

Universities blame 'societal shift' for axing foreign language degrees

Level 3: Advanced

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.

crisis	plummet	Iberian	prolific	substitute
axe	driven	pipeline	shortsighted	vital
domain	elite	nuances	barrier	shift

1. a group of applicants who are qualified in an area _____
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 situation that prevents communication or progress _____
6. a small group of powerful or wealthy people _____
7. an area of interest or an area of control _____
8. extremely important, necessary or essential _____
9. hard-working and motivated to complete a goal _____
10. highly productive and large in quantity or amount _____

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11. related to Spain and Portugal _____
12. subtle differences in meaning, quality or context _____
13. to fall or drop very quickly and severely _____
14. to get rid of something completely or severely reduce it _____
15. unable to see clearly enough to plan for the future _____

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

1. A lack of technology skills can be a(n) _____ to success in many careers.
2. The new president promised that the price of groceries would _____.
3. If you're not an expert, it can be difficult to understand the _____ of poetry.
4. My dream is to take a cruise around the _____ Peninsula.
5. People's priorities often _____ as they get older.
6. Only the _____ have access to the most expensive schools in the world.
7. The hiring manager said that there were many great candidates in the _____.
8. My plan to spend all my money on a new car was extremely _____.
9. The company plans to _____ dozens of positions in the next year.
10. Biology, physics and chemistry are different _____ of science.

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

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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4. _____

5. _____

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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 the axing of dozens of foreign language degrees and even entire departments, citing a lack of demand among students – but can years of study be easily replaced by AI or online translation tools?
- 2 Not so, according to Michael Lynas, the UK country director for the Duolingo language app, who argues there is no good substitute for the hard work of learning a language as a way of seeing another country's culture from the inside.
- 3 "Sometimes people say: 'There's translation apps now so why would you need to learn a language?' But that's not what young people in the UK are saying, they are actually spending more time learning languages on Duolingo than any other age group," Lynas said.
- 4 "There's good cultural reasons to learn languages – the UK is part of a global and interconnected world and there's a need to reach out to other people in ways that translation tools can't manage.
- 5 Lynas said he was surprised by his company's data showing that not only were UK users more likely to be learning multiple languages than those in other countries, but that those aged under 22 were the most prolific users.
- 6 "It's not what you'd expect. We know there is a problem with formal education and people selecting to study languages, but what it suggests to me is that it's not because young people aren't interested or don't want to learn them," Lynas said.
- 7 Duolingo was so concerned about the popularity of languages at degree level that it sponsored a recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute on "the languages crisis" in universities.
- 8 Megan Bowler, the report's author and a postgraduate student and lecturer at Oxford, said the recent announcement by Nottingham University that it may axe its language degrees was just the latest to be triggered by falling student demand, with no national strategy in place to protect such strategically important subjects.
- 9 "Graduate linguists are interdisciplinary thinkers who approach subtle nuances with a sophisticated awareness of societal and historical context," Bowler said.
- 10 "These skills and intellectual values are now even more important in the age of AI – the closure of languages programmes may well be shortsighted."
- 11 Over the past five years, nearly 50 centres of French, German, Italian and Iberian studies have closed or shrunk, while another wave of proposed closures is on the way, including the courses currently under threat at Nottingham and at Leicester University.
- 12 Hannah Sutcliffe, who graduated from Leicester with a degree in Spanish and French said the languages, cultural awareness and critical thinking she developed had been vital to her career.
- 13 "They've allowed me to connect meaningfully with people from diverse backgrounds, approach business challenges with empathy and nuance, and navigate international opportunities with confidence and a strong linguistic ability," Sutcliffe said.
- 14 "It would be deeply disappointing to see future students miss out on the same opportunity, not only to gain linguistic skills but to open doors to a wide range of careers."
- 15 Nottingham University said a "societal shift" was behind the fall in applications but that the pipeline of language students from England's schools had been leaking for decades.
- 16 In the past 30 years the numbers taking A-level French have plummeted from close to 30,000 to below 10,000, and in German from 10,000 to about 2,000 each year.
- 17 Only Spanish has shown improvement, but that and small increases in other languages such as Chinese have not made up for the losses, as fewer GCSE students now continue on to study languages at A-level and then university.
- 18 When Leicester started offering degrees in Spanish in the 1990s, Dr Emma Staniland was one of the earliest students.
- 19 Staniland, who has since had a career spent lecturing in Spanish studies, said: "I was having a conversation with three of our final-year students the other day, and I was heartbroken to hear them say that the university's threat to close our department has made them wonder whether what they've chosen to study was a mistake.

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- 20 "Those who do come to university to study this subject are really driven by the passion for it, and the more impossible it becomes to make that kind of choice, the smaller the space for learning for the joy of it becomes ... well, then, it will eventually only be for the elite. Modern language degrees will be the domain of the rich."
- 21 Dr Maite Usoz de la Fuente, who also lectures in Spanish at Leicester University, said Brexit had also made studying languages less attractive, by cutting off what were potential career paths in Brussels, Paris and the rest of the EU.
- 22 "That possibility is now much harder. There's a barrier now to just simply going abroad and working as a British national," she said.
- 23 "The people who come to study foreign languages with us, they're quite globally minded, and part of what they want is a degree that's going to allow them to work internationally."

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Glossary

GCSE and A-Levels: Academic qualifications taken by secondary students in the UK prior 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, False or Not mentioned in the article. Correct the false statements.

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

4 Key language

a. The adjectives below are often used in academic contexts. Find and highlight them in the article to read them in context. Then match the adjectives to the definitions.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. diverse | a. an open perspective to understand the world and its people |
| 2. globally minded | b. engaging and clever with many worldly experiences |
| 3. historical | c. highly educated, bright and intelligent |
| 4. intellectual | d. made up of many different types of people, opinions or ideas |
| 5. interconnected | e. describes people or ideas that are linked in different ways |
| 6. interdisciplinary | f. related to people or events from the past |
| 7. societal | g. related to society, community or social interactions |
| 8. sophisticated | h. including two or more academic, artistic or scientific fields |

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

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

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. Are you surprised UK universities are axing 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?
5. How do you think political events affect the languages students choose to study?

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. To make your letter stronger, look online for facts and data about language learning in your country.
- b. Share your letters with a partner. Provide feedback and edit your letter to improve it. Then read your letter to your class.