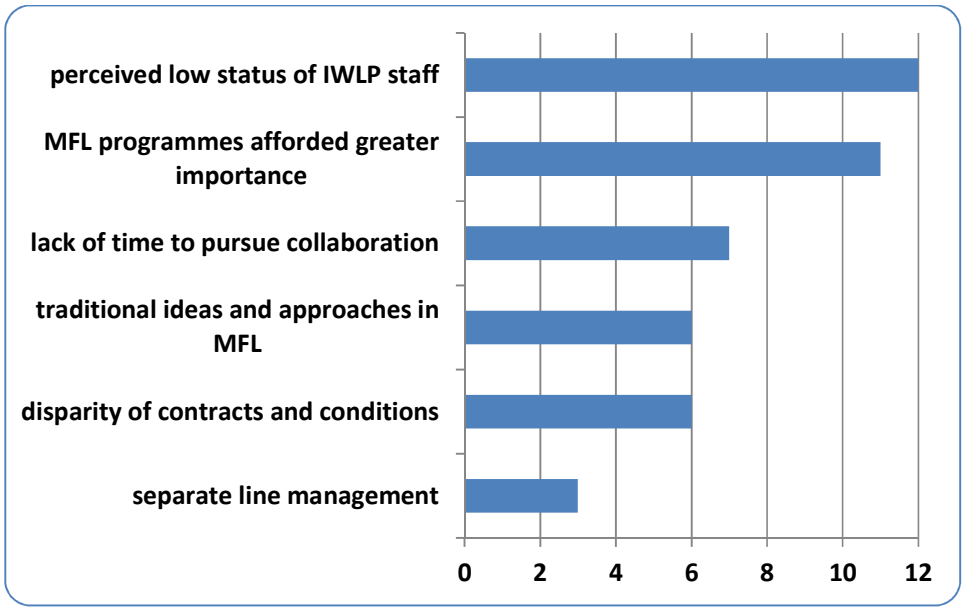

Figure 12. Impediments to MFL and IWLP collaboration (no. of responses)

3.7. Working with less-widely taught languages

The final section of this year's survey sought to obtain information on the area referred to as less-widely taught languages (LWTL), with the first question aiming to identify those languages commonly taught under this heading. The responses are shown in figure 13 below.

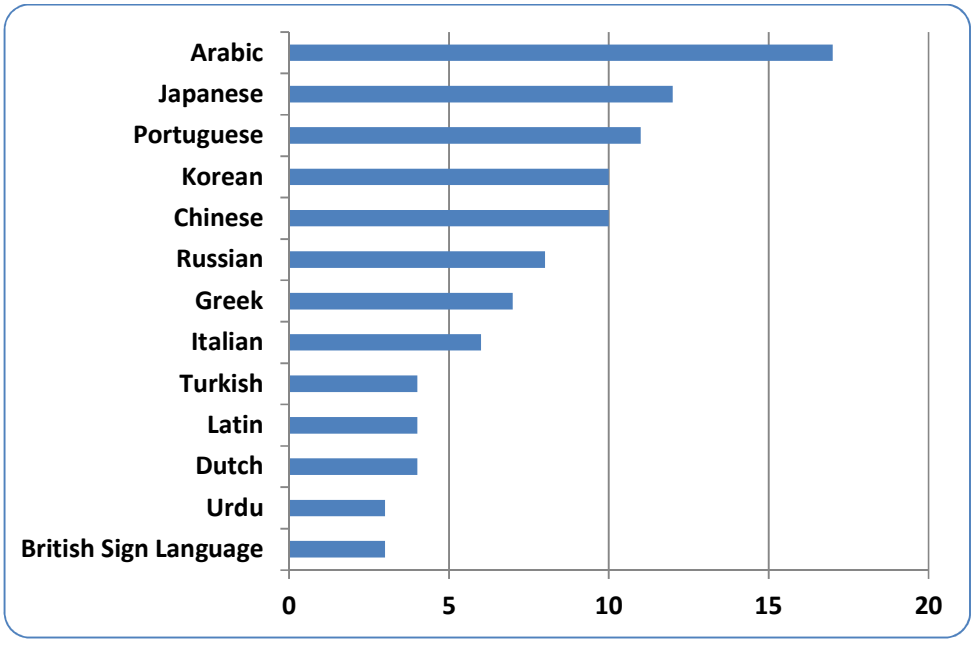

Figure 13. Languages taught under heading: less-widely taught languages (no. of responses)

Figure 13 needs to be interpreted with some caution since although these languages may be offered in many institutions, it is possible, or in some cases probable, that they are not classed as less-widely taught languages. This may explain why languages such as Chinese and Italian are found some way down the list in the graphic; in other words, they are offered fairly widely but in a small number of institutions they are classed as less-widely taught.

In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to list what they felt were the main challenges that institutions faced when running these courses. The figure below summarises the main themes that emerged from the survey data.

Figure 14. Main challenges facing those running LWTL courses (no. of responses)

It is quite clear that the principal challenge in this area is recruiting and retaining suitable teaching staff. By definition, for less-widely taught languages there is unlikely to be a ready pool of well-qualified and experienced teachers which providers can employ. Furthermore, again by definition, the amount of full-time work for a teacher in this area is likely to be limited so seeking work as a teacher of a less-widely taught language may be less attractive. Other significant problems are: the fact that supervisors may be unfamiliar with the languages they are asked to supervise; there is variable demand for courses and many courses are under threat in terms of viability; there are difficulties in finding external examiners; and many teachers in this area may feel professionally isolated.

The next question in the survey sought information about the kinds of students who choose to study a less-widely taught language. The responses are presented in the figure below:

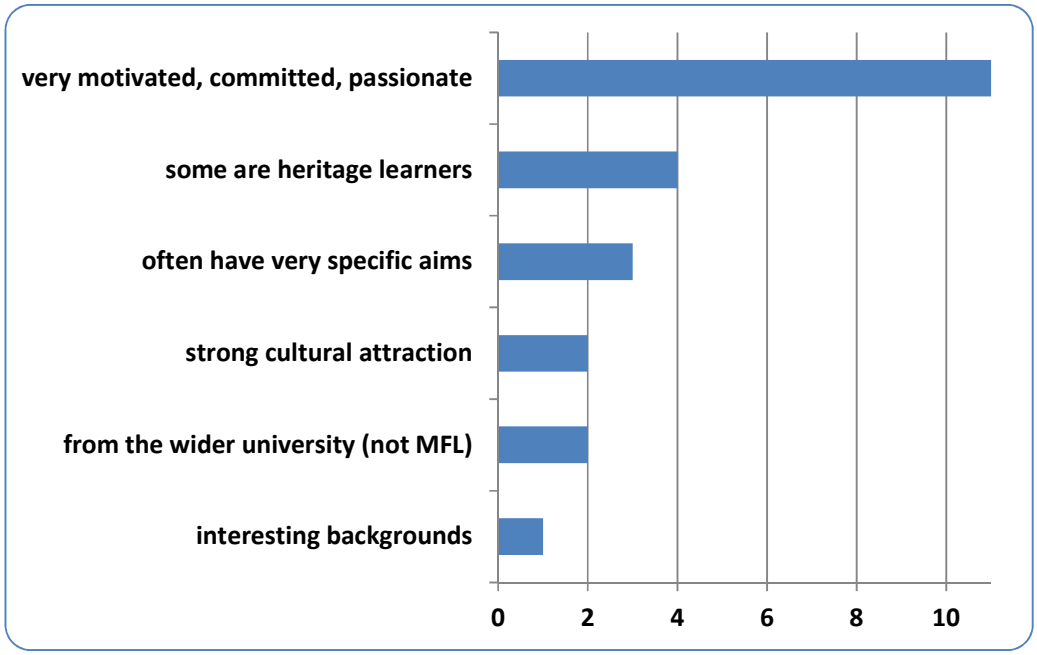

Figure 15. Characteristics of students who study LWTL (no. of responses)

Interestingly, there does seem to be a fairly widely-held perception that students who study LWTL are very motivated and more passionate and committed than the typical student. This may indeed be true, but it is interesting to speculate on why this should be so. Is it the case that less-widely taught languages tend to be unusual and more challenging for learners and therefore they attract the more able and harder working students? Is it that in a competitive employment market students wish to differentiate themselves and one way is by choosing to study a less common language? Is it because universities now offer study opportunities in a wider number of countries than was previously the case and students choose to study the relevant language as preparation if possible?

A final question on teaching less-widely taught languages asked whether respondents felt that a network group could be set up specifically for teachers who are working in this area. The results are presented in Figure 16 below.

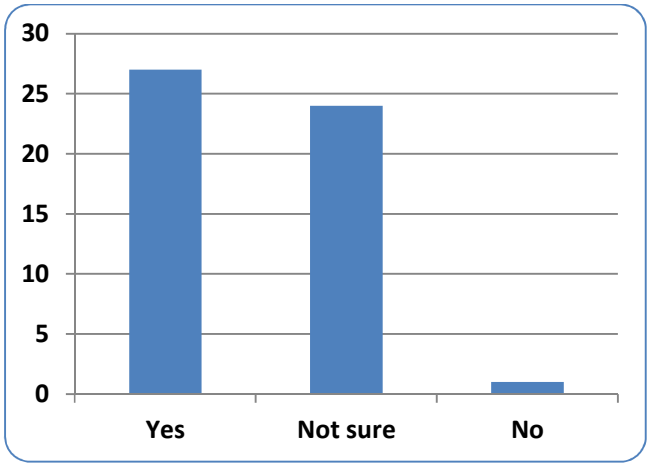

Figure 16. Would it be useful to set up a network group dedicated to the teaching of LWTL?

The figure shows that around half of the respondents in the survey thought that it would be useful to set up a network group or special interest group for teachers of less-widely taught languages.

4. Conclusion

The overall picture of IWLP student enrolment continues to be broadly positive across the Higher Education sector. However, this year there are signs of increased uncertainty facing many IWLP operations. The data obtained on assessment practices were encouraging in that most providers seem to be assessing in fairly holistic and similar ways. IWLP courses are mainly assessed through in-class assessments but some providers use their centrally timetabled examination procedures, and others use both. Assessment is one area where many respondents felt that the Association could help the membership through workshops and other means of sharing best practice. The benefits of working with MFL departments are diverse, and some form of collaboration seems to be the norm in around half of the sector. Given the benefits - as outlined by respondents - of collaboration between IWLP teachers and those teaching on MFL degrees, it would suggest that exploring ways of working towards greater collaboration is one area which the AULC can discuss with the University Council for Modern Languages (UCML). In some institutions, however, there are impediments to collaboration, one of these being that IWLP is or is perceived to be subordinate to MFL priorities. Courses in less-widely taught languages are challenging to run, but seem to attract particularly well-motivated students.

The survey has helped to identify ways in which the AULC can i) provide support to colleagues in terms of the design of assessment, sharing expertise possibly via the CPD Significant Interest Group and in identifying ways of reducing the amount of assessment to allow a keener focus on teaching and learning; and ii) support staff who teach LWTL. These will be prioritised as a result of the survey and members will be invited to consider how best to take these forward.

This survey was carried out on behalf of the Association of University Language Communities and the University Council of Modern Languages by Dr John Morley and Caroline Campbell.

5. References

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

AULC-UCML (2018) *AULC-UMLC survey of Institution-Wide Language Provision in universities in the UK* (2017-2018) http://www.aulc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AULC_UCML_2017-2018.pdf (accessed on 7th March 2019)

6. Appendix: List of participating institutions

Anglia Ruskin, University of
Aston University
Bath, University of
Birmingham, University of
Bournemouth University
Bristol, University of
Cambridge, University of
Cardiff University
Central Lancashire, University of
Coventry University
Durham University
East Anglia, University of
Edge Hill University
Essex, University of
Exeter, University of
Glasgow, University of
Hertfordshire, University of
Huddersfield, University of
Hull, University of
Imperial College London
Keele University
Kent University
King's College London
Lancaster University
Leeds Beckett University
Leeds, University of
Leicester, University of
Liverpool, University of
London School of Economics and Political Science
Loughborough University
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester, University of
Newcastle, University of
Northumbria, University of
Nottingham Trent University
Nottingham, University of
Oxford, University of
Portsmouth, University of
Queen's University Belfast
Reading, University of
Regent's University London
Roehampton, University of
Salford, University of
Sheffield, University of
Solent University
Southampton, University of
Surrey, University of
Sussex, University of
University of the Arts London
Warwick, University of
Westminster, University of
Wolverhampton, University of
Worcester, University of
York, University of