

Universities blame 'societal shift' for axing foreign language degrees

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the questions.

1. Why are you studying English? Did you choose to study it, or was it a requirement?
2. Are there any other foreign languages you want study? Which ones? Why?
3. Think about your parents' and grandparents' generation. Did they study foreign languages? Which ones?
4. Think about the children in your family or community. Are they studying any foreign languages in school? Which ones?

2 Key words

a. Choose the correct word to match each definition. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Some words may appear in a different form in the article.

substitute	sponsor	intellectual	shift
interconnected	dozens	strategy	Iberian
crisis	heartbroken	interdisciplinary	threat

1. a formal plan of action for a long period of time _____
2. a person or thing that replaces someone or something else _____
3. a situation that includes several serious problems or challenges _____
4. a small move or change in something _____
5. a warning or fear that something bad may happen _____
6. experiencing deep sadness or pain _____
7. related to intellect, or intelligence _____
8. related to Spain and Portugal _____
9. related to two or more areas of study _____
10. to give money or resources to support something _____

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11. two or more groups of twelve people or things _____
12. when different people or things are connected to each other _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. My dream is to take a cruise around the _____ Peninsula.
2. People's priorities often _____ as they get older.
3. My mum ordered _____ of treats for my sister's birthday.
4. Social media makes people around the world more _____.
5. The business is developing a new _____ to sell more products.
6. Many universities offer _____ study programmes.

c. Use the remaining words from task a to write your own sentences.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

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Numbers taking languages at A-level and beyond has been falling for decades, although Duolingo says young people are using its app more than their elders

Richard Adams
21 November, 2025

- 1 Universities are blaming a “societal shift” for removing dozens of foreign language degrees and even entire departments. They say that there is a low demand among students – but can years of study be easily replaced by AI or online translation tools?
- 2 No, says Michael Lynas, the UK country director for the Duolingo language app. He argues there is no good substitute for learning a language as a way to see another country’s culture from the inside.
- 3 “There’s good cultural reasons to learn languages – the UK is part of a global and interconnected world. There’s a need to reach out to other people in ways that translation tools can’t manage.
- 4 Information from Duolingo shows that UK users are more likely to be learning multiple languages than people in other countries. People aged under 22 are the biggest user group.
- 5 “It’s not what you’d expect. We know there is a problem with formal language education, but it’s not because young people aren’t interested,” Lynas said.
- 6 Duolingo was very concerned about the popularity of languages at degree level. It sponsored a recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute on “the languages crisis” in universities.
- 7 Megan Bowler, the report’s author, is a postgraduate student and lecturer at Oxford. She said that there is no national strategy in place to protect these important subjects.
- 8 “University language students are interdisciplinary thinkers. These skills and intellectual values are now even more important in the age of AI.”
- 9 Over the past five years, nearly 50 centres of French, German, Italian and Iberian studies have closed or got smaller. More closures are coming soon at places like Nottingham University and Leicester University.
- 10 Hannah Sutcliffe graduated from Leicester with a degree in Spanish and French. She said the languages, cultural awareness and critical thinking she developed are very important to her career.
- 11 “It would be deeply disappointing to see future students miss out on the same opportunity, not only to learn linguistic skills but to open doors to a wide range of careers.”
- 12 In the past 30 years the students taking A-level French have decreased from close to 30,000 to below 10,000, and in German from 10,000 to about 2,000 each year.
- 13 Only Spanish has shown improvement. There are also small increases in other languages such as Chinese. However, these languages have not stopped the losses. Fewer GCSE students now continue on to study languages at A-level and then university.
- 14 When Leicester started offering degrees in Spanish in the 1990s, Dr Emma Staniland was one of the earliest students.
- 15 Staniland, who is a lecturer in Spanish studies, said: “I was having a conversation with three of our final-year students the other day. I was heartbroken. They said that the university’s threat to close our department made them think that studying Spanish was a mistake.
- 16 “Students who come to university to study this subject have a passion for it. When it becomes impossible to choose language degrees, there is a smaller the space for learning for the joy of it. Modern language degrees will be for only rich people.”
- 17 Dr Maite Usoz de la Fuente also lectures in Spanish at Leicester University. She said Brexit also made studying languages less attractive because it removed potential career options in Brussels, Paris and the rest of the EU.
- 18 “The people who come to study foreign languages with us want a degree that’s going to allow them to work internationally.”

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Glossary

GCSE and A-Levels: Academic qualifications in the UK; Secondary students complete them before they go to university

Brexit: The UK’s official exit from the European Union in 2020

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3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True or False. Correct the false statements.

1. UK universities are adding more foreign language courses every year. _____
2. Young people in the UK spend less time on language apps than older generations do. _____
3. Translation tools are the best way to connect to other countries and cultures. _____
4. Duolingo is not worried about the popularity of foreign language degrees. _____
5. The UK has a national strategy to encourage foreign language learning. _____
6. The number of students studying French in the UK has decreased significantly. _____
7. University language students often have a passion for their subject. _____
8. Brexit has made UK students less interested in learning foreign languages. _____

4 Key language

a. Read the sentences below from the article. Choose what the present perfect tense is used for?

In the past 30 years the students taking A-level French have decreased ...

Only Spanish has shown improvement.

- a. actions that will happen in the near future
- b. actions that started in the past and continue in the present
- c. actions that are in progress at the moment
- d. actions that happened at a specific time in the past

b. Complete the sentences below with the correct forms of the present perfect. Then add two sentences of your own.

1. Jessie **has studied** / **is studying** Spanish for many years.
2. Anne's writing skills **are going to improve** / **have improved** a lot recently.
3. My dad **teaches** / **has taught** English for several years.
4. Language learning apps **haven't replaced** / **didn't replace** books yet.

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5. _____

6. _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Are you surprised that UK universities are ending foreign language programmes? Why or why not?
2. How do you prefer to learn languages – in a classroom, with an app or in a different way?
3. Do you think a language app can help you understand a foreign culture? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think languages like Spanish and Chinese are becoming more popular?

6 In your own words

- a. Imagine that your university has just announced that all foreign language programmes, including English, will be eliminated next year. Write a persuasive letter to the head of the university. Explain why the university should keep its language learning programmes. Include examples and evidence to support your ideas. Remember to be polite and respectful in your letter.**
- b. Share your letters with a partner. Provide feedback and edit your letter to improve it. Then read your letter to your class.**