Multilingual Manchester

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Investigating the personal attitudes and motives for acquiring additional language learning at higher education

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1 Introduction

This study's central focus is to explore the "personal attitudes and motivations behind the decision to learn a modern foreign language (MFL) at higher education in The University of Manchester." Alongside this, the study aimed to address other key areas surrounding the subject of learning an MFL at higher education. This included researching people's attitudes and views towards MFL learning, individual's opinions on their support and encouragement from others and to see if and how compulsory language learning in prior education affects an individual's motivations to continue MFL learning at higher education. Furthermore, this study also aimed to see if there is a correlation between enjoyment and academic success for the participating students at the University of Manchester.

Regarding changes to the methods that were used to undergo this study, some aspects and dates on the initial time plan were rearranged to increase the flow of the research and better fit around new plans and ideas. One of these changes included the questionnaire being distributed later than proposed. One reason for this was due to the fact that some language lecturers/tutors that were approached felt uncomfortable with handing out the questionnaires in lectures and classes to pupils. The questionnaire was instead created on an online resource; *'surveyplant.com'* and it was decided that it would be distributed via email and other online resources to students by their tutors and lecturers. Another reason for the rescheduled distribution date was because the original date for distribution was in the middle of the Easter holidays, meaning the majority of students would have returned home making the logistics of distribution and collection difficult, hence further supporting our decision to exclusively distribute them electronically. As a further consequence of the later distribution date, the interviews had to be conducted at alternative times than previously stated on the time plan. Furthermore, due to the busy nature at this time of the academic year the number of interviews with tutors of MFL's had to be reduced to less than originally planned.

In order to ensure that reliable and representative data was collected, it was necessary to carry out a pilot study. This involved sending an initial questionnaire to a small convenience sample, of peers studying MFL, and reviewing the results to see if the questions were correctly interpreted and answered. This highlighted necessary changes that needed to be made to increase the validity of the questions before distribution. Feedback given about the pilot study questionnaire was also taken into consideration when changes were made. It was shown to be important that each question was concise and therefore unambiguous so that there could be no misinterpretation of how to answer. Therefore, the wording of a few questions was slightly altered in order to ensure there was a full understanding of this from the participants.

Whilst interpreting the findings of this study, the quantitative data was manipulated from raw numbers/frequencies into percentages to show it as a proportion, so it is easier for readers to understand as no further interpretation of the data is needed. The majority of the

data is also provided in graphs and tables, again to show it a lot more clearly as opposed to just numbers.

2 Findings

The first research questions the findings will address is how compulsory language learning in prior education effects an individual's motivations to continue MFL learning at higher education. Results from the questionnaire show that 71% of participants studied an MFL as a GCSE due to it being a compulsory subject. In addition to this, 75% of individuals who studied compulsory MFL's at GCSE continued to do so at A-Level.

MFL as an optional GCSE subject choice: 28.89%

MFL as a compulsory GCSE subject choice: 71.11%

● MFL as a compulsory GCSE subject choice   32   ● MFL as an optional GCSE subject choice   13
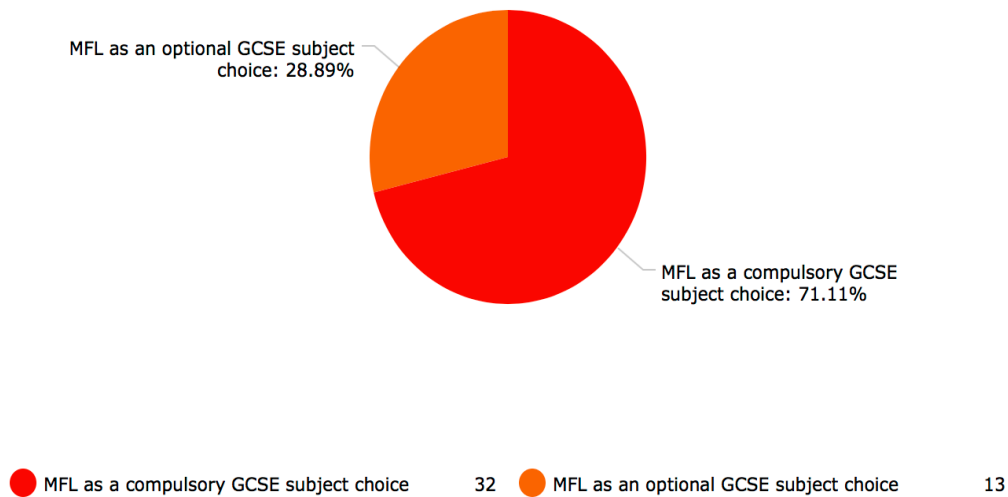
Figure 1. Pie chart showing the amount of participants who studied an MFL GCSE due to it being compulsory compared to those who optionally chose to study an MFL at GCSE.

DID NOT take A-level after compulsory GCSE in MFL: 25.00%

DID take A-level after compulsory GCSE in MFL: 75.00%

● DID NOT take A-level after compulsory GCSE in MFL   8   ● DID take A-level after compulsory GCSE in MFL   24
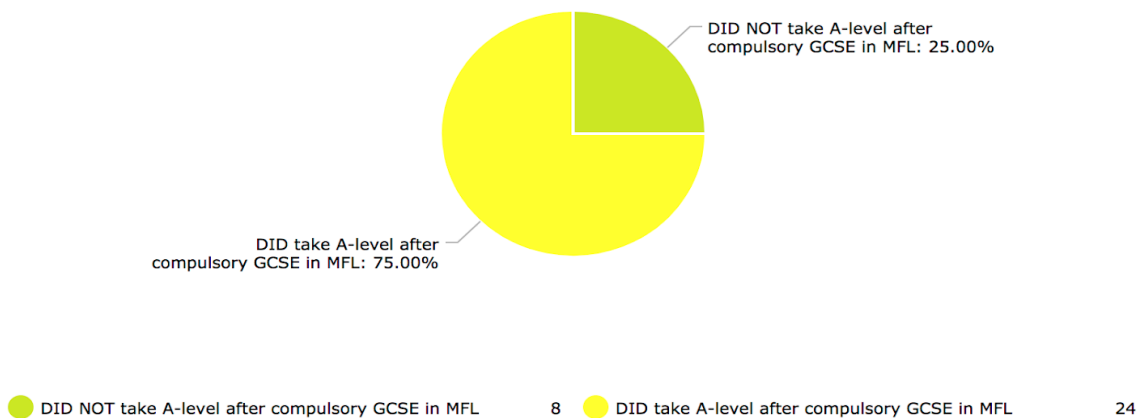
Figure 2. Pie chart showing how many participants who studied a compulsory MFL GCSE continued to study an MFL at A-Level compared to those who did not carry on studying an MFL at A-Level.

The results from the first chart show that prior education in MFL's significantly increase a individuals decision to continue the subject through to A-Level. This is a clear indicator that having MFL's as a compulsory requirement at GCSE *increases* the chances of individuals studying MFL later on in education. This could be due to the fact that by making MFL's compulsory subjects, it obliges students to experience studying MFL. Then by experiencing the subject they have more of a chance to develop an interest in the topic than those who were not obliged to study MFL. This therefore increases their likelihood to continue studying it to a further level of education. In both compulsory and non-compulsory GCSE educations, the percentage rate is higher for those with intrinsic motivation, showing that the majority that continue to study at higher education do for enjoyment. These results also question the governments statutory decision in 2004 to stop an MFL being a compulsory subject if the onset of MFL learning at GCSE increases the number of students who continue to study it at higher education.

Another research question that the questionnaire aimed to address was of individual's motivation to continue to study an MFL at higher education. The results from question 21 of the questionnaire, as to main self-reported motivation, were analysed and all the answers fell under one (or more) or the following categories: 1. Personal gain, with the main factors of this being 'personal enjoyment', interest and/or passion, it was 'easy for them to learn' or 'wanting to become fluent'. 2. Career based, i.e. the participant wishes to pursue a job in the field of MFL. 3. Travel, whether that be during the year abroad compulsory within their degree or in the future following graduation. These were then further grouped into two subgroups in accordance to the definitions given in (Bernard, 2010); intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. Those who's main motivation type was given in the personal gain category were classed as intrinsically motivated. The remainder of the participants were classed as extrinsically motivated. The results of these subgroups are shown below:
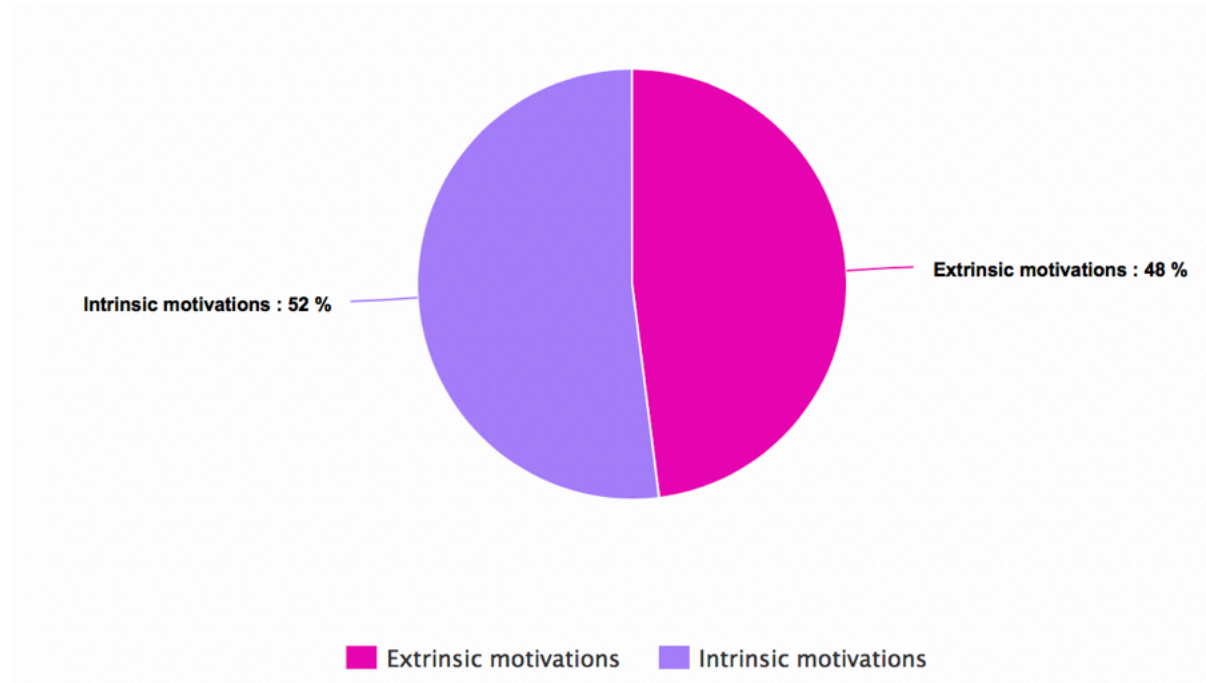
Figure 3. Pie chart displaying the participants who had extrinsic motivations compared to participants who had intrinsic motivations at higher education.

By comparing the reported levels of extrinsic vs intrinsic motivations at higher education, it seems that there is not much of a significant difference as to the motivation type of the sample with only a slightly higher proportion of participant's giving answers that fell under our definition of intrinsic motivation. However, it should be noted that the category of intrinsic motivation, as defined above had stricter guidelines than that of extrinsic motivation with only personal gain out of the 3 main reasons falling into it. Therefore, although the data shows that there is a range of motivations that influence a person's decision to study a MFL at higher education, it does suggest an agreement with the literature (Bernard, 2010) (Busse & Walter, 2013) that those who are intrinsically motivated tend to achieve more.

This study also aimed to determine if there is a relationship between the age of onset learning of an MFL and the extent of intrinsic motivation for learning the language studied by the participants. The following box and whisker chart displays the findings to this research question:
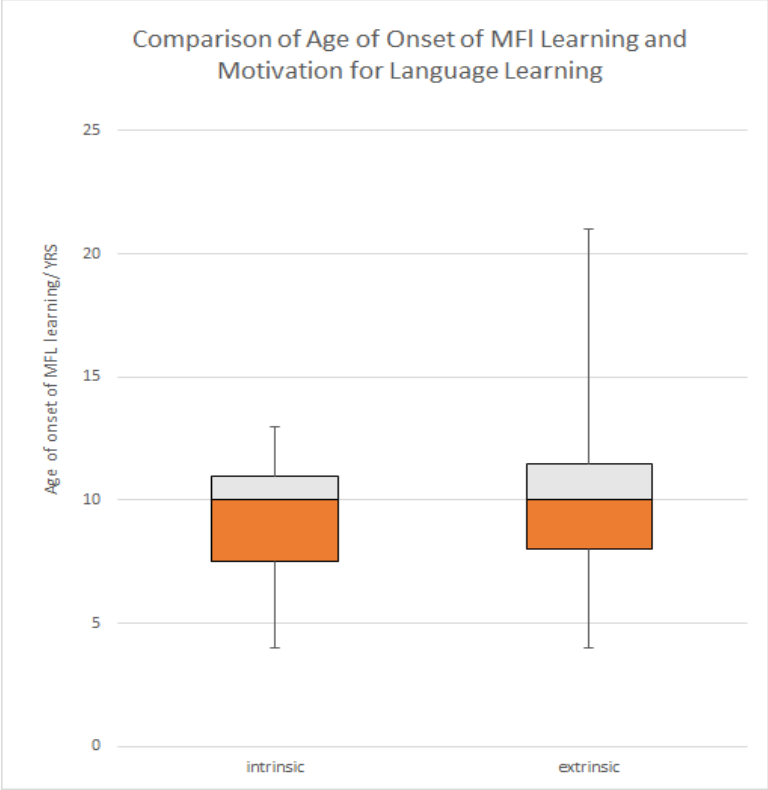
Figure 4. Box and whisker chart showing the difference between participants with intrinsic motivations compared to those with extrinsic motivations depending on their age.

The chart above compares the range, mean and upper and lower quartiles of the age of the participants who expressed intrinsic motivations and the same for those who expressed extrinsic motivations. The large overlapping ranges of plots show that there is no significant difference between the two. However, the negative skew of data on the intrinsically motivated group compared to the positive skew of the extrinsic group does suggest there to be some negative correlation between intrinsic motivation and increasing age.

Another research question that this study aimed to investigate was whether there is a correlation between enjoyment and academic success. In order to test this hypothesis in this study, the participants of the questionnaire were asked to rate their writing, reading and listening skills in the MFL they're currently studying on a scale of 1-5; 1 being basic vocabulary and 5 being fluent. The tables below show the results that were interpreted from the answers to these questions.

Writing:

	Answered on a scale of 1-2(%)	Answered on a scale of 3(%)	Answered on a scale of 4-5(%)
Participants with extrinsic motivations	26%	34%	34%
Participants with intrinsic motivations	16%	22%	60%

Reading:

	Answered on a scale of 1-2 (%)	Answered on a scale of 3 (%)	Answered on a scale of 4-5 (%)
Participants with extrinsic motivations	14%	22%	60%
Participants with intrinsic motivations	8%	25%	60%

Listening:

	Answered on a scale of 1-2 (%)	Answered on a scale of 3 (%)	Answered on a scale of 4-5 (%)
Participants with extrinsic motivations	31%	28%	39%
Participants with intrinsic motivations	16%	20%	56%

For writing, reading and listening, the participants with extrinsic motivations had a higher percentage rate of rating themselves on the lower end of the scale (1-2) in all three cases. In comparison, participants with intrinsic motivations had a lower percentage rate when rating themselves 1-2 (basic vocab) and 3 (average) compared to those with extrinsic motivations. In listening and writing, participants with intrinsic motivations had a substantially higher percentage rate of rating themselves on the higher end of the scale (4-5). Out of the 48% of participants whose motivation were extrinsic based, only 2 participants rated just one of their skills a 5 (fluent level) with 14 participants with intrinsic motivations rating one or more of their skills a 5. These results evidently support the fact that those who's motivations stem from enjoyment perform better than those who do not.

On top of the distribution of questionnaires, academics were interviewed about their experience of any changes to motivation in language learning of their students, societal attitudes to language learning, their experience in motivation students to learn an MFL and the

attitudes of students to MFL learning in comparison to their other modules or courses outside of language learning. It was decided that the interview questions would be written following the responses from the questionnaires so that they address the actual findings as well as the research question. The interviews are not the primary source of data to shed light on individual motivations to language learning, but to contextualise and triangulate the data. Unfortunately, only one interview was able to be carried out, due to the time of the academic year, as most were busy preparing exams. In the interview, the interviewee was asked 'what year did you begin teaching an MFL at higher education?', in order to establish whether they were teaching during the change to MFL policy which made language learning post age 14 non-compulsory in 2004, to which the interviewee answered 'September 2001'. This therefore allowed all the interviewees answers to be in reference to this change, in order to address the question as to whether the policy change had any effect on students' motivations to learn a language a higher education level. However, when asked about noticeable changes to the motivation of their students over the time they had been teaching our interviewee did not profess to have noticed any claiming that individual motivations, especially that to assimilate into their chosen MFL speaking world remained consistent. The responses from the questionnaire showed that there is an obvious correlation between enjoyment and motivation to learn. Therefore, in the interview the following question was asked: '*enjoyment has been listed as one of the major factors influencing motivation and achievement in studying a MFL. In your experience what would you say is the biggest influencing factor in classes that leads to students enjoying learning their chosen MFL?*'. This was in order to assess areas for future research to further analyse personal motivations for language learning and what extraneous variables can affect them. The answer from the interviewee supported this by claiming *'the enjoyment then is only possible by trying other techniques to encourage positive motivations'*. This highlighted the necessity for future research as although all personal motivations are individual and therefore influenced by a number of different extraneous variables, understanding and categorising how these variables may affect allows for techniques to combat them. When asked '*what other factors do you think have the greatest effects on their students maintaining positive motivations in their target MFL'*, the interviewee responded with '*a positive attitude towards the appropriate speaking community*', which supports the idea that a positive attitude may have a positive effect on a student's learning. The interviewee also stated that '*cohesive and relaxed groups where nobody feels embarrassed, the use of materials and participants in activities that are relevant to their interested*'. The answers to questionnaires from participants showed that many students felt under supported in their studies, with a few students making direct references to the fact that the way languages are taught do not help them achieve their full potential. This is therefore an issue that needs addressing in future research.

3 Discussions

Following research showing an overall negative trend numbers of language learners in the UK and reports into the types of motivation that effect language learning (Bernard, 2010) (Busse & Walter, 2013) (Holmes, 2016), it became apparent that there is a lack of information concerning the evaluation of student's individual differences in regard to their motivation to study MFL's at higher education. Therefore, it was important that the questionnaire directly addressed these issues, providing enough information to come to a conclusion on individual differences in motivations. It was found that 48% of participants personal motivation stems from extrinsic motivations, such as a future career associated with MFL's or they have experienced exam success in the past and so felt it was the best choice to continue with something they academically excel at. The other 52% of participant's personal motivations were based on intrinsic motivations, for example factors like personal enjoyment, general interest and a passion for the subject. However, although 48% of participants motivations were based solely on extrinsic motivations, the majority of those with intrinsic motivations did mention that they believed their degree choice would help their careers in the future, although it wasn't their main motivation.

Another main issue that was encountered when conducting background research was that the studying of MFL's has negative connotations surrounding the subject, as some define it as 'pessimistic' or a 'useless' thing to study (Board & Tinsley, 2015). Our questionnaire challenged this view by asking the participants to rate how they personally feel people view their degree choice, on a scale of 1 (positive) -5 (negative). Based on participants answers to this question, it was found that 30% of participants felt that people viewed their studying of an MFL as positive with only 5% of participants feeling that people viewed it as negative. The highest rated answer for this question was number 2 on the scale (36% of participants). This suggests that people's opinions towards MFLs being studied at a higher level may have changed over time, as it is becoming more and more of desirable skill in someone's professional and personal life. Despite this, 35% of participants claimed they did not feel encouraged to continue studying an MFL higher education, with 6 participants even stating in their answers that they don't feel encouraged by others. In addition to this, 39% of participants also confirmed that they do not feel supported enough in their MFL studies. These findings alone show that although people may view MFL learning as more positively now, it does not necessarily mean that there is more importance placed on this degree choice in comparison to those studying more prestige degree choices, such as maths and sciences.

It was also noted in case studies that were read (Bernard, 2010) that different attitudes and feelings toward an activity, in this case the studying of MFL's, can have an effect on an individual's performance of this certain activity. The responses to the question of how participants personally feel people view their degree choice were compared with participants

ratings of their own writing, reading and listening skills. It was found that 30% of participants who feels as though people have a positive view on their degree had rated all of their own skills between 1-2 (basic vocab) and 39% of those who feel as though people had a positive view on their degree had rated their skills between 4-5 (fluent). This shows that people viewing MFL learning as a positive thing had a positive effect on these particular participants learning, as there is a higher percentage of those excelling in their performance of MFL learning. It was also found that only 14% of participants who rated people's personal opinions as negatively (from 3-5 on the scale) rated their own skills as between 1-2 (basic vocab), with 64% of these participants rating at least two of their reading, writing and/or listening skills between 4-5 (fluent). This therefore disproves, with regards to our data, that negative attitudes towards MFL learning has a negative effect on an individual's performance; it actually has the opposite effect. It could be possible that these particular participants feel more motivated to do well to prove other people's opinions wrong, however further research would be needed to investigate this hypothesis.

To conclude, this study aimed to address some missing areas of research that were established in the literature surrounding individual motivation for language learning using the case of the university of Manchester. The findings of this study have provided a basis to these missing areas on a small scale, however it has provided some basic statistic for future research in regard to the areas discussed. With respect to the title of this study, the questionnaire investigated the personal attitudes and motivations for acquiring additional language learning at higher education. It's been established that although there is a higher rate of participants with intrinsic motivations in this study, the majority of participants are very conscious of the fact that the studying of an MFL at higher education will have an effect on their future plans and career. Despite this, it's important to remember that a statistic does not define all students' individual motivations and there is no 'label' that apply to all student's personal motivations and attitudes. This study brought to light some issues that could be addressed and changed in education at the moment, for example the level of support and encouragement towards students.

4 References

Bernard, J. (2010). *Motivation in Foreign Language Learning: The Relationship between Classroom Activities, Motivation, and Outcomes in a University Language-Learning Environment.* Pittsburgh : Carnegie Mellon University.

Board, K., & Tinsley, T. (2015). *Language Trends 2014/15*. Retrieved from British Council: https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language_trends_survey_2015.pdf

Busse, V., & Walter, C. (2013). Foreign Language Learning Motivation in Higher Education: A longitudinal Study of Motivation Changes and Their Causes. *The Modern Language Journal*, 435-456.

Holmes, B. (2016). *Born Global.* London: The British Academy.

5 Appendix

Questionnaire

1. What is your nationality?
2. What is your date of birth?
3. What is your first language?
4. What language(s) are spoken in your home environment?
5. Are there any environmental factors that influence your MFL learning? For example your parents, your birth place etc.
6. Have you ever studied a language(s) outside of education? Multiple choice: Yes or No
7. If yes to question 6, please state the language(s) you learned and the age you began learning at.
8. At what age did you begin learning a language in education?
9. Did you take GCSE(s) or equivalent in modern foreign language (MFL)? Multiple choice: Yes or No
10. If yes to question 9, was it compulsory at your educational institution? Multiple choice: Yes or No
11. If no to question 10, why did you choose to study an MFL at GCSE?
12. If you did study a GCSE (or equivalent) which MFL(s) did you study? Please state all.
13. Did you have an enjoyable experience when studying a MFL at GCSE (or equivalent)? Multiple choice: Not enjoyable, somewhat, average, good, enjoyable.
14. Did you continue to study these MFLs at A-Level (or equivalent)? Multiple choice: Yes or No
15. If yes to question 14, briefly explain your reasoning to not continue to learn an MFL at higher education. (You should give your answer in key words and/or phrases, not full sentences, less than 15 words).
16. If no to question 14, briefly explain your reasoning to not continue to learn an MFL at higher education. (You should give your answer in key words and/or phrases, not in full sentences, less than 15 words).
17. Do you feel as though a MFL GCSE (or equivalent) should be compulsory in schools? Multiple choice: Yes or No
18. What MFL are you currently studying at university?
19. What is your full degree title?
20. How are you studying your MFL? Multiple choice: Honours degree, joint honours, LEAP (free choice module) course, paid LEAP course, other.
21. Please briefly state your main motivation(s) behind your choice to learn a MFL at university.
22. Did you feel encouraged to continue studying MFL(s) at higher education? Please briefly explain your answer.
23. Do you feel as though you would personally benefit from an employment focused lecture within your MFL studies? Multiple choice: Yes or No
24. Do you believe learning a MFL will help further your career? Multiple choice: Yes or No
25. What field do you want to work in following your degree?
26. How would you rate your writing skills in your MFL? Please only select one number. Scoring: (basic vocab) 1 2 3 4 5 (fluent).

27. How would you rate your reading skills in your MFL? Please only select one number. Scoring: (basic vocab) 1 2 3 4 5 (fluent).

28. How would you rate your listening skills in your MFL? Please only select one number. Scoring: (basic vocab) 1 2 3 4 5 (fluent).

29. Do you feel you are supported enough in your studies to reach your full potential in MFL learning? Please state yes or no and briefly explain your answer.

30. How do you personally feel people view your degree choice, with regards to MFL. Scoring: (positive) 1 2 3 4 5 (negative)

31. Do you feel as though the teaching of MFL in schools is as important as core subjects as maths, English, science etc. Multiple choice: Yes or No

Interview questions

1. What year did you begin teaching MFL at higher education?
2. Over your time teaching MFL at higher education level have you seen a noticeable changing in motivation to learn their target MFL from your students?
3. If so, what would you say has been the greatest influencing factor for this trend?
4. In your experience what would you say is the biggest influencing factor in classes that leads to students enjoying learning their chosen MFL?
5. What other factors do you think have the greatest effects on your students maintaining positive motivation in their target MFL?
6. Would you say that your students who are already bi or multilingual show more or less motivation in their chosen MFL than those who are not?
7. Why would you say this?
8. Would you say that employment skills in general is a major or minor motivator for your students to learn their chosen MFL?
9. How has this changed over the time you have been teaching?
10. What, in your opinion, is the general attitude of the UK towards the importance of learning an MFL?
11. Do you think that this has a significant effect on the motivation of your students to do the work required to achieve an MFL at higher education level?
12. If so what is this effect?
13. Do you find it difficult to motivate students to do the work that's required of them to process in their chosen MFL?
14. For your students studying a MFL as part of a LEAP or joint degree, in general, how would you say that the MFL modules studied are regarded in importance by pupils in comparison to the areas of their studies?