Report on Granular Trends in Modern Languages in UCAS Admissions Data, 2012-18

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About this Document

This report has been produced by Dr Peter Webster of Webster Research and Consulting Ltd. on behalf of the University Council of Modern Languages, who purchased the UCAS data jointly with the British Academy.

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Report on Granular Trends in Modern Languages in UCAS Admissions Data, 2012-18

The prevailing narrative in UK higher education is one of decline in modern languages, and UCAS statistics are frequently used in media reports to underpin that narrative, most recently in an article in the *Times Higher* in February.[1] The UCML-British Academy Granularity Project seeks to nuance this narrative, and to look beyond summary data for the two top-level JACS codes, R and T, traditionally associated with modern languages (this is the publicly available data) by instead looking at degree titles that include a language.

To this end, in May 2021 Webster Research and Consulting was commissioned by the UCML to conduct an in-depth analysis of a dataset for the period 2012-18, jointly purchased from UCAS by the UCML and the British Academy. The data reported on courses in the four nations of the UK that were assigned to the principal language groups (JACS codes R (European languages, literature and related) and T (Non-European languages, literature and related)). As well as these, it included courses with titles containing a specific modern language or another related keyword. The data enabled analyses of three metric indicators: (i) the *numbers of courses* available in each application cycle; (ii) the numbers of *applications* to each course in each year; and (iii) *acceptances* onto each course.

It is important to note that this data, specifically about admissions, provides no indication about trends in language learning in institution-wide language programmes.

The resulting report and its appendices may not be published, due to the restrictions in force on the republication of the data required by UCAS. What follows is adapted from the report's summary and recommendations and conforms to UCAS specifications.

When viewed in aggregate, all three main indicators (courses, applications and acceptances) all declined over the 2012-8 period; the number of courses fell by 12%, applications by 17%, and acceptances by 13%. The overall picture, then, is one of a gradual decline in the total incidence of language study. Yet, in 2018 there were still 44,465 applications to study languages in some form, and 7,470 acceptances.

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1 'Languages decline sees numbers drop to zero at UK universities', *Times Higher Education*, at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/languages-decline-sees-numbers-drop-zero-ukuniversities; see also Martin McQuillan, 'Global Britain's language barrier', *The New European*, March 11-17, 2021.

There were variations among different types of HEI (as denoted by membership of one or other mission group). While the overall number of courses on offer fell, it fell by less in the Russell Group institutions, such that the proportion of the total offer located in those institutions rose (from 44% in 2012 to 48% in 2018). Applications fell in each mission group category, but faster among University Alliance institutions, in pre-92 HEIs outside the Russell Group, and in other post-92 institutions except the Million Plus group. The pattern for acceptances was broadly comparable, as acceptances in the Russell Group fell by 9%, in contrast to a decline of 28% in the other pre-92 institutions. In sum, there is some evidence that, in a context of overall decline, Russell Group institutions have weathered the storm better, and the other pre-92 institutions have seen a more precipitous decline, while the picture in the post-92 institutions was mixed.

The downward trend is most marked in relation to the study of single language programmes. For such single honours study, applications fell by 30% across the period, and acceptances by almost as much. This varied between institution types, with acceptances falling less quickly among the Russell Group than in other pre-92 institutions, while the post-92 group as a whole recorded a slight increase. The same trend is visible in the data for JACS groups R and T alone, which between them largely encompass such single honours study. Applications to Group R courses fell by 31%, and acceptances by 26%. Though the decline was less steep for Group T overall, it was significant nonetheless: a fall of 15% in applications, and 7% in acceptances.

However, when the whole dataset is examined (and in particular the large Group Y, comprised of courses in social sciences combined with arts or combined arts), the picture is more complex. While acceptances to study a single language or two or more together fell by 22%, those in combination with social sciences remained steady (and indeed grew somewhat in the middle of the period), and those in combination with other humanities in fact grew slightly. Within this, there was variation in relation to individual disciplines: study of languages in combination with some subjects expanded, such as Politics (acceptances for which grew by nearly half), Linguistics and TESOL. Other combinations remained steady (History, Business, Law) and others again lost ground, notably English (for which acceptances fell by 32%) and Economics (34%).

There was also evidence of modest growth in the study of applied languages or translation, with acceptances rising by just short of 10%. There was also a shift in course titles away from specific single languages to more general names. While the number of courses on offer in fact fell, the number of them that were entitled ‘Modern Languages with

Translation’ or similar increased significantly, such that the proportion of courses so named grew from less than 20% to almost half.

Across the whole dataset (and thus all JACS groups), there were varying patterns for individual languages. Acceptances to study French, German and Russian all fell by around 30%; acceptances in Italian declined by a greater degree again (38%). Other languages, however, fared better. Acceptances to read Spanish and Portuguese fell, but by less than 10%. The numbers reading Chinese rose by 5% by 2018, and those for Arabic remained practically constant. Acceptances to read Japanese, in contrast, grew significantly (71%) as did those for Korean, which more than trebled, though from a low base (rising from approximately 50 in 2012 to 175 in 2018). The trend, then, is not one of decline in all areas, but of a shift away from the more traditional languages, and (in aggregate) from European to non-European. By the end of the period, as many students were being accepted to read Korean as Russian, and more were studying Japanese or Chinese than Italian.

If these trends have continued since 2018, the last year included in the data, it would suggest some reconsideration of strategy that might cement the position of language learning, against the prevailing narrative of decline. We **recommend** that language departments re-examine their course offerings with a view to both expanding the range of courses in combination with other HSS subjects, in line with local strengths, and also the provision of tuition in a greater range of non-European languages. It would be necessary at the same time to adjust institutional marketing strategies as a result.

Though some geographic analysis was attempted, in order to identify ‘cold spots’ in language provision in particular areas, it was hard to identify patterns that could easily be generalised. What emerged, in fact, was a great particularity of local stories. Acceptances in Greater Manchester, for instance, rose by 22%, while those in Tyne and Wear fell by more than a third. In Scotland, the decline in acceptances was slower than the UK as a whole (7%), while in Wales it broadly matched the national trend (15%); in Northern Ireland the decline was much greater (33%). While it was difficult, therefore, to make usable recommendations in general, there is a need for ongoing watchfulness at a national level, to identify such ‘cold spots’ if and when they begin to emerge.