Less-widely Taught Languages in UK Higher Education

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1. Introduction

The widely discussed decline in language learning that the UK (e.g. Lanvers et al., 2021, Tinsley and Doležal, 2018, Kelly 2018) has been experiencing since 2004 when the policy to make languages an optional study from the age of fourteen was introduced, has affected the language provision not only at secondary school level but also in British universities. However, it is hardly ever acknowledged that the British Higher Education institutions (HEIs) currently offer courses in over seventy foreign languages other than French, Spanish and German, which are classed as less-widely taught languages (LWTLs). The variety of these languages ranging from Italian and Urdu to Korean and Swahili does not often receive the attention it deserves.

This article aims to examine the provision of LWTLs, as well as the challenges that these languages pose and the approaches to strengthen the provision in the HE context. Currently, there is only fragmented data that shows an incomplete picture of LWTLs provision in this sector in the UK. This article, therefore, intends to address this gap by combining various available findings from the Association of University Language Communities (AULC) - University Council for Modern Languages (UCML) annual survey reports (2012-2023), the 2016 UCML report (Polisca, 2016) on LWTLs and three LWTLs surveys (Drobnik-Rogers and Torres, 2019, 2023, 2024) conducted via the AULC Special Interest Group (SIG) for LWTLs - Less-widely taught languages SIG - Association of University Language Communities (aulc.org).

Although the AULC-UCML annual surveys have been conducted since 2012, they do not focus on LWTLs and the number of participating institutions changes every year therefore the data is only partial. The UCML report (Polisca, 2016) on LWTLs only concerns degree level programmes and since it was conducted eight years ago, the findings are no longer up to date.

The main sources of our discussion in this paper lie in three LWTLs surveys (Drobnik-Rogers and Torres, 2019, 2023, 2024) that were designed to get a better understanding of the field. The first two

surveys were specifically addressed to the individual teaching practitioners representing different language programmes (i.e. degree, Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) and extracurricular courses), and the third survey (Drobnik-Rogers and Torres, 2024) was completed by directors of IWLPs.

The term LWTLs used in this article is applied to all languages that are currently offered in HEIs in the UK except for English, French, German and Spanish. The rationale behind using this term and grouping these languages together, despite these languages representing very diverse linguistic families, lies in the idiosyncratic situation that they share to a bigger or smaller extent. This includes a limited provision across the country, smaller teaching teams (often one teacher per institution and with a part-time contract), limited teaching resources, and a lack of professional language teaching associations representing the teachers' interests.

While the term 'less-widely taught' may be considered a bit politically sensitive, it is used as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of languages such as indigenous, community, heritage or home languages, and also other languages that may be underrepresented at universities in the UK.

In the UK's Higher Education, the use of the term 'less-widely taught' has not always been consistent. For example, in the AULC-UCML surveys (2015, 2016, 2018) some languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Italian and Arabic, were referred to as 'widely-taught' as the majority of institutions surveyed were offering courses in these languages. Another phrase used in IWLP was 'non-Latin script languages' which served as an umbrella term for all the languages apart from French, German and Spanish (e.g. AULC survey 2016) even though some of the languages in this category are based on Latin script. However, from 2019 the term 'less-widely taught languages' started being used more regularly to refer to the provision of these languages and since then, this term has been used widely by AULC and their SIG for LWTLs.

These changes in the terminology are also in line with the recent discussion in the field related to the inclusivity of the term 'modern languages' or 'foreign modern languages'. This has historically only included some of the 'community languages' (e.g. Italian and Mandarin Chinese), whilst languages of immigrants from outside Europe have been excluded. As Matras (2019) and Li (2021) point out, this has resulted in an unhealthy hierarchy among the languages in the British education system. The change from UCML to UCFL (University Council for Languages) makes the name more inclusive as it comprises not only what is commonly understood as 'community' languages mentioned above, but also 'home' languages defined by the UNESCO as languages 'learnt in childhood and in a home environment' (2024). This term 'home language' incorporates home, heritage and/or community languages such as Welsh, Gaelic, Scots, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati or Polish. However, there is still a prevalent view that some languages matter more than others as they are for example, perceived as more strategically useful, e.g. 'languages of the future' (British Council, 2017) or are more widely supported by institutions, e.g. German, French and Spanish. This is especially the case for languages that are commonly known as 'less-widely taught' (LWTLs), 'less-commonly taught' (mainly used in the North American context), 'lesser-taught' and 'less-widely studied' languages (e.g. Kelly and Jones, 2003).

2. The Provision of LWTLs

The LWTLs provision in the UK, especially in IWLP, tends to fluctuate and be more vulnerable and susceptible to institutional and external changes than the provision of the more commonly taught languages such as English, German, French and Spanish. These changes will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

The provision of LWTLs in HEIs varies significantly in the number of languages on offer and their levels. The 24 members of the research-intensive Russell Group universities tend to have a richer or bigger variety of languages than non-Russell Group universities. The 2023 LWTLs survey shows that some institutions offer these languages as part of a degree (single, combined or joint honours, minor), IWLP (languages offered to undergraduate students as part of their course) or both, or as extracurricular classes (for a fee and accessible to the wider community). It is worth noting that in some institutions, such as the University of Manchester, there is no difference between IWLP and extracurricular modules.

Based on the responses from 32 institutions representing 38 languages in the 2023 LWTLs survey, the table below illustrates the language provision in different programmes.

Table 1. Language Provision in Different Programmes

Languages offered at degree level only	Basque, Estonian, Serbian/Croatian, Slovak, Zulu
Languages offered in IWLP only	Bengali, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Modern Greek, Punjabi, Slovene, Turkish, Urdu, Yoruba
Languages offered in both programmes	Italian, Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese, Korean, Polish, Russian, British Sign Language (BSL), Dutch, Catalan, Czech, Irish, Swahili, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Latin, Macedonian, Persian, Romanian, Sanskrit, Vietnamese

According to the data collected in this survey, languages such as Arabic, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Portuguese and Russian are taught in one-third of the participating institutions. Whilst other languages such as Korean, Polish, British Sign Language (BSL), Swedish, Turkish, Dutch, Catalan, Swahili, Czech and Irish are taught in two or three universities, the remaining twenty-one languages illustrated in the table are only offered in one institution. This means that the opportunities to learn a certain language, e.g. Urdu, Bulgarian, Basque or Zulu, are very limited nationally.

However, according to the AULC 2021-22 report, the top seven LWTLs by registration are Japanese, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Korean and BSL. This has remained unchanged over the last seven years. It is also reported that languages such as Japanese and Korean are increasing in popularity and that even the number of students' registrations of Japanese in IWLP is almost reaching the level of registrations for German, which is considered one of the most popular languages.

The languages that are not represented in the 2023 LWTLs survey, but that are also offered in the HEIs in the UK, are:

Table 2. Other LWTLs Offered in HEIs in the UK

Albanian	Amharic	Ancient Greek	Bosnian
Cantonese	Cornish	Danish	Filipino (Tagalog)
Finnish	Gaelic	Galician	Georgian
Gujarati	Hebrew	Hindi	Icelandic
Indonesian	Irish Sign Language (ISL)	Kurdish	Latvian
Luxembourgish	Malayalam	Maltese	Mongolian
Norwegian	Pashto	Sinhala	Somali
Swedish	Tamil	Thai	Tibetan
Ulster Scots	Welsh	Xhosa	Yiddish

Even though there are over seventy languages on offer nationally, it is important to highlight that there are big geographical gaps between regions, for example, most of the thirty languages listed above are offered in London by two institutions, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and University College London (UCL). Also, as pointed out by Muradas-Taylor (2023), there are large 'cold spots' in language provision in the North, East and South-West of England.

It is noteworthy that the early post-pandemic years did not bring any radical changes in terms of the format and delivery of the language courses in general and most universities have returned to teaching face-to-face as quickly as it was possible with only evening non-credit-bearing courses that remained online. However, the recent LWTLs survey conducted in 2024 suggests an increased flexibility with which directors of IWLPs approach their provision, especially where LWTLs are concerned, which may be a way

of addressing the geographical gaps and enabling access to languages that are not available in certain regions of the country.

Significantly, when practitioners of LWTLs were asked in the 2023 survey whether teaching online had a positive impact on how they feel about the future of their language, the answers were almost equally distributed between those feeling optimistic and those who reported uncertainty. When asked whether teaching online had a significant impact on the LWTLs provision, practitioners did not report any notable influence. What they mostly disagreed or strongly disagreed with was that teaching online had reduced the interest in the language. Perhaps, the most remarkable finding concerning teaching online was related to the fact that 45% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that teaching online had opened new job opportunities. While this is a preliminary picture that represents views of LWTLs practitioners from 32 institutions surveyed shortly after teaching had returned to campuses and therefore needs to be measured with caution, the prevalent feeling of uncertainty reported by the tutors is clearly an important feature of LWTLs provision in general, which was naturally intensified during the pandemic and in the first post-pandemic academic years.

Students' demand for LWTLs is also affected by socio-political, economic and cultural changes which make the provision of these languages more vulnerable in comparison to more commonly taught languages. This is seen in the slightly shifting reasons for which students take up the studying of LWTLs. The 2019 and 2023 LWTLs surveys showed that the most popular reasons, according to the tutors, were the challenge they pose, curiosity or interest in the language and culture, family ties and heritage as well as travel and holiday. The latter used to be one of the main reasons for studying a LWTL but due to the difficulties imposed by Brexit, the pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Palestine and the cost of living, this reason has shifted down. Additionally, two reasons that emerged in the 2023 survey were a specific interest in the history and politics of Ukraine and the recent boom in BSL in the media as well as its introduction as a GCSE subject.

This shift in motivation for studying an LWTL is also in line with the Duolingo 2023 report that highlights the reasons why younger generations are choosing these languages. One of those is political solidarity, which results in increased interest in studying Ukrainian but a decrease in studying Russian, as observed in HEIs around the country. Another trend, noted in the Duolingo 2023 report, is related to an increased interest in studying Asian languages, especially Japanese, Chinese and specifically Korean, which 'jumps in global ranking to #6'. This may be due to the popularity of K-pop culture and Korea's economic growth which is reflected in increased enrolments for Korean courses in HEIs. Furthermore, the report indicates that Generation Zed often chooses a language to complement their interests rather than for practical reasons related to employability. An example of this may be the rise in popularity of Portuguese, which 'ousted Russian for the number 10 spot in the list of most popular languages' (Duolingo Language Report 2023) and reflects the interest in Brazil and Portugal as travel destinations.

Some institutions are responding to these trends by offering, for example, Ukrainian because of student demand. It is of course impossible for HE institutions to closely follow those trends due to financial and logistical constraints but it is crucial to acknowledge the behaviour trends of Gen Z which is the majority of the HE student population.

3. Challenges that Affect the Provision of LWTLs

There are various challenges that affect the provision of LWTLs to a larger extent than the most commonly taught languages. Some of those challenges are related to the teaching of those languages, others are institutional constraints to maintain a healthy provision, and there are also more external factors that have a direct impact on the offer of LWTLs.

Regarding the teaching of LWTLs, tutors mentioned that the main challenge they face is related to resources. They reported in the 2019 and 2023 LWTLs surveys, that the quality of resources and teaching materials available in the UK market is inadequate, not stimulating, is characterised by a cultural mismatch and/or is irrelevant and unsuitable for the courses and levels they teach. Therefore, teachers have to spend a substantial amount of time looking for, adapting and/or designing teaching resources, especially for languages that have not been established as languages for foreign speakers in the Anglophone world, for example Turkish, Polish, Persian or Hebrew. In the case of Japanese, Italian or Chinese this challenge would be affecting teachers to a lesser degree, especially for lower levels.

Additionally, teachers reported other challenges such as limited or decreasing student numbers (e.g. Catalan, Czech or Arabic) which can make running the courses unviable, or very big classes for languages such as Korean, Japanese or Chinese which may be detrimental to students' learning experience.

Another challenge related to that is a limited institutional understanding of the specificities and difficulties of some of these languages (i.e. syntactic differences, few recognisable words, different scripts) that may, for instance, require a different teaching approach, an adjusted assessment or simply more contact time than the more popular languages that have traditionally driven the teaching standards for learning foreign languages in the HEIs. A uniform approach to course structure and rigid university guidelines such as the same number of hours for all language modules, or an expectation to achieve a certain level of fluency can result in discouraging students from continuing to study a given language.

Placing students at the right level is also reported as a difficulty that many teachers face. This is due in part to the lack of continuity or pathway as in many instances only one or two levels are offered in a specific language. For example, Turkish, Urdu, Persian or Yoruba are only offered at the beginner level in very few universities. Another reason is the difficulty of catering for heritage students, especially in community languages such as Arabic, Polish, Russian or Urdu where students already have some knowledge or are confident speakers of the language but do not know the script or vice versa. Some of them may have no understanding of the grammar but have learnt the language at home in everyday situations, which poses another challenge to tutors who need to teach them along with students who learn a given language as foreign.

The provision of LWTLs can be influenced by challenges within an institution to a much larger extent than is the case with languages such as English, French, German or Spanish. One of these challenges is financial viability, which is especially important in the context of IWLP programmes that are predominantly run by language centres as service departments within HEIs (Howarth, 2014) and therefore often run as self-financed businesses. Since the courses on offer need to bring profit and be financially feasible, there are often strict requirements of a minimum student enrolment for a given LWTL course to

run and, if these requirements are not met, as directors of IWLP provision in the 2024 survey report, on many occasions courses can be cancelled at a short notice. This was recently, for instance, the case with languages such as Czech, Romanian, Mongolian or Hindi at some institutions, as illustrated by this survey.

On the one hand, this unpredictability may affect students' choices, especially if these are elective modules for credits, as students may want to avoid courses with a risk of cancellation. On the other hand, this uncertainty also directly affects LWTLs tutors' contracts and their working conditions, especially if those tutors are on part-time or fractional contracts that depend on their work allocation.

As for challenges that such unpredictability may bring for LWTLs tutors, it is worth mentioning that precarity of contracts and casualisation are one of the main features of the tutors' situation. Although in general, tutors' working conditions have been slowly improving and more teachers are currently on permanent contracts - as illustrated by the 2023 LWTLs survey - than was the case in the pre-pandemic times (the 2019 LWTLs survey), these contracts tend to be fractional and often offered over ten months. As more job adverts offer permanent positions in comparison to 2019, there is still a big percentage of LWTLs tutors on fixed-term or hourly-based contracts and with not even one-third of all surveyed tutors (only 31%) on full-time contracts, the precarious working conditions remain a strong feature of this profession.

These conditions however are in a striking contradiction with the tutors' education, experience, and commitment towards their profession and their employers. The two LWTLs surveys (2019 and 2023), which collated over 200 responses from practitioners of these languages teaching in IWLP, degree programmes or on extracurricular courses, showed for example that LWTLs practitioners are well educated, with over 50% holding a PhD (2023), which is rarely a requirement for language tutors per se, yet it may be when they are also required to teach content courses on degree programmes. These two surveys also demonstrated that more than 60% of the respondents have been working in HE for over 10 or 15 years and a staggering one-third of all tutors surveyed in 2023 have worked at the same institution for over 15 years, with a further 17% for between 10 and 15 years and almost 20% for 5 to 10 years. There is clearly limited mobility in this field, which is likely to be affected by limited job offers and a type of available contracts - part-time or fixed-term - for the less popular LWTLs such as Persian, Turkish or Urdu. Similarly, these types of contracts are not attractive enough to entice tutors to relocate or make a living, which results in a shortage of practitioners in some languages, such as Korean, BSL or Polish, as reported by the IWLP directors in the 2024 LWTLs survey.

Another aspect of the working conditions is the lack of career progression or access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Only two directors out of twenty-two respondents to the 2024 LWTLs survey, reported that language tutors at their institution can apply for promotion and the others quoted the type of contract, financial viability or lack of support from senior management as the reasons for not offering such a career path. Only a further two institutions are currently working on introducing such promotional paths for language tutors. Access to CPD creates a more optimistic picture, as only three institutions reported that scholarship and professional development are not part of tutors' contracts. In those cases where scholarship is integrated in contracts, the percentage varies between five and twenty, and in some cases this is listed as the number of hours between 30-100 hours per year. It is however worth

emphasising that these allocations do not always apply to hourly-based and fixed-term staff, which, as we have indicated above, are often the contracts of many LWTLs tutors.

Tutors of some LWTLs are often the only ones teaching a given language at their institutions, which in turn creates a sense of isolation and limits their opportunities to share best practices or collaborate with other colleagues. This also has an impact on the CPD opportunities they engage with. Furthermore, many of those tutors tend to work in the evenings and on fractional contracts which contribute to even more difficult working conditions.

These precarious working conditions affect to some degree the availability of LWTLs tutors nationwide. In the 2024 LWTLs survey, directors reported that a shortage of qualified and experienced tutors in a particular language stops them from running an existing course or from offering a new language or level. This is mainly due to difficulties in teacher recruitment, as the type of contract offered to potential tutors depends on student registration. Also, geopolitical changes such as Brexit or the termination of the Erasmus programme in the UK, result in institutions having to fulfil certain visa requirements to be able to hire a potential tutor from outside the UK and considering that many of these LWTLs contracts tend to be fractional, meeting these requirements is very difficult.

Another important challenge is related to the perception of LWTLs within the institution. According to findings from all three aforementioned LWTLs surveys, tutors and directors mention a marginalised perception of these languages in comparison to French, German and Spanish. One reason for such marginalisation, as reported by tutors and directors, is the pressure from the universities' senior management to run only those language courses that are financially viable whilst, at the same time the resources available for promoting these courses are limited. This commercialisation also determines the number of languages and courses, which in turn affects the teachers' contracts and working conditions.

Where IWLP provision in LWTLs or so-called 'Languages for All' exist, the access to those modules may be in contradiction with its actual name 'institution-wide' or 'for all' and with the recommendations made by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry, which reviews the UK's capability in languages and states that 'languages should be a key skill for graduates and all students should be entitled to learn a language as an optional part of their degree' (2000:7). Not all institutions offer their students the opportunity to study a language as an elective module for credit or for free as centrally-funded courses, and in many instances, students need to pay a fee to learn a language as an extracurricular activity. These fees can become a barrier to studying languages, especially where LWTLs are concerned as commitment to a less popular language that may be more exotic, harder to learn, require more time to master it and have limited resources to study or limited access to communities speaking this language. Moreover, even if a given LWTL is offered for credits, some degrees may have restrictions in place for students in their final year where they cannot, for example, take a level 1 course.

Additionally, not many HEIs in the UK have a language policy that encourages students to study a language as a part of their degree. In many institutions learning languages is not included as part of the globalisation or internationalisation strategy and there is often no emphasis on the value of learning languages for employability purposes. Students who have learnt one of the more commonly taught

languages at secondary schools or colleges and possibly have taken a GCSE or A-level exam in these languages, mostly appreciate the importance of having this linguistic knowledge and are usually more likely to choose this language at university and continue improving their skills.

Whilst the majority of HEIs in the UK offer students the opportunity to study French, German or Spanish, the same cannot be said about choosing LWTLs, which presents students with more complex challenges. As we have discussed, the offer of LWTLs differs from institution to institution and often also from region to region with many geographical gaps, especially outside big cities and Russell Group Institutions. This means that choosing a LWTL is not always possible and even if a given language of interest is available at university, its provision is often limited so it is harder to study it beyond the beginner's level, which may discourage students from learning it in the first place.

On the other hand, where an institution offers a good selection of LWTLs, some of their modules may struggle to recruit enough students and therefore the importance of studying these languages needs to be more explicitly promoted and their provision advertised more widely. This is especially crucial if we consider a broader context of post-Brexit Britain and the prevalent attitudes towards learning languages, as illustrated by Tinsley in her British Council report, *Language Trends 2019*. As the report demonstrates, studying languages continues to be seen as harder than studying other subjects at GCSE and A-level. This is especially the case in secondary schools in poor areas of the country, where many parents and pupils report 'no use' of studying languages. Interestingly, when asked about the choice, pupils showed interest apart from Spanish, French and German, in Italian, Japanese, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese.

Considering such a cultural climate, the promotion of the value of LWTLs languages within the given institution and beyond seems to be more crucial than ever before, while in reality, it is often limited or non-existent. Over half of the directors in the 2024 LWTLs survey stated that they do not have any specific strategy to promote them. The lack of such a strategy is very often due to the structure of the institutions that creates barriers to study languages, e.g. lack of support from senior management, credit-bearing restrictions or lack of a designated staff member with the capacity for promotional activities.

Some of the directors believe that there is no need to promote these languages differently than the more commonly taught ones. However, almost 80 percent of the directors recognise the need for a specific strategy that would, for instance, demystify how difficult the LWTLs are. A good example of how this may be implemented is the Modern Language Teaching Centre (MLTC) at the University of Sheffield and its recent focus on the promotion of some LWTLs, such as Arabic or Polish, where the targeted efforts brought increased enrolments for these languages in the academic year 2023/2024. Even though the promotion was for all seventeen languages that constitute the Language for All (LfA) programme, these LWTLs were targeted because of their lower recruitment and their limited visibility within the university. Some of the promotional activities included: taster sessions, meet the tutors events, videos featuring tutors and current students talking about these languages, events and extracurricular activities open to the members of the public, printed leaflets, and an improved and easier-to-navigate website. It is important to notice that these LWTLs can be studied at Sheffield beyond a beginner level, which is not always the case where LWTLs are concerned.

4. Strengthening the Provision of LWTLs

As we have seen, the challenges that tutors and institutions face make the provision of LWTLs less stable in comparison to the more commonly taught languages. This means that much more effort needs to be put into sustaining it and some institutions have already successfully implemented certain approaches to help strengthen the provision, which will be discussed along with other suggestions of possible solutions.

As mentioned earlier, some universities have already adopted a more flexible approach to the delivery format of their LWTLs courses, which is reflected in offering online or hybrid modules alongside their face-to-face provision. This, for instance, increases access for students who cannot attend courses on campus or are unable to travel and also, in some cases helps to close geographical gaps where a given language may not be available in the region. One example of such an approach is The University of Oxford, which offers a variety of extracurricular courses in mixed delivery formats and for some languages also at different levels of intensity. For example, students could choose a pathway that suits their needs for Arabic, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese or Russian, which are offered as general, fast-track or intensive and can be studied face-to-face or online.

Another initiative is the collaboration between institutions in delivering a particular language run by one university but promoted and offered to students at another institution. This is the case for example for Dutch, which is run online by the University of Durham and is also advertised to the students from the University of Exeter. Currently, this is a non-credit-bearing module that is offered for a fee. Such cross-institutional collaboration in various geographical locations across the country could enable access to LWTLs courses that are currently not available in home institutions and therefore close the 'cold spots' that exist for some languages nationally. This would extend the offer of LWTLs languages in the country and ensure more democratic access to the provision in various parts of the UK, which would in turn address the current inequality of opportunities. Second, such collaboration would also help to sustain the provision of certain languages and ensure their financial viability where perhaps before, that provision might have been vulnerable financially, due to recruiting a limited number of students. Third, such initiatives could help to address the shortage of teachers that has been discussed here as one of the reasons why certain LWTLs are not on offer in some institutions.

As the majority of directors who responded to the 2024 LWTLs survey reported, such collaborations could potentially result in offering more attractive contracts and working conditions to tutors, which would help with the precarious situation experienced by many practitioners in the field. Although such collaborations may be difficult to achieve and organise, according to the findings from this survey, there are already some ideas that have been discussed in various institutions. These include consolidating post offers between departments and considering joint recruitment with other local HEIs or increasing online delivery and creating credit-bearing courses that can be shared between institutions.

Creating case studies of such initiatives and sharing best practices around the processes involved in such collaborations, may certainly help further institutions to consider similar agreements. There is no doubt that these schemes, due to complexities and differences in structures characterising each university, may be very difficult to implement or even get approval from senior management, especially where shared

credit-bearing courses may be concerned. Perhaps flexibility, risk-taking as well as thinking beyond the interest of one particular institution are one of the ways forward to ensure that the provision of LWTLs can be strengthened and sustained.

To address the shortage of teachers of LWTLs, another solution would be to offer internal training programmes to allow universities to use language tutors who might not have experience working in HEIs which is often part of the recruitment requirements. Moreover, creating an online 'introduction to teaching courses at HE' could be used by various institutions.

In addition to the increased understanding that including scholarship in teachers' contracts encourages engagement and improves the quality of teaching, there are other initiatives that enhance CPD and scholarship opportunities. For example, the workshop series 'Back to Basics In Language Teaching and Learning' - Back to basics in language teaching and learning (nottingham.ac.uk) - was organised by the University of Nottingham to support tutors in reflecting on their teaching approaches and sharing best practices.

Furthermore, a third of the directors of IWLP reported in the 2024 LWTLs survey that offering an incentive for scholarship improves tutors' working conditions and access to career paths. It also contributes to sustaining the LWTLs provision as tutors not only engage in their professional development but also feel more part of the academic community, share ideas and best practices, feel more valued within the institution, engage more in the promotion of their language and contribute to a better perception of the language at the institution and beyond. Generally speaking, this strengthens the whole community of language teachers and consequently improves the language education for students.

As discussed earlier, one of the main challenges LWTLs teachers face is the amount of time they spend looking for, adapting and/or creating resources that are relevant to their students' needs, and the levels and types of courses they teach. Setting up an area for virtual sharing of resources and/or assessments and creating a database of existing online resources would address this challenge. For instance, the University of Cambridge has made available as open courseware a set of courses in various LWTLs such as Arabic, Greek, Chinese, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, and Swahili, that can be used for self-study or to support a face-to-face teaching environment. Another platform that is not exclusively devoted to the virtual sharing of resources or to LWTLs, but that facilitates access to existing opportunities, information and resources regarding languages in the UK is The Languages Gateway - https://www.thelanguagesgateway.uk/. This new platform was established in 2023 as a response to the proposal 'Towards a National Languages Strategy' - https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/towards-national-languages-strategy-education-and-skills/ - and was produced by five organisations: The British Academy, The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), The British Council and Universities UK. It acts as a portal to everything related to languages at the national level in order to increase language learning, awareness of the languages on offer, and to foster links between different sectors. There are also examples of computer-aided resources for LWTLs such as for Icelandic (IcelandicOnline, 2014) and Dutch (Rubens, 2014) that can be of value to language learners and teachers and can serve as inspiration for other similar initiatives.

The lack of understanding of the specificities of LWTLs and rigid university guidelines to the structure of language courses, especially in IWLP, call for a flexible approach by the institutions where teaching time is adjusted, realistic learning outcomes are set, assessment adjustments are placed and benchmarking with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is developed. Regarding teaching time, due to the perceived difficulty of LWTLs, some researchers have categorised languages into four levels of difficulty according to the number of hours of study typically required to achieve a specific level (Gor and Vatz, 2009). For example, whilst it would take around 600 hours to achieve a B2 CEFR in Spanish, the number of study hours in Korean to achieve a similar level would triple. In this regard, HEIs surveyed by the UCFL (2016) acknowledged that in degree programmes, the LWTLs require additional contact time at the beginner's level overall if students are to achieve results, within a similar time frame, that can be compared with the most widely-taught languages (p. 26). This is reflected in the amount of time devoted to *ab initio* courses in languages such as Czech or Russian at the University of Sheffield. Similarly, this is reflected in the level students achieve in a course that has the same duration, e.g. at Manchester, students performing at a level of A2/B1 in Polish would reach a B1 in Spanish in the Languages for All programme.

There is also a tendency to view LWTLs from a Eurocentric perspective and in relation to the CEFR, which is not always appropriate to Asian or African languages. The results of the same survey reveal that the use of the Common European framework is widespread amongst the LWTLs alongside the use of other officially recognised systems of accreditation that pertain to specific languages, such as the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) for Chinese (p. 27). However, these adjustments only refer to language courses as part of a degree in foreign languages, in the IWLP sector, the CEFR is still widely used for all languages.

Some institutions are already adopting a more flexible approach to the assessment of LWTLs. For example, the University of Manchester has adjusted the rubrics for these languages to cater for their specificities. Some adjustments include the different weighting of reading, grammar and writing sections, the number of words/characters for reading comprehension and writing production, and the duration of listening material. Another example of a more flexible approach is the adjustment of the provision based on students' needs and characteristics. For instance, some universities offer Cantonese for Mandarin speakers (University of Leeds), or Japanese fast-track courses (University of Leicester).

The flexibility to adapt the provision is also illustrated in how the IWLP directors monitor and respond to the situation of LWTLs by introducing more online courses and in some cases, making them available as a hybrid in order to cater for a wider community and maximise the demand (the 2024 LWTLs survey). This also helps to avoid cancelling courses at short notice and make decisions regarding opening a new language module or a level based on this information. Another reason for such flexibility lies in addressing teachers' shortages in certain areas but also responding to their needs and their individual circumstances.

Furthermore, the creation of the AULC-SIG for LWTLs in 2019 addresses many issues mentioned earlier as well as giving these languages more prominence nationally and taking them to the forefront of discussions about learning languages in HE in this country. Consequently, in 2023 this SIG became a joint initiative with UCFL - Less-Widely Taught Languages Special Interest Group – University Council For Languages (university-council-for-languages.org). Grouping those very diverse languages under one

umbrella without creating a hierarchy between them based on their popularity, number of registrations or simply their political or economic importance, helps to promote an egalitarian status for all of them and address various challenges that these languages currently face. Importantly, this SIG has been also created to voice the interests of LWTLs practitioners for whom in many cases, there was no formal body of language-specific associations that would represent their complex needs. The objectives of this SIG have been to create a platform for communication, peer support and exchange of ideas, to enable networking opportunities between the LWTLs practitioners, to share best practices in order to enhance the teaching and learning of those languages as well as to strengthen the case for teaching and learning LWTLs.

The existence of this SIG helps to address the issue of isolation that many of the LWTLs tutors face due to being, for example, the only tutor teaching their language at a given institution, in the region or often even nationally. In cases where the associations for languages such as Arabic, Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, Italian or Japanese, already exist, the SIG also helps to promote their activities and maintain the close links between the practitioners of the given language. Encouraging and promoting CPD opportunities is certainly one of the key activities of the SIG and the existing mailing list of over 130 practitioners of LWTLs enables sharing information.

Recent initiatives of the SIG were identifying over seventy languages that are currently taught in the HEIs in the UK as well as creating a list of representatives for these languages. The representatives of almost forty languages out of those identified as currently taught in the country, will hopefully act as leads or champions for consultation, advice and guidance in relation to the languages that they represent.

Despite the fact that universities in the UK have an internationalisation agenda for students to become global citizens, languages hardly ever explicitly feature there. Lewis (2021) highlights the fact that, after reviewing 134 universities in the UK, many fail to connect 'their ambitions for international engagement and language learning'. It seems logical that internationalisation would mean a multicultural and multilingual university, where students value other cultures and languages for 'intercultural understanding, employability, mobility and competitiveness' (Lewis 2021), and yet, learning a foreign language can be under-appreciated. There are some exceptions, however, where the institutional language policy at some HEIs encourages students to take a language course as part of their degree and puts emphasis on the value of learning them for intellectual and employability purposes. For example, the London School of Economics' language policy stresses the importance of language skills by offering a free non-degree language course to students who do not have a GCSE or equivalent in a language that is not their mother tongue. Also, at the University of Sussex, the language policy enables students to study a language as part of their degree, adding value to their studies. Such policies, apart from focusing on the advantages and benefits of learning a language, help to support the idea that not everything is based on numbers, recruitment and financial viability.

Around 40% of universities in the UK have an IWLP programme that provides classes in different foreign languages and in some institutions, languages which cater for the bigger community, e.g. Urdu where there is a high Pakistani population. However, IWLP programmes not only offer language tuition, but they also play a crucial role in the promotion of languages and intercultural competence. For example, the University of Edinburgh offers a diverse set of programmes: 'Open Languages' for students to be taken

as part of their degree or for extra-credits, 'Languages for All' for the wider community (Languages for All | The University of Edinburgh) or 'Tandem Language Programme', which is a language exchange programme (Edinburgh University Students' Association). They also invite the community to become part of international societies, meet-up groups to practise a language and offer resources to encourage the learning of a language. Such activities reflect a university's belief that language skills bring benefits to the community and that opportunities should be widely available.

Apart from the many benefits of language policies in individual institutions, there is certainly a need for an overarching national language policy that would concern not only all education sectors but also focus on the value of indigenous languages such as Irish, Gaelic, Cornish or Scots and community or heritage languages that are languages of immigrant populations in the UK. Such all-embracing thinking would change the way in which we consider language learning in this country and attach an equal value to those languages that are part of the identity of people living here. In line with initiatives such as the UNESCO Mother Tongue Day that takes place every year in February and celebrates learners' universal right to study their heritage language, this way of thinking, centred around social justice and responsibility as well as society cohesion, would celebrate the diversity of UK's languages and would certainly have a bigger impact on how we view LWTLs in particular, which are often marginalised.

While there are policies such as Scotland's 'Mother Tongue + 2' and the Welsh 'Bilingual + 1' that emphasise the value and promote learning of languages in all education sectors, England continues to lag behind in terms of a coherent joined-up strategy (Humphries and Ayres-Bennett, 2023). Such a strategy would oversee the legislation for languages and put them at the centre of national debates and decision-making concerning not only education but also other aspects of human existence. As stated in The Nuffield Language Enquiry: 'The UK needs competence in many languages - not just French - but the education system is not geared to achieve this. Schools and colleges do not provide an adequate range of languages and levels of competence for the future. Curricular, financial and staffing pressures mean that we teach a narrowing range of languages, at a time when we should be doing the opposite' (2000: 6). This observation is worth noticing in the context of the HE's language provision, especially where over seventy LWTLs are taught across the country. This richness and diversity of LWTLs on offer is hardly discussed and as a result, it is also not sufficiently exploited.

Considering that there are more than 1.5 million British children who are growing up in bilingual households with languages such as Polish, Romanian, Panjabi or Urdu being the most popular home languages, the UK does not capitalise enough on this linguistic diversity as many of these children do not take up a formal qualification in their home language. Vicky Gough, the British Council School Adviser sees this as 'a missed opportunity' and argues that these pupils should be encouraged 'to develop their academic skills and use their language professionally' (Gough, 2023). Enabling school children to gain a GCSE or A-level qualification in their home language or language learnt within community or faith setting, as well as encouraging universities - with the support from government - to offer a pathway for those languages so once these bilingual pupils become students they could continue mastering their linguistic skills to more proficient level, would certainly re-evaluate heritage languages in this country and as a

consequence, strengthen the provision of many of the LWTLs making them more stable and financially viable.

Gough also argues that invigorating language learning in the UK needs to start with focusing on young people and creating opportunities for them in schools. She quotes the findings of the British Council report from 2017, in which 37% of 18-24 years old said that 'they have always wanted to learn another language'. Interestingly, when asked about the choice, apart from Spanish, French and German, young people expressed their interest in learning LWTLs such as Italian, Japanese, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese. This desire to speak languages other than English is certainly in dissonance with the actual situation in schools where only around half of pupils in England take a language at GCSE level. It is noteworthy, as Parrish (2024) points out, that the amount of language tuition pupils receive throughout their primary and secondary education in the UK is considerably lower than in other European countries such as Germany or Greece. This partly explains a common belief in the Anglophone world that learning a language is difficult and therefore there is a lot that needs to be done to not only demystify language learning but also to respond to the students' needs and interests by increasing the hours of tuition and the languages on offer.

Despite the reputation that language learning has received in this country for a long time, the enthusiasm for languages continues to surface throughout people's lifespan and beyond formal education. Similarly however, the actual lifelong learning of languages in the UK, according to the Nuffield Languages Enquiry is also failing: 'Despite extensive interest in language learning among adults, and a commendable appreciation by the government of the value of lifelong learning, there is flagrant inequality of access and a complete absence of coherence in the language provision currently on offer.' (The Nuffield Language Enquiry, 2000: 58) Here again, capitalising on the LWTLs provision that already exists at universities across the country could potentially address the lifelong learning needs, especially since many adults in this survey are interested in learning community languages.

As illustrated earlier, some HEIs are very good at promoting their provision within their university and in a wider community, and, as we have observed already the majority of the IWLP directors recognise a need for a strategic promotion of LWTLs, which is in line with the language centres' status as 'service' departments. Some of those directors reported in the 2024 LWTLs survey, that successful strategies included involving teachers in students' registration and Welcome Weeks or organising language taster sessions and open classes. The presence and direct communication with a tutor often help to dispel the myths about learning LWTLs. This also gives students or members of the public a chance to 'try them out' and ask questions that may concern students wanting to study a given language. Moreover, some directors reported that they have seen an uptake in enrolment since engaging in outreach work in the community, which is another element of social responsibility, one of the core values of many universities.

5. Conclusion

This article is a first attempt to discuss the complexity of the field of LWTLs at HEIs in the UK and at the same time illustrates and celebrates the richness of over seventy languages that are currently offered across the country. We have highlighted the challenges that the field is facing and discussed the approaches

that have been taken to address these challenges and strengthen the provision. As we have observed, the provision of LWTLs is vulnerable to external and institutional changes and fluctuates more than that of the more commonly taught languages.

Although the overall UK's language landscape remains bleak and the decline in language learning in all educational sectors over the last twenty years poses serious challenges for the country, Higher Education has some urgent tasks that should focus on to increase understanding, provision and policy regarding all languages and LWTLs, in particular due to many vulnerabilities that concern their provision.

One of the key steps should be an overarching presence of languages and the emphasis on the value of learning them as part of the university experience whether this is at a degree level, alongside the main degree, as an extracurricular activity or in the form of lifelong learning where those languages are also offered to a wider community. The benefits of language learning should be widely promoted at universities for their importance for employability, improving cognitive functions and socio-political values. This could be achieved through clear language policy at both, institutional and national levels. The role of Higher Education, especially in the context of LWTLs, should be to promote the diversity of languages, spanning from indigenous, through community and heritage to foreign languages, which should be equal in status and prominence. Even though many universities have listed as their core values social inclusion and responsibility, internationalisation and focus on preparing their graduates to become global citizens, languages do not seem to have a prominent place in this agenda, therefore it is critical to make languages available to all students without any financial and institutional barriers.

Another important strategy for HEIs to sustain and strengthen the provision of LWTLs is to adopt a more flexible approach, which is illustrated by adapting the delivery of courses, introducing new levels or modules that directly respond to students' needs as well as to the idiosyncrasies of the languages. As we have observed, some institutions are much more prepared to experiment and take risks with their provision of LWTLs and engage in cross-institution collaboration than others, which is perhaps due to a clearer vision for their language provision, senior management support, and/or less rigid institutional and course structures.

Further research that would provide a complete mapping of the provision would detail the languages on offer, the type and level of courses as well as their geographical spread. This would enable everyone interested in studying languages, whether at a degree level or as an extracurricular activity, to find suitable courses that may be available face-to-face or in an online format. This would also increase opportunities for networking, sharing resources, further collaborations between institutions and individual practitioners as well as making the provision of LWTLs more visible and prominent.

Drawing on the existing resources and linguistic expertise in LWTLs of HEIs to increase outreach activities would help to enhance the links with local communities and raise awareness of the importance of all languages, especially those already spoken around the country. A more holistic thinking about all education sectors and lifelong learning and placing LWTLs more firmly in the context of both local communities and nationally - where online provision is concerned - would certainly help to honour and strengthen the linguistic diversity that already exists in the UK.

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