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# Language learning in the FE sector

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A survey with FE  
colleges in 2011

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## Introduction

Language learning has an important role to play in preparing individuals for employment within an increasingly globalised economy, as well as meeting business needs for an appropriately skilled and internationally aware workforce. Provision for languages in the FE sector is therefore of particular importance.

In spring 2011 CILT (now part of the CfBT Education Trust) carried out a survey of FE colleges throughout the UK and Sixth Form Colleges (Sixth Form Colleges in England, Wales & Northern Ireland only) to understand more about their provision for languages and how this is developing in relation to changes affecting this sector of education. Since we completed the survey, the CBI has published its Education and Skills Survey for 2011<sup>1</sup> emphasising how much language skills are needed in order to operate effectively in the global economy (CBI 2011, p.45).

*Staff who can communicate at least conversationally – combined with an understanding of the local culture – can make all the difference in the conduct of business, consolidating relationships with existing suppliers and customers and opening the way to new contacts.*

The survey is the latest of a series of recent publications by the CBI and others that have consistently highlighted the vocational relevance of language learning. A recent report published by the European Commission (2011)<sup>2</sup> has also highlighted the importance of language skills for training and work opportunities within the European Union and the mismatch of supply and demand in language skills for work

The survey was carried out with the support of the Association of Colleges and colleagues at CILT Cymru, SCILT (Scotland) and Northern Ireland CILT.

The findings are based on responses received from 98 colleges from across the UK, representing a response rate of 23%.

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<sup>1</sup> CBI. (2011). *Building for growth: Business priorities for education and skills*. [www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/20110509-building-for-growth.pdf](http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/20110509-building-for-growth.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. (2011). *Languages for Jobs: providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market*. [http://www.real-association.eu/sites/default/files/report\\_languages\\_for\\_jobs.pdf](http://www.real-association.eu/sites/default/files/report_languages_for_jobs.pdf)

### Summary findings

Our findings show that the bulk of language provision in the FE sector is aimed at Advanced level students, with languages being delivered mainly in Sixth Form colleges or FE colleges with Sixth Forms (Sixth Form relates to England, Wales & Northern Ireland only). Only a small number of colleges are targeting learners on vocational courses and there is very little language learning at all going on in general FE colleges without a Sixth Form. Language learning post 16 continues to focus on the more 'specialised', academic pathway to language learning and there is very little connection being made between the alternative pathway of language learning and skills for the world of work. Where this does exist, it is likely to be Spanish in the context of Travel and Tourism courses. Such a limited language curriculum is an inadequate response to labour market needs since as the CBI highlights, manufacturing and finance are the sectors of the economy where language skills are most needed by employers, and France and Germany are the most important export markets for our goods.

One in five colleges with languages provision that previously offered languages in conjunction with vocational courses now no longer do so. The reasons attributed include both funding and structural constraints and a lack of student demand.

Lack of demand is also making even the traditional offer of A level courses vulnerable, as fewer students come through from secondary schools wanting to study French or German. Teachers are pessimistic about the opportunities for their continuing professional development.

There is little evidence of colleges taking advantage of EU funding for work-related international links specifically involving languages.

### Similarities and differences across the UK

Although there are some differences in systems and policies across the four nations, responses to our survey from colleges across the UK tell a very similar story.

At the time of survey, there were 43 FE colleges in Scotland, of which 12 (28%) provided a response. Scotland has no comparable Sixth Form provision which could be included in the survey and this was a major difference. The most recently available data from the Scottish Qualifications Authority (2011) show that modern language provision in the Scottish further education sector has declined dramatically<sup>3</sup>. Of the 12 Scottish FE colleges that responded to the CILT survey, nine reported providing language courses and six currently link languages with other subjects or qualifications. These include Travel and Tourism, Business Studies, Fashion, Merchandising and Law. Qualifications are predominantly for NQs, HND, HNC and Higher and Higher Advanced. International links are in place in four out of the five colleges who answered the relevant questions and three of these have made such links with the help of EU funding.

Of the 23 FE colleges in Wales, seven responded to the survey. All of these reported providing language courses but only one reported linking languages with other subjects or qualifications. Following the main trend of the findings, most language courses offered are GCSE, A level and AS level. Languages are also offered as part of the Welsh Baccalaureate (WBQ) which may be Welsh or

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<sup>3</sup> Doughty, H. (2011). La Grande Illusion: Why Scottish further education has failed to grasp the potential of modern languages. In *Scottish Languages Review, Issue 23, Spring 2011*. University of Strathclyde. [http://www.strath.ac.uk/media/faculties/hass/scilt/slr/issues/23/23-2\\_Doughty.pdf](http://www.strath.ac.uk/media/faculties/hass/scilt/slr/issues/23/23-2_Doughty.pdf)

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another MFL. The WBQ is not mandatory and although every FE colleges offer it, not all offer it to all students – e.g. it could be offered to hairdressing students but not construction students. Few international links were reported from colleges in Wales, with only one college reporting positively.

In Northern Ireland, four general FE colleges (without Sixth Form centres) responded to the survey. Of these, three reported offering languages, two of which linked languages to other subjects or qualifications. In contrast to the other nations, the most popular language qualification offered was Asset Languages. Two colleges reported having international links and one of these had received funding from the Leonardo Programme.

### Detailed findings

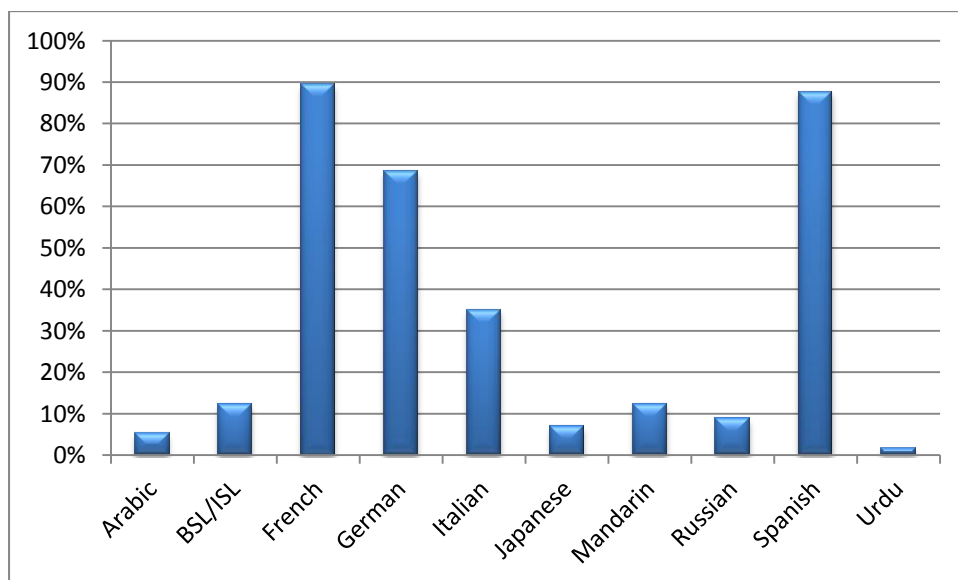
#### Most language provision is offered in colleges with Sixth Form provision

More than four out of five colleges responding to the survey (83%) provide language courses; the remaining colleges used to provide language teaching but no longer do so. In total, more than 350 different courses were offered, covering different languages, levels and types of accreditation. Sixth Form colleges, or FE colleges with Sixth Form provision, were much more likely to offer language courses than general FE colleges. Note that this form of provision is only prevalent in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Because of the emphasis on Sixth Form provision, language courses tend to be offered as stand-alone language courses such as A level, rather than courses offered as part of a wider vocational programme such as business studies or hospitality. 83% of provision is stand-alone. However, one in three of the colleges who responded to the survey offer some courses in French, German, Spanish or Italian linked to other programmes. 21% of the colleges reported having stopped offering language courses which link to other subjects, while 49% never did so.

#### French, Spanish, German and Italian are the languages most commonly offered

Altogether 57 colleges provided data on which languages are offered. As shown in the bar chart below, French, Spanish, and German predominate across all four nations. French and Spanish are offered in 88% of the colleges and German is offered by about two thirds of the colleges, and Italian by just above one third. Other languages offered include Mandarin, Russian, Sign Languages, Japanese, Arabic and Urdu. Irish, Swedish, Polish and Welsh were also reported as being offered, although by a significantly smaller number of colleges.

#### Which languages do colleges offer?



As to the different trends among languages, Arabic, Italian, Mandarin and Spanish are all growing in the FE sector, while French, German, Russian and British/Irish Sign Language are decreasing. In particular, French and German have suffered falls in numbers, as a consequence of declining numbers taking these languages to GCSE or equivalent in secondary schools. More than half of the colleges which responded to the relevant question had seen reduced demand for German, and more than one in three had experienced reduced take up of French.

### **A level and AS are the courses most commonly offered**

Around two thirds of the provision logged is Sixth Form A level options in the languages referred to above, though Japanese is only offered as Asset Languages. BSL/ISL have their own separate awards, and Arabic is offered as a non-accredited course. The remaining provision is for a range of accredited and non accredited courses, including GCSE, the International Baccalaureate, NVQ language units (Levels 1-2), Asset Languages (various levels), ABC ( Entry level and Level 1) and in Scotland, NQs, HND, HNC and Highers.

### **Learner numbers are worryingly low for some courses (all nations) and 37% of courses are funded via learner-responsive funding <sup>4</sup>(England only)**

For all nations nearly half the courses logged (47%) have fewer than 10 students enrolled, and 22% have fewer than 5 students. German is particularly affected by low enrolment, with 41% of German courses having fewer than 5 students in the group. In England only 37% of courses are funded via learner-responsive funding and only 10% are run as entitlement courses where learners are able to take an additional option not directly related to their course. This used to be an important source of funding for languages in FE in England. There are a particularly low number of German courses run as entitlement courses

### **Travel and tourism is the subject area most likely to include a language**

Our survey particularly wanted to identify provision for vocationally-oriented language learning. As we found in our previous 2006 survey of FE vocational language provision<sup>5</sup>, there is very little provision for studying languages within the context of a vocational course. Where this does exist, as before, it is likely to be Spanish as part of a Travel and Tourism programme – 10 colleges said they offered this and one Scottish college offered French and German. In England and Wales NVQ was the usual form of accreditation, commonly at level 1 but also at level 2. ABC entry level was also offered. Just three colleges offered languages in association with Business Studies courses; in two out of the three cases once again this was Spanish. One college offered Swedish in combination with Health and Social Care and another offered entry level French as part of a BTEC in Art and Design. Other courses mentioned which offered a language module were courses in Fashion, Merchandising, Legal Services, Retail, and the International and Welsh Baccalaureates. In Scotland, languages were linked to some Business Studies, Fashion, Merchandising and Law courses.

### **Declining provision is due to fewer language students coming in from secondary schools**

In England and Wales, Colleges which had seen a decline in take up or provision for Sixth Form language courses such as A level overwhelmingly said the reason for this was the knock-on effect of declining provision in secondary schools. This was particularly affecting provision for German. Other respondents said it was due to the lack of funding.

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<sup>4</sup> Demand-led, public funding provided by the [Skills Funding Agency](#) is based on what is thought to be needed to raise skills at local level. In many local areas, languages are not seen as a priority and may not therefore be eligible for public funding

<sup>5</sup> CILT (2006). Vocationally-related language learning in further education.

[http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research\\_and\\_statistics/language\\_trends\\_surveys/further\\_education.aspx](http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/language_trends_surveys/further_education.aspx)

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Colleges which had seen a decline in languages linked to other programmes said this was due to funding changes, course closures or relocations, or course leaders not understanding the relevance of languages in vocational courses or perhaps looking for easier options. Two colleges said that programmes such as the International Baccalaureate were being phased out and that this had led to declining numbers taking languages. One college said the decline was due to an increased emphasis on English for Speakers of Other Languages and the language needs of overseas students.

### Some optimism where language provision is increasing

Although the overall picture is one of shrinking provision, some courses in some colleges have seen increasing numbers. There was little consensus about the reasons behind these increases and appear to be based on factors unique to individual institutions rather than on national trends. For example one respondent felt that languages were being seen as more important generally and another put their institutions' increase down to a larger pool from increased numbers taking the Travel and Tourism course generally. A small number of respondents noted an increase in the importance given to languages for university entry and subsequent employability and one felt in particular that there was a resurgence of interest in French. Where language take-up as part of other courses had increased, NVQ was cited as a positive factor which had encouraged this.

#### Good practice case study

##### **Vocational language training for Spanish work placements – Leeds City College**

Travel and Tourism students receive 60 hours of Spanish learning in preparation for work placements in Spain. Forming part of a Leonardo da Vinci-funded programme learners take on a number of jobs in Spain in the tourism, hospitality and holiday entertainment arena. They gain an NVQ level 1 qualification in Spanish as well as invaluable work experience and confidence.

*'Students go into the selection process with more confidence and their ability to immediately hit the ground running on arrival in Majorca gives them even greater value to the host employers.'* (Quote from teacher)

### International links and exchanges tend to be 'cultural' rather than work-related

45 out of 58 institutions who responded to the relevant question (78%) said their staff or students had taken part in mobility programmes overseas; though very few had taken advantage of EU funding to finance such initiatives. International experiences were more commonly available in Sixth Form Colleges than in general FE colleges. These tended to take the traditional form of school exchanges (nine had links with France and a smaller number with Spain, Germany and Belgium) or otherwise cultural trips to Paris, Barcelona and other destinations. Nine colleges organised such trips to Spain for students, eight to France, three to Germany, one to Belgium and one to Morocco. These appear to be largely self-funded by the students. Other colleges were involved in mobility programmes for staff – either incoming or outgoing – or incoming English language students.

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Just two colleges said they offered work experience abroad for students; however, others offered international experiences linked to Health and Social Care (Malta, Sweden), Hospitality and Tourism (Florida), Sports Studies (Cyprus), Engineering and the Built Environment (Germany), Computing and Multi Media (Rome), Music (Italy), and Geography/Geology (Iceland). Two colleges were involved in exchanges with France based on film studies, and four were taking part in Comenius multinational projects funded through the EU.

Colleges used a wide range of funding sources including Leonardo, Comenius, Erasmus and the Jules Verne programme; however the number of colleges doing so was low. In general, most overseas mobility for languages was self-funded rather than through EU programmes.

### **Poor outlook for CPD for teachers**

Respondents were generally pessimistic about the opportunities that would be available for their continuing professional development in the current funding climate. Training that focussed on getting language courses funded or making the case for languages within their institutions was seen as almost as important as CPD to improve teaching and learning. However, the most preferred topic for CPD was improving success rates and adding value in language courses. A number of respondents also mentioned topics linked to the use of ICT for language learning, including the use of Virtual Learning Environments.

Face-to-face training was preferred by respondents, either in college with a visiting trainer or externally-provided. 23 out of 53 respondents who answered the question relating to CPD (43%) said they would be unlikely to use an e-forum for professional development, and 15 respondents (28%) said they would not use any form of online training.



### Implications and future outlook

Given how much our economy depends on international contacts, it is of concern that only a small number of colleges are providing languages to students on vocational courses. For these learners a language element, even at a relatively low level, would not only provide an additional practical skill to offer future employers, but would contribute to their general learning and international awareness. Managers need considerable vision and drive to overcome the obstacles to integrating languages into vocational courses yet such a low level of integration between languages and vocational subject areas cannot be healthy when so many young people will be challenged to operate in international environments during their working life. As Alison Wolf notes in her Review of Vocational Education<sup>6</sup>, *'Conventional academic study encompasses only part of what the labour market values and demands: vocational education can offer different content, different skills, different forms of teaching,'* we believe that this is especially true where language study is concerned; there is vast potential for many more young people to benefit from and enjoy learning a language as an element of their vocational course. **We need a policy steer to kick start a movement to include languages element in all vocational courses where there is an international element. Leaders in FE could increase mobility opportunities in their institutions via such schemes as Leonardo, Comenius, Erasmus and the Jules Verne programme. This would help to motivate and inspire young people to learn languages, increase their intercultural understanding and improve their employability skills.**

The decline in the number of students studying French and German to GCSE (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), Standard Grade (Scotland) or equivalent in secondary school is clearly impacting on colleges' ability to maintaining viable advanced level provision. For many managers safeguarding these advanced level courses may be more of a priority than extending language provision to new groups of learners. In England, the introduction of the English Baccalaureate, which rewards students who take subjects which are academically demanding like languages, may strengthen numbers within a few years. In addition, the Russell Group of universities has called on schools to improve the advice they give to students about which A level subjects give them the most advantages when it comes to applying for university. Languages are cited as one of the subjects which should be recommended and this too should help to improve uptake. The jobs market for languages is complex and there are many misconceptions about the opportunities available. With the responsibility for careers advice for young people now being transferred to schools, **we should ensure that students have access to the best advice on how languages can help them in their future careers.**

*One of the best ways to keep your options open at university is to choose your advanced level subjects from the list of facilitating subjects.* (Informed Choices<sup>7</sup>, Russell Group 2011, p.23)

As the labour market becomes increasingly international, many FE colleges are leading the way in providing more international experiences for learners, including innovative work-related international links which take advantage of EU funding. Yet our findings show that languages departments tend to stick to traditional forms of exchange with overseas institutions rather than exploiting the potential of funding streams such as Leonardo to build links across the college between employability, international experience and language study. There is immense potential to do more of this, and this would respond to employers' dissatisfaction with college leavers'

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<sup>6</sup> Review of Vocational Education - The Wolf Report. (2011).

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00031-2011>

<sup>7</sup> Russell Group. (2011). *Informed choices: a Russell Group guide to making choices about post 16 education.*

<http://russellgroup.org/Informed%20Choices%20final.pdf>

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international business awareness, as reported in CBI employer surveys, as well as providing a practical demonstration of the relevance of language skills across a wider range of vocational areas. **Language departments need to be positioned more centrally with respect to international developments within the college.**

In the context where teachers in FE in all nation states are recommended or even required to undertake professional development (teachers in FE in England are required to undertake 30 hours of professional development per year and to record it with their professional body the IfL [[Institute for Learning](#)]), it is of concern that respondents are so much more pessimistic about what opportunities are likely to be available. In their 2011 report 'Modern languages: achievement and challenge' Ofsted inspectors were generally very positive about standards of language teaching in the small sample of English colleges they inspected during 2009-10. However, they highlighted the fact that fewer students were following the traditional GCSE to A level route, and that matching learning to different ability groups was sometimes underdeveloped. They also noted that information and learning technology was rarely used effectively to improve learners' progress and that assessment of learning was weak in some cases. It is clear that language teachers in this sector are facing challenges in a changing environment, and that they will need continuing professional development not only to keep pace with the needs of their mainstream learners, but to enable them to be more proactive in linking languages to the world of work. **College managers should ensure that language teachers have access to genuine subject-specific opportunities for CPD.**

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H. Doughty. (2011). La Grande Illusion: Why Scottish further education has failed to grasp the potential of modern languages. *Scottish Languages Review*, Issue 23, Spring 2011.

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