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## Part I
# Trends and developments

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# Beginners' German – *Ja, bitte!* Development and status quo of German *ab initio* education in degree programmes and language centres at UK universities

Martina Wallner and Elisabeth Wielander

## Introduction

This book is an update and follow-up to Leder, Reimann and Walsh's (1996) volume that was among the first to shed light on the development of *ab initio* German teaching and learning at UK universities. In this chapter, we will first investigate twenty-first-century policy changes and developments in the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) landscape in the UK at secondary level and their impact on higher education, followed by an overview of the development of *ab initio* instruction of German in higher education, both at undergraduate degree level and through institution-wide language programmes for non-specialist language study. We will then outline one example for each model – undergraduate (UG) and IWLP – to demonstrate how *ab initio* German is delivered in practice.

## 25 years on: the MFL landscape in the UK today

It is widely known that student numbers in MFL degree programmes have been declining for a number of years. Nearly 20 years ago, Grix and Jaworska posited that '[a] lack of qualified teachers and low motivation among those teaching are ... contributing factors to the state of language

learning in UK schools', along with 'limited contact with the language and culture' (2002: 4–5), and the situation has not changed significantly since then. Tinsley and Dolezal (2018: 8), for example, report that many schools have difficulty recruiting teachers for some languages or language combinations, and '60% of state schools and more than half of independent schools' struggle to recruit 'teachers of sufficient quality'.

Student motivation for learning foreign languages seems to have been at an alarming low for quite some time. At the turn of the millennium, the Nuffield Language Inquiry found that nine out of ten children stopped learning languages at 16. In its recommendations, the Inquiry called for a 'national strategy for developing capability in languages in the UK' (The Nuffield Languages Inquiry, 2000: 8), going so far as to propose that a language should be made a requirement for university entry. However, the opposite was the norm; in 2004, foreign languages became optional after the age of 14 in secondary state schools in England. These schools are highly dependent on their position in the annual league tables and on favourable assessments by Ofsted inspectors. Given that German is viewed as the most difficult language in the MFL curriculum, schools often encourage less able students to opt out of German post-KS3 (Reershemius, 2010: 1675), and other languages face their own preconceptions. As a result, between 2003 and 2007, during their steepest decline, GCSE entries in MFL overall fell by 27.6 per cent, with an even more marked decrease in German (-35.6 per cent) and French (-34.7 per cent). This ongoing development goes hand in hand with the fact that fewer state secondary schools offer German at KS3, falling from 48 per cent in 2015 to 41 per cent in 2018 (Tinsley and Dolezal, 2018: 10).

These conditions have meant that even fewer students have pursued MFL as a subject to A-level since 2004. As a result, A-level entries in German declined by 37 per cent between 2005 and 2017 (Tinsley and Dolezal, 2018: 4). Consequently, many university language departments struggle to draw a significant number of qualified students to their language degrees.

This development has only been exacerbated by the trebling of university fees in 2012. Until 2011, applications in European languages (and related subjects) had trended upwards, but in the first application cycle under the new fees regime (January 2012), the number of applications for European languages and related subjects decreased by 11.2 per cent. By 2018, applications for European languages and related studies had decreased by 33.1 per cent compared to 2012 (UCAS, 2018), and the latest UCAS figures show that 'the number of applicants accepted this year [2021] had fallen 36 per cent since 2011' (Baker, 2021: n.p.).

Those accepted are increasingly concentrated at a handful of institutions; around 60 per cent of students were accepted by only 13 institutions, whereas 36 universities accepted virtually no students or reduced acceptance numbers by more than half (Baker, 2021).

These recruitment trends have, of course, had a financial impact on MFL departments because of the comparatively high cost of delivery due to the nature of the discipline (the need for smaller groups, delivery of language-specific modules rather than cross-language provision of subject content and so on). By necessity or strategic consideration, a number of universities have discontinued their provision of degree programmes in MFL. Generally speaking, the younger universities and former polytechnics are more likely to phase out MFL programmes than older institutions, particularly the Russell Group, where MFL generally retain their traditional place in the Humanities (Reershemius, 2010: 1677). In October 2013, *The Guardian* reported that, since 2007, 11 universities had completely shut down all specialist language degrees, and a further 13 closed specialist language programmes but still offered languages in combination with other subjects (Bawden, 2013). In total, 'more than 50 universities in the UK have cut courses, or scrapped departments entirely since 2000' (Kelly, 2019). This development shows no sign of slowing down. Recent examples of universities that significantly reduced their language offer and/or staff numbers include Nottingham and Birmingham, and among the institutions that threatened or implemented the closure of their MFL programmes are Ulster, Salford, Hull and Aston.

The – mostly financial – pressures exerted on MFL departments in the current climate are only one side of the story. Since the late 1990s, experts have observed a national trend away from single honours degrees (Footitt, 2005: 9), and even dual language degrees are losing ground (Klapper, 2006: 2). Integrated degrees that combine a language and another non-linguistic discipline are still popular, but increasingly, universities 'are offering programmes in which a language is an optional rather than compulsory component' (Kelly and Jones, 2003: 24).

Among the reasons usually given for this general decline of MFL Studies are the fee-driven market's emphasis on direct routes to clearly defined careers and the assumption that languages are seen as most valuable in combination with other subjects, such as business, despite many voices from both academia and the private sector decrying the worrying lack of qualified linguists. The Confederation of British Industry, conducting its annual report in partnership with Pearson, found that the 'need for languages has been heightened by the UK's departure from the European Union. To achieve the government's ambition for a "Global

Britain", we have to get language teaching … right' (CBI/Pearson, 2018: 31). The latest report confirms that the major European languages most commonly listed by companies as being in demand are: German (37 per cent), Spanish (35 per cent) and French (32 per cent), with Mandarin catching up to or exceeding demand for European languages at 37 per cent for the first time (CBI/Pearson, 2019: 26–7).

To summarise, the high cost of delivering MFL programmes, combined with falling student numbers, means that many language departments, according to their institutions' resource models, are perceived as being in deficit and require cross-subsidy by other parts of the university, or face closure. In such cases, the decision to maintain MFL programmes often depends on high-level strategic considerations, for example the prioritising of MFL as part of an institution's international policy and its mission to train global citizens and enhance employability.

## *Ab initio* German: a new delivery model at degree level

As we have seen, changes in provision and uptake at secondary level have had serious implications for recruitment into language degree programmes at many universities in the UK. Inevitably, German is no exception, in that the number of undergraduate students has fallen continuously – by 33 per cent between 1997 and 2006–7 (Reershemius, 2010: 1678), and even further since then. Ultimately, this trend has led to a wave of department closures: Where 126 universities in the UK offered German undergraduate programmes in 2000, by 2006, their number had fallen by 48 per cent to 65 (Reershemius, 2010: 1678), and in 2014–15, only 53 institutions offered German either as single honours or joint honours (Bawden, 2013).

One way in which universities have tried to make up for the steep decrease in A-level entries and the subsequent fall in university applications has been to open up alternative pathways into university language study. Where traditionally, it was necessary to have an A-level or equivalent qualification in a language to be able to enrol in a university language degree, fewer and fewer secondary schools, particularly in the state sector, offer their pupils the opportunity to attain such a qualification. Therefore, more and more universities have created so-called *ab initio* pathways that require no or very little prior knowledge of the language. These degree pathways usually focus very heavily on language acquisition and progression in the first year or two in order to enable students to

achieve the same level of proficiency as their peers in the post-A-level pathway by the time they graduate.

Data collected during the inaugural meeting of the German *Ab Initio* Network (GAIN) at University College London in June 2017 show that the first *ab initio* programmes in German were introduced in the 1990s, but that the majority of such programmes have come online since the turn of the millennium. The GAIN findings indicate that there are a variety of different delivery models for *ab initio* degree programmes. They differ with regard to the number of weekly hours dedicated to language acquisition, the language level *ab initio* students are required to achieve in each academic year and the point at which these students are integrated with their post-A-level peers. An investigation of *ab initio* delivery at the institutions represented at the GAIN meeting in 2017 found that there were three main modules of integration with post-A-level pathway students: in some institutions, Year 2 *ab initio* students merge with Year 1 post-A-level students. In only a few universities, Year 2 *ab initio* students merge with Year 2 post-A-level students. Meanwhile, in half the institutions present, the two streams only merge in final year, usually after they have spent their third year abroad, studying at a German-speaking university or completing a work placement at a school or company in a German-speaking country.

At the 2017 GAIN meeting, *ab initio* programme leaders and tutors also discussed some of the challenges these programmes pose. Many reported that if their *ab initio* students are expected to join their post-A-level peers in Year 2, this often means that they have to put considerable efforts into developing their language independently during the summer holidays. In some places, they are expected or required to take part in intensive language courses during the summer months. Often, students feel that they do not get enough weekly hours dedicated to language development, and as a result ask for more contact time. At many institutions, tutors report discernible gaps, for example in vocabulary acquisition and self-confidence, between *ab initio* students and their post-A-level peers after integration of the two groups, requiring additional contact hours to be scheduled. And finally, many students underestimate the time, effort and dedication required to successfully complete an *ab initio* language degree, which can lead to significant differences in progression within the group and relatively high drop-out rates.

Some reports on *ab initio* provision have found that departments considering the introduction of *ab initio* pathways often feel that they may be a stop gap for falling recruitment from traditional student groups,

but that they also have knock-on effects for the curriculum and for the workload of colleagues involved in their delivery (Footitt, 2005: 18).

On the other hand, these *ab initio* pathways provide an opportunity to study a language particularly to students from secondary schools who have limited or altogether eliminated language study. In that sense, they are an important instrument of widening participation. Modern foreign languages are increasingly offered predominantly at independent rather than state schools. As equality and diversity data from the Office for Students (OfS, n.d.) show, the student population on language degrees is made up of more than 80 per cent White students who come from mostly affluent homes, as is evidenced by the POLAR4 statistics. Due to the reduction of language teaching in state schools (Tinsley and Dolezal, 2018: 3; Collen, 2020: 3), language students are now typically from privileged backgrounds (Collen 2020), with easy access to language learning and international travel. In order to counter this development, *ab initio* pathways provide access to a discipline that would otherwise increasingly become the privilege of certain sectors of society.

## The rise of IWLPs and German for non-specialists

Against the background of three decades of surveys, academic studies and newspaper reports analysing and lamenting the alarming decline in language learning in schools and in language degrees in UK higher education, a rather interesting phenomenon can be observed at tertiary level during the same period – namely the healthy recruitment to language learning in institution-wide non-specialist language programmes (IWLPs).

In their respective surveys of German Studies in the UK, Kolinsky and Tenberg concluded as early as 1993 that IWLP-type courses, and primarily *ab initio* IWLPs, 'constitute important dimensions of departments' contemporary teaching programmes' in the 'old' universities (Kolinsky, 1993: 122), and although a then 'relatively recent phenomenon' in the post-1992 universities, several institutions expected a threefold increase in IWLP German numbers over the following years (Tenberg, 1993: 155). This optimistic view was clearly borne out for languages in general, and for German in particular, in the years since. By 2001, Marshall (2001: 16) reported that 'the provision of less-specialist language learning in UK universities has grown exponentially in the last 10 years'. Coleman (2004: 150) also described a scenario where '[i]n a major power shift, language centres are increasingly supplying *all* the

language classes for the institution – even where there are specialist degrees in Modern Languages.' Kelly and Jones highlighted that 'language centres are flourishing' (2003: 33), and towards the end of the decade, Worton (2009: 4) confirmed the 'considerable optimism across the Language Centre sector', reporting that 'most [respondents] felt that their language centre was strong and would remain so or grow' (Worton, 2009: 32). In the 2013–14 UCML-AULC survey of language centres, not a single respondent considered prospects for IWLP at their institution 'poor', whereas 65 per cent saw prospects as 'encouraging' (UCML-AULC, 2014: 11). This positive assessment was even improved upon in the following year when 80 per cent of respondents saw the future of their IWLP as 'encouraging' (UCML-AULC, 2015: 18).

The annual UCML-AULC/AULC-UCML surveys have provided a regular overview of the main trends and issues in IWLP since 2012. Due to the absence of UCAS or HESA statistics for the large number of students who study languages in non-credit-bearing modules, survey data relying on self-reporting by participating institutions can only give a general idea of the relative growth or decline of student numbers, and of the comparative position of individual languages within the whole IWLP student body. The fact that a similar number of institutions reported a rise from just under 50,000 to over 62,000 students in total between 2012–13 and 2016–17 (in 61 and 62 institutions respectively) can be seen as proof of the continued rapid rise of IWLPs and the consequent positive outlook of the sector. This trend only seemed to taper off in 2018–19 when the authors concluded that 'the overall numbers for IWLP appear to be stable' (UCML-AULC, 2019: 4).

The 2010s, of course, saw the entry of students into higher education who no longer had language education as a compulsory element at GCSE level. It can therefore be concluded that 'the success of IWLP perhaps reflects challenges elsewhere, including the reduction in take up of languages in schools and downward pressure on numbers being recruited to specialist degree programmes' (UCML-AULC, 2016: 19).

In the context of the overall positive trend of language study in non-degree higher education settings, it is interesting to observe the position of German. Throughout the AULC reporting period 2011–19, German remained the third most popular IWLP language after Spanish and French, thereby occupying the same position, if we exclude English Language, that it already held in 1998–9 (Marshall, 2001: 4). It therefore seems safe to assume that German benefitted from the general upward trend in IWPL student numbers during this period. In fact, the UCML-AULC data suggest that, unlike in degree settings where German was seen

as 'the most vulnerable' of the languages (Worton, 2009: 29), it was a particularly popular choice in IWLP. German featured in the list of languages with increased demand by the greatest number of institutions in every single year of the UCML-AULC survey. It topped the list in 2013–14, 2014–15 and again (in joint first place) in 2015–16, when 'almost half of all participating institutions reported an increase in demand for German and Japanese' (UCML-AULC, 2016: 6).

This 'somewhat puzzling' popularity of German among IWLP learners was emphasised by the authors of the 2013–14 survey, in which respondents had cited 'the economic importance of Germany, employability reasons, and also the popularity of German with Engineering students and with some groups of international students' as potential reasons for the popularity of German (UCML-AULC, 2014: 7).

After several years, the continued growth of German has, however, now seemingly come to an end. By 2018–19, the number of institutions reporting a decline in German for the first time outnumbered those reporting increases. In fact, 'German was reported as showing a decrease in uptake by more respondents than for any other language' (AULC-UCML, 2019: 6). It is yet unclear to what extent this result heralds a new trend for IWLP German in the wake of the impact of Brexit. And unfortunately, it is not only German that saw a decline, but for the first time in a long period of growth, there appear to be signs that the seemingly unstoppable rise of IWLP has come, if not to an end, then at least to a stagnation in growth.

In the following section, we will examine two institutions' delivery of *ab initio* German to illustrate two different models – one at degree level and the other as part of an IWLP.

## Case study 1: the *ab initio* degree pathway at Aston University[1]

Languages have made an important contribution to Aston's image and reputation from its beginnings as a university in 1966. Students choose Aston because they want to study languages applied to real-life settings and with a clear emphasis on the political, cultural and societal characteristics of target language regions. Target language instruction outside of the core language modules, also known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), has been the USP of language study at Aston from the very outset, and Aston students complete a large proportion of their studies in the target language.

The German group at Aston is part of one of three academic departments that make up the School of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). Students can study a language in combination with either another language or with one of the subjects on offer in SSH. Depending on the subject combination, all language students acquire 40–80 of 120 required credits in each academic year through the medium of the target language. The basic 40 credits consist of a core language module and a core subject module such as Introduction to the French/Spanish(/etc.)-Speaking World or Politics & Society. The rest of the credits come from L2-taught optional modules, from English-taught modules in the combination subject or from another language studied as part of the IWLP (Languages for All). In addition, Aston offers an integrated degree in International Business and Modern Languages (IBML). All undergraduate language programmes feature a mandatory year abroad in one of the L2-speaking countries, where students undertake a work placement, work as language assistants through the British Council or study at an L2-speaking university after their second year of study.

As discussed previously, OfS equality and diversity data indicate that the vast majority of language students tend to be White and from affluent households. This is not a profile that matches the majority of Aston language students. Entry profiles show that most students are from the region, come largely from ethnic minority backgrounds, and often from low-income families. Aston's award as Guardian University of the Year 2020 was won in celebration of Aston's 'commitment to social mobility and diversity'. In MFL, this means giving students access to a subject they have previously had very limited opportunity to experience. Key to this strategy was the introduction of *ab initio* language routes in 2015 – first in German and French and a year later in Spanish, followed by Mandarin Chinese in 2018 – that allow students to study a language from beginners' level without A-level requirements.

The *ab initio* pathways at Aston follow a pattern similar to that of the post-A-level cohort: 40 of the 60 yearly credits for the half programme in the language are dedicated to an intensive language module, with five hours of contact time per week and an extensive array of learning tasks and formative assessment for another 10 hours of independent study per week. Usually, four of the five hours of contact time are delivered by the module convenor and structured around the chosen coursebook (*Motive A1-B1*), and an additional hour of language practice is delivered by language assistants. In March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery was adapted to the new circumstances, particularly in the academic year 2020–1: students were asked to complete asynchronous

tasks (mainly grammar explanations and exercises or vocabulary overviews) estimated to take one hour before joining the first of three hours of weekly synchronous webinars with the module convenor and an additional one-hour webinar with the language assistant.

This pattern of delivery applies to the first two years of the *ab initio* pathway. In addition to the language module, Year 1 *ab initio* students join their post-A-level counterparts in the module 'Introduction to Language and Communication', which is taught in English across the languages. In Year 2, the *ab initio* students face a much more challenging task: they join the Year 1 post-A-level cohort in a content module that introduces them to the history, society, geography and politics of German-speaking countries. This module is taught in the target language and assumes proficiency of at least B1 level. Since the *ab initio* students generally reach level A2 at the end of their first year of study, they have an additional seminar where the topics covered in the module are revised and where the students learn the specific language necessary to discuss them. All students spend their third year abroad.

Overall, the introduction of the *ab initio* pathway has seen mixed results. On the one hand, it has to some extent made up for the drop in post-A-level recruitment figures. In fact, in some years, more students enrol on the *ab initio* pathway than on the post-A-level stream. On the other hand, attrition is a more serious issue among *ab initio* students than for their post-A-level peers where few, if any, students leave the programme before graduation, whereas in *ab initio*, some years see up to half the cohort change programme or leave altogether before they go on their placement year. However, those who stick it out tend to catch up with, and at times even outperform, their post-A-level peers once they are integrated in the shared final year, a clear indication that *ab initio* provides an opportunity for very able students to excel.

## Case study 2: the Keele 'with competency in German' degree designation

The national trends in recruitment to German were mirrored at Keele University: a period of strong recruitment to the German degree programme in the early 1990s was followed by a steady decline in applications in the early 2000s, when specialist language degrees that had hitherto been offered in a wide range of dual honours combinations were phased out. At the same time, the university committed to expanding the existing provision for students to study language electives as part of,

or in addition to, non-language degrees via the creation of a new language centre in 2010.

Keele's founding ethos with its emphasis on interdisciplinarity had, since its post-war inception in 1949, ensured an element of breadth of education across all programmes. Undergraduate language subsidiary modules for students from all faculties had therefore already been a well-established and popular feature in students' foundation and first year programmes; and second- and third-year students were able to join on a non-credit-bearing basis, financed via separate lifelong learning funding which was available until HEFCE's ELQ policy change in 2008.

By 2001, it had become apparent that there was an increasing demand for a formal recognition of such extra-curricular language learning. Consequently, a 'Certificate of Language Competency in [Language]' was established that allowed students who successfully completed a series of language modules in each of their three years of study to graduate with a university-approved additional qualification.

A far-reaching curriculum reform at Keele in 2008–10 finally enabled the inclusion of language electives in each of the three years of study in many programmes. By this time, there was general recognition of the wider importance of language learning and the national skills gap in languages, but also general acknowledgement of the role that language learning could play in the enhancement of the university's internationalisation agenda, and in the development of graduate attributes as well as transferable and employability skills. This created a climate in which language electives could flourish.

The elevation of language modules to the status of credit-bearing modules – now counting towards degree classifications in students' second and final year presented additional challenges for the new language centre. A complete redesign of all modules with benchmarking against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) set clear standards for learning outcomes and assessments at each level, thereby implementing a quality assurance mechanism that was to become the sector norm in the following years. By 2013–14 around 85 per cent of respondents to the UCML-AULC survey indicated reference to CEFR (2014: 9).

With languages firmly embedded within a large number of programmes, and student numbers for IWLP languages at Keele following the national upward trend, a further major development followed in 2015–16, when the separate 'Certificate of Language Competency' was withdrawn in favour of enhanced degree titles that include the designation 'with competency in [Language]' or 'with advanced

competency in [Language]'. These formally recognise the sustained engagement with language learning during an undergraduate course and the wide-ranging benefits this can have on students' personal development, international outlook and transferable skills.

Over the course of a typical three-year undergraduate programme, students who start as *ab initio* German learners can normally reach the 'with competency in German' degree designation, equating to CEFR A2/B1 level, by completing six one-semester modules. Those who attend intensive summer residential courses at a partner university abroad can reach this level within two years. There is even a route from *ab initio* to 'advanced competency' level (CEFR B1/B2) for students who spend a year abroad or attend a minimum of eight weeks of intensive language courses over the period of three years. This accelerated pathway has in practice only been completed by one student in the past 20 years, whereas the basic 'with competency' is well within reach of any student who decides to persevere with their learning during their time at Keele. In summer 2020, 49 students graduated with degree enhancements across all languages, six of whom gained a formal recognition of studying German in awards such as 'LLB in Law with competency in German'.

Within the debate about *ab initio* language courses in an IWLP context, it has to be acknowledged that students who only receive two hours of contact time per week in their chosen language and who do not have a compulsory period abroad, will not reach the high level of linguistic proficiency and in-depth knowledge of culture and society that is expected of MFL graduates. Despite the extensive use of asynchronous self-study tasks delivered via the VLE, the relative lack of contact time is further exacerbated by the fact that students who study languages as a minor element in their degree at lower levels of proficiency are generally less likely to organise or take part in extra-curricular language activities. The term 'with competency in German' – rather than 'with proficiency in German' or simply 'with German' – is therefore deliberately used to acknowledge the student's considerable achievement of learning a language from beginners' to CEFR B1 level as a minor element within a non-MFL degree and, at the same time, to indicate that it is not providing the CEFR B2/C1 proficiency of MFL graduates. This should not be seen a deficit, however, as

> all linguistic skills, including those achieved at lower levels, can be of professional advantage, since employers do not only appreciate the instrumental value of linguistic skills, but also the additional

knowledge, cultural awareness and sensitivities that are brought about by language capability at all levels. (Skrandries, 2016: 17)

The 'Keele model' of allowing students to gain language skills and a qualification alongside their principal subjects is therefore well-placed to respond to the demand for linguistically and interculturally capable graduates in a climate where fewer and fewer applicants wish to commit to studying specialist language degrees. The success of the 'with-language competency' degree enhancements is, in fact, a key element in current discussions about adding additional (non-language) 'Global Challenges' enhancement pathways to the Keele portfolio in the near future.

## Conclusion: Brexit and beyond

As the previous discussion has shown, a number of national policy decisions related to the British education system have had a direct or indirect impact on the fortunes of German provision at UK universities. The national discourse on the value of languages has been discouraging, despite recurring reports and commentaries in various news outlets bemoaning the negative impact on the skills gap in languages on society and the economy. At the time of writing, there are two major developments that will no doubt affect the long-term future for language learning in the UK – the combined impact of Brexit and of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the EU referendum in 2016, a shift in attitudes towards European languages has emerged. With Brexit now a reality, further detrimental developments are to be expected. To give but one example, many schools – both state and independent – have at least one teacher on staff who is from an EU country without UK citizenship, leaving many school managers worried about their ability to recruit and retain staff, so that 'finding language teachers of sufficient quality is a concern for 60 per cent of state schools and more than half of independent schools' (Tinsley and Dolezal, 2018: 8). And of the state schools that still offer German at and beyond KS3, more than half reported that pupils were 'less motivated' to study European languages after Brexit (Collen, 2020).

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to fully online delivery of language modules was managed with admirable alacrity in MFL departments and language centres at many universities across the UK, aided by a subject community that has embraced technological innovations for many years. The new form of delivery has often meant a reduction of synchronous teaching and learning opportunities and often

also a reduction in available spaces on IWLP courses that had to reduce student numbers to make online learning effective.

Finally, the recent call for a national languages strategy in a set of joint proposals from the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Association of School and College Leaders, the British Council and Universities UK highlights the 'overwhelming evidence of an inadequate, longstanding, and worsening supply of the language skills needed by the UK to meet future needs' and emphasises the need for 'urgent, concerted and coordinated action at all levels from primary schools through to university and beyond' (British Academy et al., 2020: 2). In order to ensure that the ever-increasing skills gap in languages is reversed, the British government needs to make a strong commitment to language education at all levels.

## Notes

1  Due to falling student numbers, Aston University management decided to discontinue recruitment to German degree programmes – both *ab initio* and post-A-level – from September 2020. The remaining language degree programmes in French, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese were closed down after a final admissions cycle in August 2021.

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