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Motivations and Pathways in Higher Education Language Learning:

Evidence to Inform the Next Phase of *Languages Connect*

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
List of Tables	4
List of Figures	4
Executive Summary	5
Policy Context and Background	7
Research Overview	8
Findings	9
Language learning trajectory and experience	10
Language backgrounds of participants	10
Language learning prior to higher education	11
Language learning in higher education	12
Factors shaping participation	13
Motivation, attitudes and continuity	14
Motivations for language learning	14
Motivational trajectories across the language learning journey	16
Attitudes toward language learning.....	17
Continuity and lifelong learning	18
Artificial Intelligence and future language learning	19
Attitude towards AI and future language learning.....	19
Attitudes towards AI-supported language learning.....	20
AI and broader language learning attitudes	21
Barriers, challenges, and support needs	22
Barriers to participation in higher education language learning	22
Challenges associated with discontinuation	24
Support needed to sustain language learning continuity	25
Discussion and Implications for the Next Phase of <i>Languages Connect</i>.....	27
Positive attitudes provide the foundation for sustained participation	28
Continuity across the language learning continuum	28
The distinctive contribution of higher education	29
Multilingualism, Artificial Intelligence and the future of language learning	29
Policy Recommendations	30
Recommendation 1: Strengthen continuity across the language learning continuum	31
Recommendation 2: Recognising language learning as a strategic capacity	32
Conclusion.....	33
References.....	34

List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Distribution of participants by discipline</i>	8
Table 2 <i>Home and heritage languages reported by participants.....</i>	10
Table 3 <i>Language learning pathways before higher education</i>	11
Table 4 <i>Languages currently being studied by participants</i>	12
Table 5 <i>Interview findings: Qualitative themes underlying motivations for language learning</i>	15
Table 6 <i>Variation in support needs across student groups</i>	26

List of Figures

Figure 1 <i>Participation and discontinuation rates across stages of study</i>	13
Figure 2 <i>Survey findings: Students' motivations for language learning among current learners</i>	14
Figure 3 <i>Peak motivation across the language learning journey.....</i>	16
Figure 4 <i>Attitudes toward language learning by participation groups</i>	17
Figure 5 <i>Attitudes towards AI and future language learning</i>	19
Figure 6 <i>AI support orientation construction</i>	20
Figure 7 <i>Correlations between AI related attitudes and broader language learning attitudes</i>	21
Figure 8 <i>Barriers to participation in higher education language learning</i>	23
Figure 9 <i>Challenges associated with discontinuation from higher education language learning...</i>	23
Figure 10 <i>Supports identified for sustaining language learning continuity</i>	25

Executive Summary

Background

Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education (2017-2026) identifies the need to strengthen language learning across the education system and to develop a stronger evidence base to inform future policy. While substantial progress has been made in primary and post-primary education, comparatively little evidence has been available on students' experiences of language learning beyond school and the factors shaping continued participation in higher education. To address this evidence gap, Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth, commissioned this mixed-methods study to explore students' motivations, experiences, and pathways in relation to foreign language learning in Irish higher education. The study combined survey responses from 462 students with interviews involving 17 students and seven language educators and institutional representatives across Trinity College Dublin and South East Technological University.

Headline findings

- 1. Students consistently recognised the value of language learning.**
Participants associated language learning with communication, intercultural understanding, personal development, international engagement and future employment.
- 2. Motivation alone did not determine participation.**
Students reported diverse and predominantly intrinsic motivations, but participation depended on the opportunities available to continue language learning.
- 3. Continuity emerged as the principal policy challenge.**
Barriers to participation and challenges associated with discontinuation were primarily structural rather than motivational, relating to programme availability, curriculum flexibility, workload, progression opportunities and access to appropriate provision.
- 4. Students identified a clear need for more flexible language learning pathways.**
Flexible pathways, appropriate course levels, clearer progression routes, institutional recognition and opportunities for meaningful communication and intercultural engagement were identified as priorities for sustaining participation.
- 5. Language learning extends beyond traditional language disciplines.**
Students from diverse educational, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds identified a need for institutional support, reinforcing that language learning should not be viewed solely as the domain of traditional language disciplines.
- 6. Students expressed a strong commitment to continue language learning.**
Future plans extended beyond formal study to include self-directed learning, international mobility, professional use, heritage language maintenance and lifelong learning.
- 7. Artificial Intelligence is reshaping, but not replacing, language learning.**
Students were cautious about AI as a direct learning support while consistently recognising the continuing importance of language skills, communication, intercultural understanding and human interaction.

Implications for the next phase of Languages Connect

The findings suggest that the next phase of *Languages Connect* should continue to promote positive attitudes towards language learning while placing greater emphasis on strengthening continuity across the language learning continuum. Sustained participation depends not only on learner motivation, but also on accessible progression pathways, flexible models of provision and institutional support. The findings also reinforce the importance of recognising multilingualism as a national resource and strengthening the contribution of higher education within Ireland's wider language learning ecosystem.

Headline strategy recommendations

1. Strengthen continuity across the language learning continuum.

Support coherent progression from primary and post-primary education into higher education and lifelong learning.

2. Expand flexible participation pathways.

Improve curriculum flexibility, institutional recognition, progression opportunities and access to appropriately levelled provision to reduce structural barriers to participation.

3. Recognise language learning as a strategic capability.

Position language learning as a capability that supports communication, intercultural understanding, learner agency and participation across education, society and employment.

4. Build on Ireland's multilingual capacity.

Continue to recognise and build on heritage languages, home languages and diverse language learning pathways as educational, cultural and economic assets.

5. Prepare learners for language learning in an AI-mediated world.

Support the responsible integration of AI within language education while continuing to prioritise language proficiency, intercultural competence and meaningful human communication.

6. Strengthen policy alignment across education sectors.

Build stronger connections between language education and wider higher education, skills and research priorities to support learner progression, graduate capability and national competitiveness.

Policy Context and Background

The publication of *Languages Connect: Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026* marked a significant development in national language policy by positioning language learning as a continuum extending across primary, post-primary, higher education and lifelong learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). The strategy recognised that language learning contributes not only to economic development and international engagement, but also to intercultural understanding, social participation and individual development. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* similarly identified lifelong learning, graduate capability and international engagement as central objectives of the Irish higher education system (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), establishing higher education as an important component of Ireland's language learning continuum.

The *Languages Connect Interim Review and Implementation Plan to 2026* recognised the progress made since 2017 while identifying higher education as an area where important evidence gaps remain, particularly in relation to participation, continuity and the monitoring of language learning beyond post-primary education (Department of Education, 2024). *Global Citizens 2030* further reinforced the importance of international engagement, lifelong learning and the development of graduates equipped to participate confidently in an increasingly interconnected world (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], 2024).

Recent policy has also highlighted broader developments shaping language education. The Council of Europe has recognised plurilingual and intercultural competences as educational assets that support inclusion, democratic participation and social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2020, 2022). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has similarly emphasised the importance of equipping learners with the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to participate in a rapidly changing and interconnected world (OECD, 2019, 2023). Within Ireland, the *Guideline on Artificial Intelligence in Schools* identifies the effective, responsible and ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as an important priority for education (Department of Education and Youth, 2025).

Ireland's language learning landscape has also continued to evolve. The *Language Trends Ireland* report highlights both positive attitudes towards language learning and continuing structural challenges affecting participation in post-primary education (McKelvey et al., 2026). At the same time, higher education institutions are becoming increasingly linguistically diverse, with growing numbers of students bringing home, heritage and community languages alongside English and Irish. Understanding how learners continue, discontinue or re-engage with language learning in this changing context is important for strengthening continuity across the language learning continuum.

Against this policy and educational context, the present study examines the motivations, participation pathways and experiences shaping higher education language learning in Ireland. By exploring students' motivations, attitudes, continuity, barriers and perspectives on AI, it provides new evidence to strengthen the evidence base for the next phase of *Languages Connect* and to inform future language policy, practice and provision across the language learning continuum.

Research Overview

Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining an online survey with semi-structured interviews to provide both breadth and depth of understanding of higher education language learning. This approach enabled quantitative patterns to be interpreted alongside participants' experiences and perspectives, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Statistical analyses were undertaken using IBM SPSS Statistics, with descriptive and inferential analyses selected according to the research questions and distribution of the data (Field, 2018). Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), allowing themes to be identified through systematic coding and iterative interpretation.

Participants

The survey received 462 valid responses from students enrolled at Trinity College Dublin and South East Technological University. Respondents included undergraduate and postgraduate students from a broad range of disciplines. STEM students constituted the largest disciplinary group, followed by Arts and Humanities and Social and Professional disciplines (Table 1). The sample included students currently studying languages, those who had discontinued language learning, and those who had not studied languages during higher education.

Table 1

Distribution of participants by discipline

Discipline Group	Discipline	n	%
STEM	Engineering	82	17.70%
	Science	79	17.10%
	Technology	47	10.20%
	Mathematics	5	1.10%
	Subtotal	213	46.10%
Arts and Humanities	Arts and Humanities	163	35.30%
	Subtotal	163	35.30%
Social and Professional	Social Science	32	6.90%
	Business	29	6.30%
	Health and Social Care	15	3.20%
	Law	8	1.70%
	Education	2	0.40%
	Subtotal	86	18.60%
Total		462	100%

Following the survey, 17 students participated in semi-structured interviews. A further seven language educators, programme coordinators and institutional representatives were interviewed to provide institutional perspectives on language learning in higher education. These interviews provided contextual insights that complemented the survey findings.

Findings

Language learning trajectory and experience

Motivation, attitudes and continuity

Artificial Intelligence and future language learning

Barriers, challenges, and support required

Language learning trajectory and experience

Survey respondents represented a linguistically diverse and plurilingual cohort. Most participants began language learning through school before continuing in higher education, although participation differed across institutions and stages of study. No significant differences were observed according to gender, discipline, home language background or self-reported language proficiency.

Language backgrounds of participants

The survey demonstrates that participants represented a linguistically diverse and plurilingual cohort. While 291 students (63.0%) reported a single home or heritage language, over one third of respondents reported two or more (171 students, 36.8%), including 155 (33.5%) reporting two languages and 15 (3.2%) reporting three, and one respondent reporting five languages.

English was the most frequently reported home or heritage language ($n = 291$, 63.0%), followed by Irish ($n = 124$, 26.8%) and Chinese ($n = 44$, 9.5%). Beyond these, participants reported approximately 50 distinct home or heritage languages or language varieties, encompassing European, Asian, African and Middle Eastern languages (Table 2). This diversity reflects the increasingly multilingual composition of Ireland's higher education sector and the wide range of linguistic resources students bring to their university studies.

Table 2
Home and heritage languages reported by participants

Home or heritage language	n	%
English	291	63.0%
Irish	124	26.8%
Chinese	44	9.5%
French	22	4.8%
Polish	20	4.3%
Spanish	19	4.1%
German	16	3.5%
Russian	16	3.5%
Italian	14	3.0%
Romanian	9	1.9%
Japanese	6	1.3%
Hindi	5	1.1%
Other	61	13.2%

Note. Students could select more than one home or heritage language, so percentages do not sum to 100%. The “Other” category includes languages reported by fewer than five respondents each.

Participants also reported relatively high levels of functional plurilingual competence. On average, respondents reported proficiency in 3.51 languages ($SD = 1.47$), including a mean of 2.37 languages at Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B1 level or above ($SD = 1.22$), indicating that many students entered higher education with established language capabilities rather than beginning language learning from scratch. These findings reflect the concept of plurilingual competence, which recognises learners' linguistic repertoires as integrated resources that support communication and further language learning (Coste et al., 2009; Galante, 2025). Later analyses show that while multilingual home and heritage language backgrounds were associated with higher levels of functional proficiency, language proficiency itself was not a significant predictor of continued participation in higher education language learning.

Language learning prior to higher education

Before entering higher education, language learning was predominantly shaped by school-based provision. Overall, 412 students (89.2%) reported learning languages through the state school system, making it by far the most common route into language learning. Home learning also played an important role, reported by 199 students (43.1%), while smaller proportions had learned languages through the private sector ($n = 96$, 20.8%) or a state language centre ($n = 30$, 6.5%) (Table 3).

Table 3

Language learning pathways before higher education

Previous language learning route	Total n	Total %	Irish school experience n (%)	No prior Irish school experience n (%)
State school	412	89.2%	290 (89.2%)	122 (89.1%)
State language centre	30	6.5%	20 (6.2%)	10 (7.3%)
Private sector	96	20.8%	67 (20.6%)	29 (21.2%)
Home learning	199	43.1%	142 (43.7%)	57 (41.6%)

Note. Participants could select more than one pathway, so percentages do not sum to 100%.

Although school-based provision formed the foundation of most students' language learning journeys, many participants reported engaging with languages through multiple pathways before entering higher education. The combination of school, home and community learning suggests that language learning often extends beyond formal education and is supported by wider family, cultural and personal experiences.

Previous language learning routes were broadly similar irrespective of whether students had completed their schooling in Ireland. No statistically significant differences were found between students with and without prior experience of the Irish school system across any of the four learning pathways (all $p > .75$), indicating that the overall pattern of language learning before higher education was consistent across both groups.

Language learning in higher education

Participation in higher education language learning was characterised by high levels of current engagement. Overall, 342 students (74.0%) reported that they were currently studying a language, while 64 (13.9%) had previously studied a language but discontinued. A further 56 students (12.1%) reported that they had never studied a language during higher education.

Among respondents who were currently or had previously engaged in language learning, participation most commonly took place through structured curricular provision. Optional credit-bearing modules were the most frequently reported mode of study ($n = 268$, 58.0%), followed by required language modules within degree programmes ($n = 109$, 23.6%). Smaller proportions reported participating through non-credit-bearing provision ($n = 41$, 8.9%), self-directed learning ($n = 22$, 4.8%) or private tuition ($n = 18$, 3.9%) (Table 4).

Table 4

Languages currently being studied by participants

Language	n	%
Spanish	121	26.2
French	78	16.9
German	49	10.6
Irish	41	8.9
Chinese	34	7.4
Japanese	28	6.1
Other languages	111	24.0

Note. Percentages are based on the total sample ($N = 462$). Respondents could select more than one language. Other languages include Arabic, Irish Sign Language (ISL), Italian, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish, and English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The languages studied reflected both established patterns of provision and a broad range of learner interests. Spanish was the most frequently studied language ($n = 121$, 26.2%), followed by French ($n = 78$, 16.9%) and German ($n = 49$, 10.6%). Irish ($n = 41$, 8.9%), Chinese ($n = 34$, 7.4%) and Japanese ($n = 28$, 6.1%) were also commonly reported, while 111 students (24.0%) indicated that they were studying other languages.

Factors shaping participation

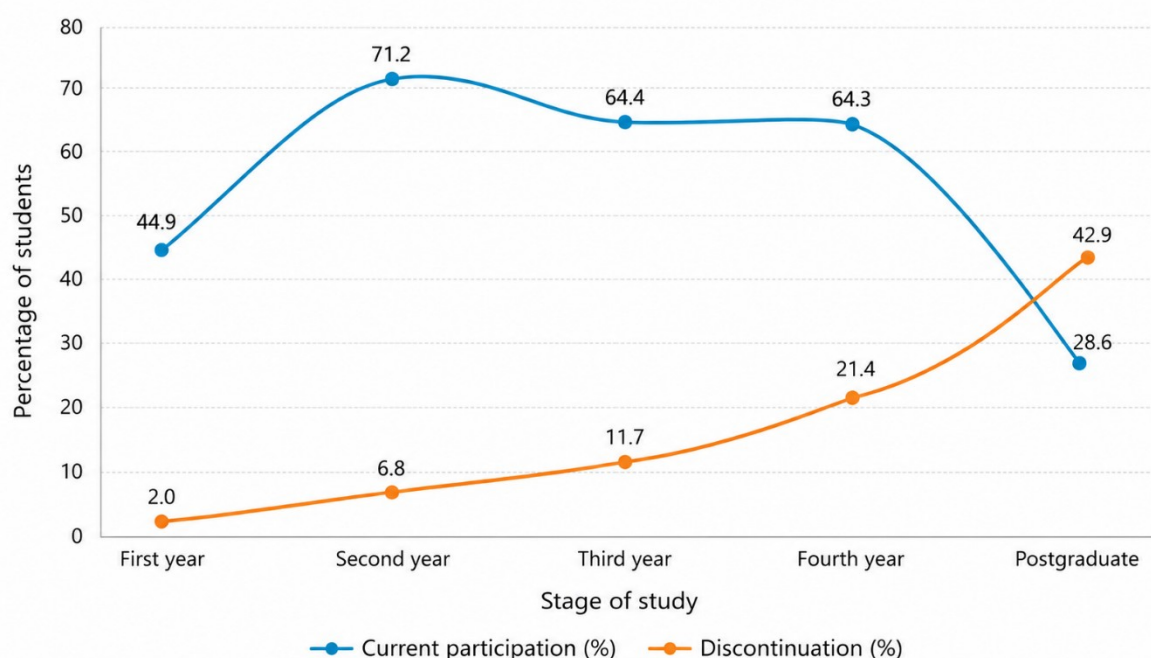
Previous research has shown that learners' motivation does not necessarily translate into continued participation in language learning where structural or contextual factors limit opportunities for engagement (Teräväinen-Goff, 2025). To explore these relationships, participation status was examined across institutional, demographic and educational characteristics.

A significant association was observed between institution and participation status, $\chi^2(2, N = 462) = 8.42, p = .015$, Cramér's $V = .135$. Respondents from Trinity College Dublin were more likely to report current participation in language learning (78.6%) than respondents from South East Technological University (69.3%), while respondents from South East Technological University were more likely to report having discontinued language learning (16.8% compared with 11.2%). These findings indicate that participation patterns differed between the two participating institutions.

Participation status also varied significantly across stages of study, $\chi^2(8, N = 462) = 60.36, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .260$. Current participation was highest among first and second year undergraduate students before declining in later years of study, while the proportion of students who had discontinued language learning increased progressively among later undergraduate and postgraduate students (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Participation and discontinuation rates across stages of study



No statistically significant associations were observed between participation status and gender, disciplinary area, previous experience of the Irish education system, home or heritage language profile, or self-reported language proficiency (all $p > .05$). Within this sample, these learner characteristics were not associated with whether students continued, discontinued or had never participated in language learning during higher education.

Motivation, attitudes and continuity

Students demonstrated consistently positive orientations towards language learning throughout higher education. Contemporary perspectives recognise language learning motivation as dynamic and shaped by learners' identities, experiences and educational contexts rather than as a fixed individual characteristic (Ushioda, 2016). Consistent with this perspective, motivation in the present study was typically shaped by multiple, overlapping factors rather than a single reason, with personal interest and cultural engagement emerging as the strongest drivers of participation. Motivation evolved across the language learning journey and remained closely linked to opportunities to continue learning, suggesting that sustaining participation depends not only on learners' motivation but also on accessible and flexible pathways for continued engagement.

Motivations for language learning

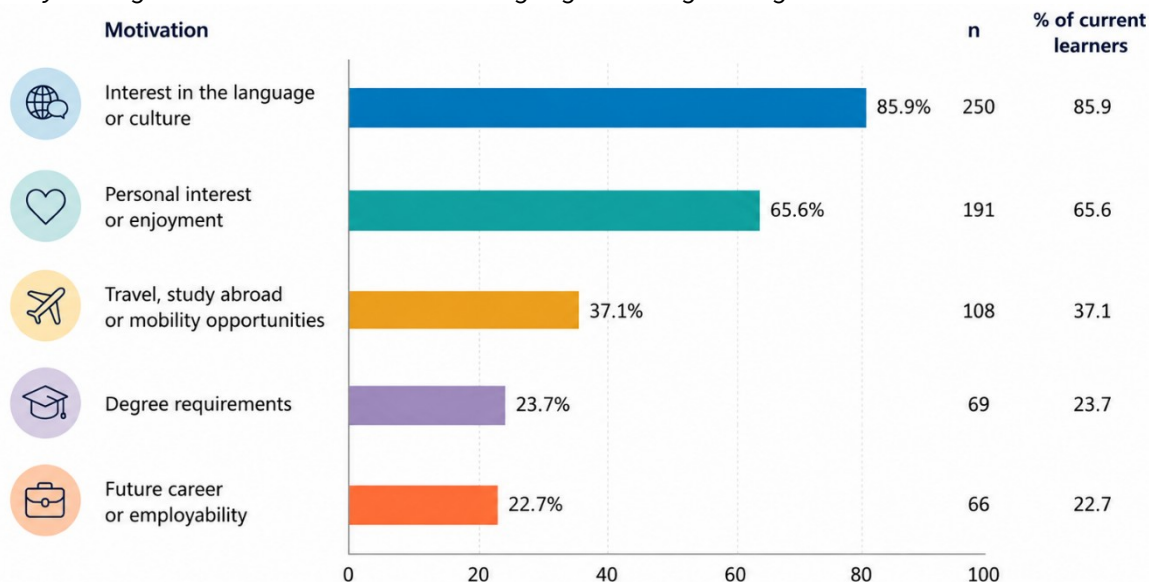
Motivational factors were examined among students who were currently studying a language, while broader attitudinal measures relating to language learning were analysed across the full respondent group. This distinction recognises that the motivations underlying active participation may differ from more general attitudes towards language learning (Teräsväinen-Goff, 2025).

Students reported multiple and overlapping motivations for language learning, indicating that decisions to engage with languages in higher education are rarely driven by a single factor. This pattern reflects previous research suggesting that language learners are typically motivated by multiple, interacting personal, educational and social factors rather than a single reason for participation (Ushioda, 2008).

Current learners selected a mean of 2.35 motivations (SD = 1.14), with 217 survey respondents (74.6%) selecting two or more motivation categories. Interest in the language or culture was the most frequently reported motivation (n = 250, 85.9%), followed by personal interest or enjoyment (n = 191, 65.6%). Travel, study abroad or mobility opportunities were identified by 108 respondents (37.1%), while degree requirements (n = 69, 23.7%) and future career or employability (n = 66, 22.7%) were reported less frequently (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Survey findings: Students' motivations for language learning among current learners



Interview data also showed that students' motivations were rarely singular, instead reflecting combinations of personal interests, previous educational experiences, cultural engagement, family connections, international mobility and professional aspirations (Table 5).

Table 5

Interview findings: Qualitative themes underlying motivations for language learning

Student	Extrinsic motivation				Instrumental motivation			Integrative motivation				Intrinsic motivation	
	Degree requirement	Future work or career prospects	Opportune time to learn a language	Peer influence	Future goal	Health/Sport	Safeguard against AI	Assimilate to new culture	Connect with new people	Language maintenance	Understand society	Personal challenge	Personal interest/enjoyment/desire
1					X		X		X		X	X	X
2	X			X					X		X	X	X
3	X	X			X		X	X	X		X		X
4		X	X		X			X	X				X
5	X							X	X		X	X	
6	X	X			X			X	X		X		X
7			X		X				X		X		X
8								X	X		X		X
9	X							X	X			X	X
10								X	X		X		X
11		X			X				X		X		X
12		X			X			X	X				X
13						X		X	X	X	X	X	X
14	X							X	X	X	X		X
15	X	X			X			X	X	X	X		X
16	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X
17	X	X			X	X							X

For some students, university represented an opportunity to continue a language they had studied at school and further develop an existing interest.

Student: “I wanted to finish my French journey because I had studied French for so many years already. I didn't want to stop after school. I wanted to continue and finish what I had started.”

Others viewed higher education as an opportunity to expand their linguistic repertoire and continue learning beyond a single language.

Student: “I would really like to learn another language after this. I don't think I'll stop with French. I definitely see myself wanting to learn another few languages in the future.”

Teachers also identified motivations not explicitly captured in the survey, including heritage and family connections, relationships with speakers of the target language, previous experiences of travel or living abroad, interests in music, history and culture, recommendations from peers, and aspirations for Erasmus and future careers. As one teacher explained:

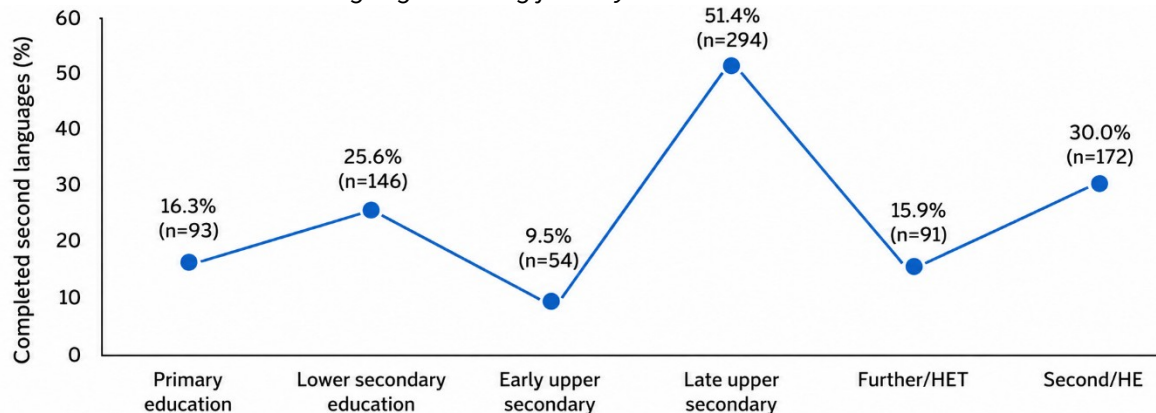
Teacher: “There is such a huge variation in terms of motivation. Some students have Italian family backgrounds, others want to communicate with relatives or partners, while many are simply interested in the language and culture. There are so many different reasons why students choose to learn Italian.”

Motivational trajectories across the language learning journey

Students reported experiencing their highest levels of motivation at different stages of their educational journey, indicating that language learning motivation develops over time rather than being confined to a single period of education (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Peak motivation across the language learning journey



Among students with prior experience of the Irish education system ($n = 325$, 70.3%), upper secondary education was the most frequently identified stage of peak motivation, with 134 students (41.2%) identifying this stage. Substantial numbers also reported their highest motivation during higher education and at other stages of their language learning journey.

By contrast, among students without prior experience of the Irish education system ($n = 137$, 29.7%), 30 students (22.2%) identified primary education as the stage at which they felt most motivated to learn a language, highlighting the potential contribution of earlier language learning experiences.

Survey responses highlighted different factors shaping motivation across educational stages, including engaging teaching, international mobility, clearly defined learning goals and increased learner autonomy.

Student: *“The Leaving Certificate and DELF (French) exams acted as goals to focus my efforts towards, leading to an increased motivation.”*

Interview participants described motivation as being shaped by successive educational experiences. For some, higher education provided the opportunity to continue a language studied at school, while for others it was the stage at which language learning became more personally meaningful through greater choice, flexibility and opportunities to apply languages beyond the classroom.

Student: *“I wanted to finish my journey because I had studied for so many years already. I didn't want to stop after school. I wanted to continue and finish what I had started.”*

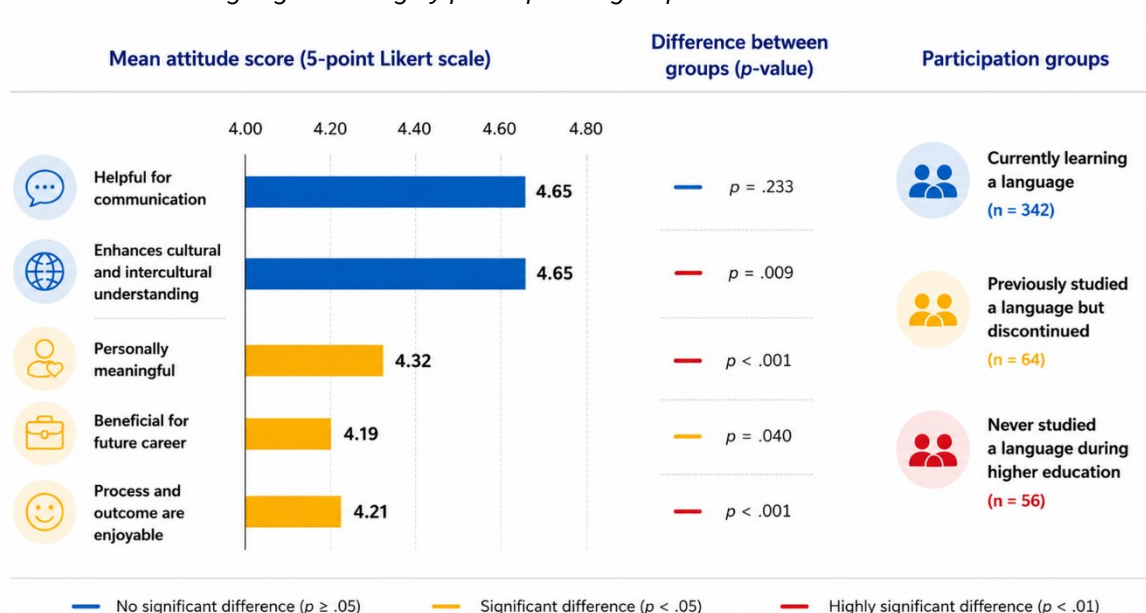
These findings highlight the importance of providing meaningful opportunities to engage with language learning across different stages of education. Higher education can play an important role in sustaining and strengthening learners' motivation beyond compulsory schooling.

Attitudes toward language learning

Students expressed consistently positive attitudes towards language learning across all dimensions examined (Figure 4). Communication received the highest level of agreement, while perceptions of the intercultural, personal and career value of language learning were also highly positive. Although career-related benefits were rated comparatively lower than the other dimensions, overall agreement remained strong, indicating broad recognition of the value of language learning beyond degree requirements alone.

Figure 4

Attitudes toward language learning by participation groups



Interview findings reinforce these results by illustrating the breadth of benefits that students associated with language learning. Students frequently described languages as enabling communication, cultural understanding, personal development and professional opportunities.

Student: “Interest in cultures, brain development, enjoyment, self-mastery. A great opportunity for employment and to connect with people in my field.”

Student: “I have always been exposed to many languages and love to communicate with people from different cultures.”

Other students similarly emphasised that the value of language learning extended beyond university study.

Student: “To be able to expand my understanding of the world.”

These findings indicate that students already recognise the broad educational, personal and professional value of language learning. The challenge for policy is therefore less about changing attitudes and more about ensuring that learners have accessible opportunities to participate and continue learning throughout higher education.

Continuity and lifelong learning

Students were asked whether they intended to continue language learning beyond their current stage of education. Overall, 333 students (72.1%) indicated that they intended to continue language learning in the future, while 129 (27.9%) reported that they did not intend to continue formal language study.

Continuation intention was not significantly associated with home or heritage language background, $\chi^2(3, N = 462) = 2.45, p = .485$, Cramér's $V = .073$, indicating that intentions to continue language learning were broadly consistent across different linguistic profiles.

Continuation intention also did not differ significantly across participation groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 462) = 2.69, p = .261$, Cramér's $V = .076$. Students who were currently studying a language, those who had previously studied but discontinued, and those who had never studied a language during higher education expressed similarly strong intentions to continue language learning. This suggests that interest in future language learning extends beyond students currently engaged in formal higher education language study.

By contrast, continuation intention was associated with previous experience of the Irish education system, $\chi^2(1, N = 462) = 11.22, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .156$. Students without prior Irish school experience were more likely to report intending to continue language learning (83.2%) than students with Irish school experience (67.4%). Considered alongside the findings on motivational trajectories, this pattern suggests that learners from different educational backgrounds may develop and sustain language learning motivations through different educational experiences.

Open-ended survey responses suggested that students did not necessarily equate continuation with formal university study. Future language learning plans included self-directed learning, learning additional languages, travel, international mobility, heritage language maintenance and the use of languages in professional and everyday contexts.

Student: *“I would really like to learn another language after this... I definitely see myself wanting to learn another few languages in the future.”*

Interview data also highlighted the role of institutional provision in supporting longer-term continuity. Staff described how access to advanced language modules, flexible elective provision and language-integrated degree programmes could encourage continued engagement, while also identifying challenges associated with progression within some multidisciplinary degree structures.

Teacher: *“So for business students... they are confronted with a wall, which is the fact that they don't have grammar lessons... So, they end up struggling a lot unless they already have a very strong grammar...”*

Artificial Intelligence and future language learning

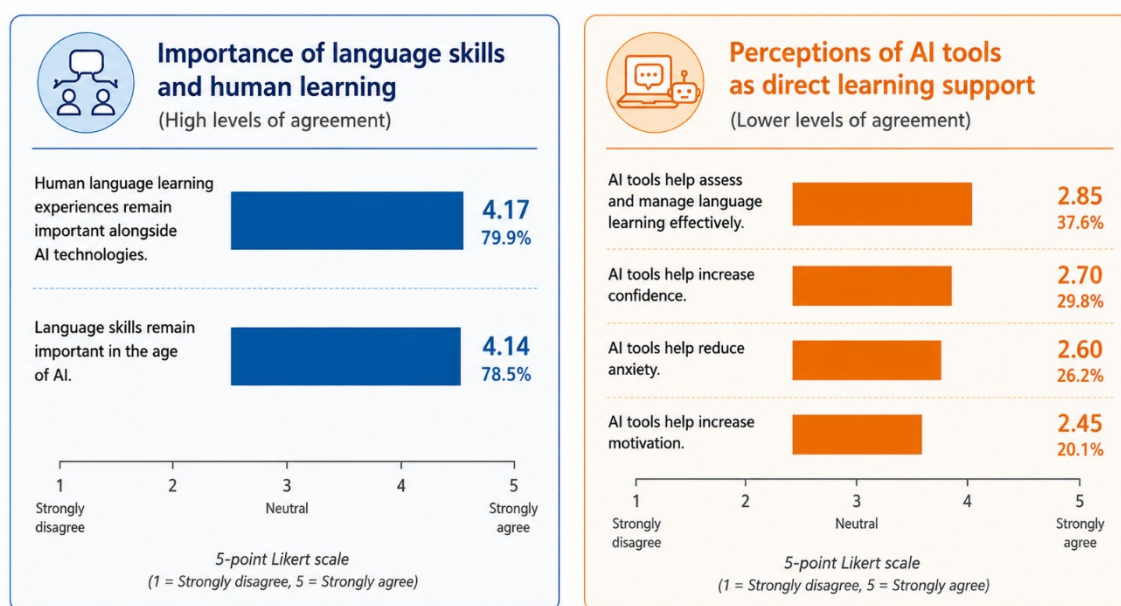
AI is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of language learning in higher education. To understand its potential role in shaping future language learning, this study explored students' perceptions of AI, differences in attitudes across learner groups, and views on the relationship between AI and the continuing value of language learning.

Attitude towards AI and future language learning

Students reported contrasting attitudes towards the role of AI in language learning (Figure 5). While perceptions of AI as a direct learning support were generally cautious, respondents expressed consistently strong support for the continuing importance of language skills and human language learning experiences.

Figure 5

Attitudes towards AI and future language learning



Agreement was strongest for the statements that language skills remain important in the age of AI and that human language learning experiences continue to have value alongside AI technologies. By comparison, students expressed considerably lower levels of agreement that AI directly enhances learning management, confidence, motivation or reduces language learning anxiety.

Student: “AI is a reasonably proficient translator, but there are a world of other skills associated with language learning that AI can not YET sufficiently engage with. It discredits the entire field of language learning to only view it as important ‘alongside AI technologies.’”

This perspective was also reflected in the teacher interviews, where participants emphasised that higher education language learning develops communication, intercultural understanding and transferable capabilities that extend beyond the functions currently offered by AI.

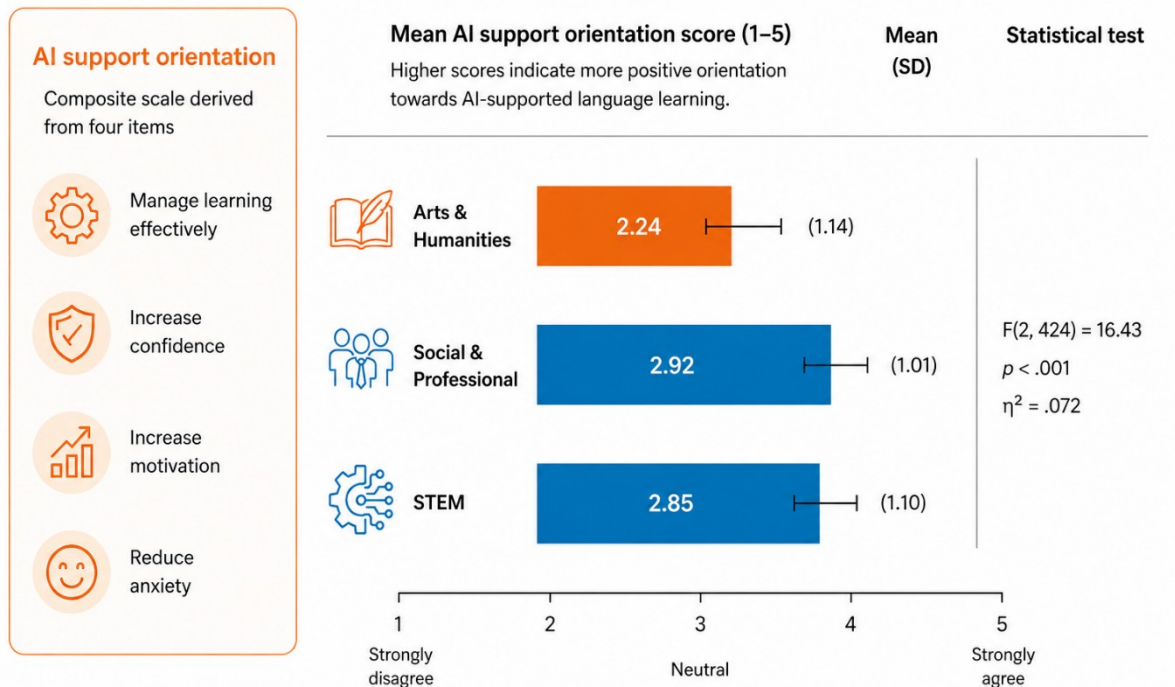
Teacher: “It opens so many doors... Whatever they learn is transferable across their own disciplines.”

Attitudes towards AI-supported language learning

To examine overall orientations towards AI-supported language learning, the four AI support items were combined into a composite AI support orientation scale (Figure 6). The two items relating to the continuing importance of language skills and human learning experiences were analysed separately.

Figure 6

AI support orientation construction



Note. Values are mean (standard deviation). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

AI support orientation composite scale reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = .946$.

Discipline was the only participant characteristic associated with AI support orientation. Students from Arts and Humanities reported lower AI support orientation ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.14$) than those studying Social and Professional disciplines ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.01$) and STEM disciplines ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(2, 424) = 16.43$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .072$. By contrast, discipline was not associated with attitudes towards the continuing importance of language skills or human language learning experiences. Across all disciplinary groups, respondents consistently recognised the enduring value of language learning alongside AI.

Similarly, AI support orientation did not differ significantly according to language learning participation status, intention to continue language learning or gender. While current language learners reported slightly stronger agreement that human language learning experiences remain important than students who had never studied a language in higher education, the observed effect was small ($\eta^2 = .018$). Likewise, students who intended to continue learning languages expressed marginally stronger agreement regarding the importance of language skills than those who did not, although the effect size was also small ($\eta^2 = .017$).

AI and broader language learning attitudes

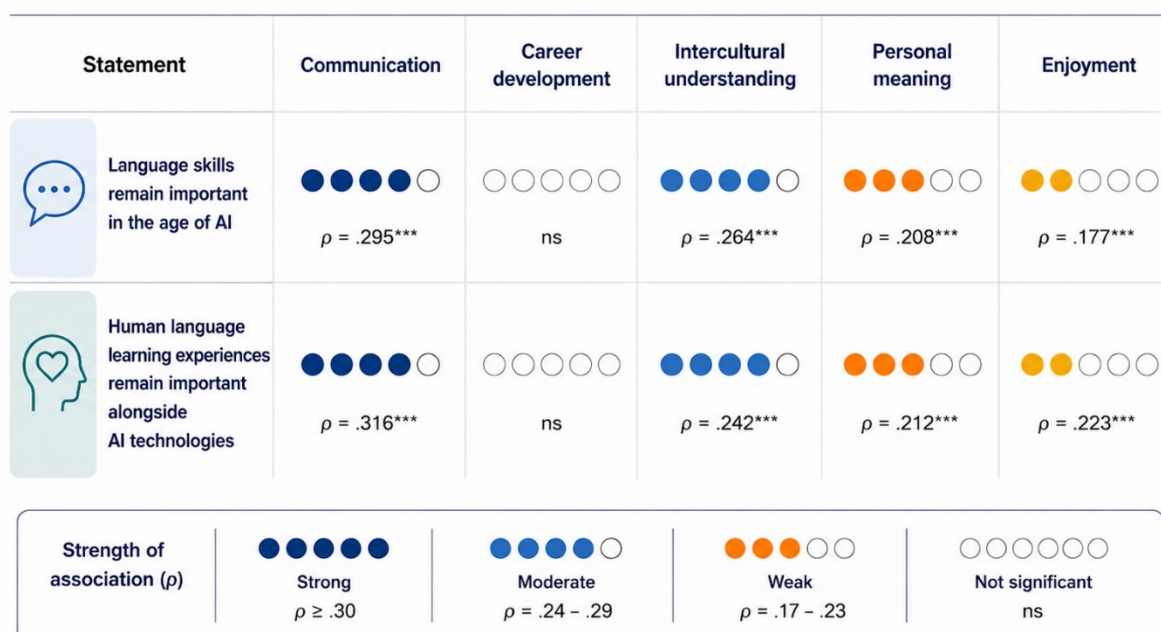
Relationships between AI-related attitudes and broader language learning attitudes were examined across five dimensions: communication, intercultural understanding, career development, personal meaning and enjoyment.

No significant relationships were identified between AI support orientation and any of the broader language learning attitude dimensions, indicating that students' openness towards AI-supported language learning was independent of their broader attitudes towards language learning.

By contrast, students who agreed that language skills remain important in the age of AI were more likely to value language learning for communication ($\rho = .295$, $p < .001$) and intercultural understanding ($\rho = .264$, $p < .001$), with similar positive relationships observed for personal meaning and enjoyment (Figure 7). A comparable pattern was found for students who valued human language learning experiences alongside AI technologies, with the strongest association again observed for communication ($\rho = .316$, $p < .001$). No significant relationships were identified with career-related attitudes.

Figure 7

Correlations between AI related attitudes and broader language learning attitudes



Note. Values shown are Spearman correlation coefficients (ρ). Larger positive coefficients indicate stronger positive associations. ns = not statistically significant. *** $p < .001$.

Barriers, challenges, and support needs

The previous sections highlighted generally positive attitudes towards foreign language learning and strong motivation among participants. However, these positive dispositions did not always translate into sustained participation. This section examines the barriers to participation in higher education language learning, the challenges associated with discontinuation, and the supports participants identified as important for sustaining language learning. Drawing on both survey and interview data, the findings indicate that many of the barriers identified by participants were structural in nature, suggesting opportunities for institutional and policy intervention.

Barriers to participation in higher education language learning

Responses from students who had not participated in higher education language learning ($n = 121$) indicate that the principal barriers were largely related to how language learning opportunities were organised and made available within higher education. Students were asked to identify all factors that had prevented or discouraged them from engaging in language learning during their studies (Figure 8). Multiple responses were permitted.

Students selected an average of 1.83 barriers ($SD = 1.23$), with almost half (47.1%) identifying two or more barriers. The most frequently reported barriers were concentrated within the structural and organisational category. The absence of language modules within students' degree programmes was the most frequently identified barrier (43.8%), followed by heavy existing workload (26.4%). Smaller but still notable proportions of respondents referred to limited recognition of language learning within degree structures (15.7%), previous negative learning experiences (15.7%), and limited alignment between language modules and their degree pathways (14.0%).

Interview data reinforced these findings. Students consistently described positive learning experiences and valued the opportunity to study languages, but many felt that existing degree structures offered insufficient flexibility to combine language learning with other areas of study.

Student: *“There's no way to, say, take an extra 5 credits to minor in something or anything like that, but that's the one thing that I would think would be nice, to have an opportunity to, for example, if you're doing a STEM degree, to add, like, a minor in a language or something like that.”*

Other respondents highlighted practical barriers to accessing available provision, particularly where demand exceeded capacity:

Student: *“There is an Irish class for levels of A1 to B2... but they fill up almost instantly.”*

No statistically significant differences were observed in the number of barriers reported across discipline groups, continuation intention, or prior Irish school experience. The consistency of these findings across student groups suggests that barriers to participation reflect broader institutional conditions rather than characteristics of particular student populations.

Figure 8

Barriers to participation in higher education language learning

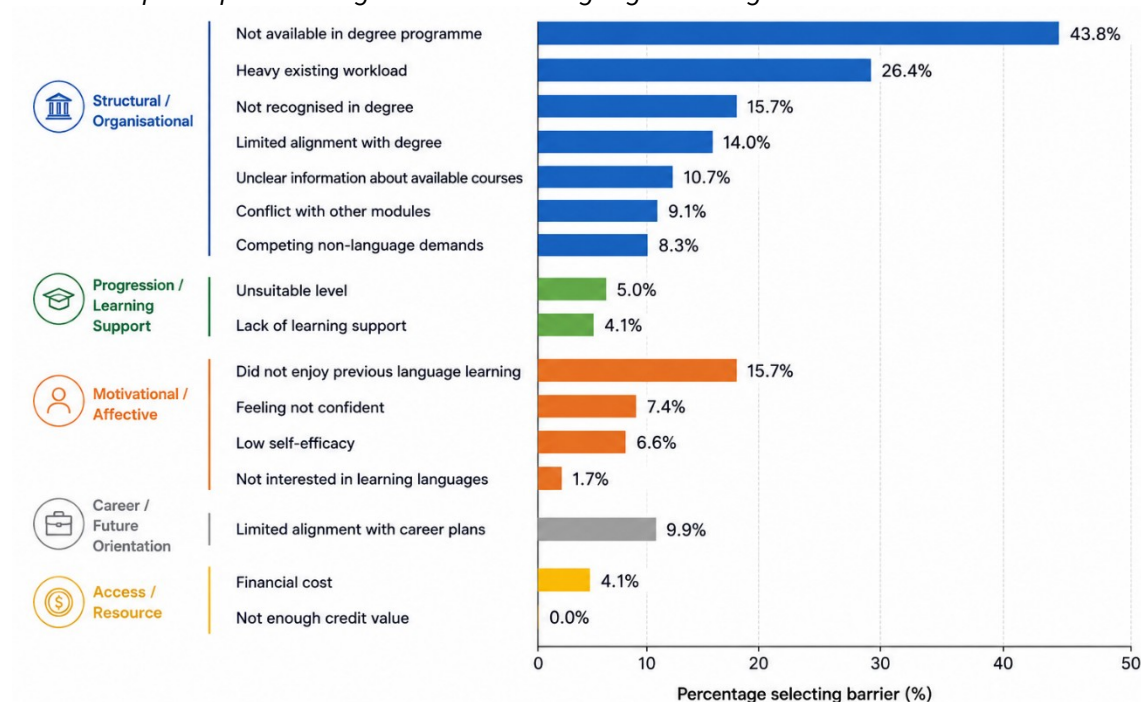
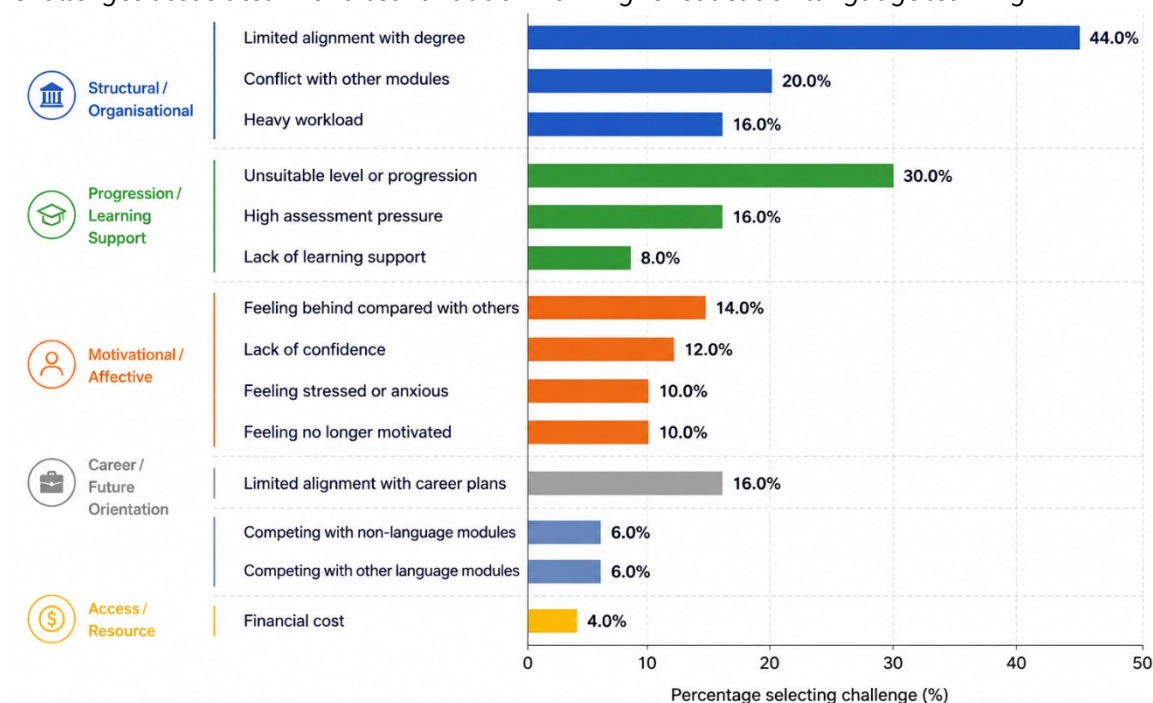


Figure 9

Challenges associated with discontinuation from higher education language learning



Challenges associated with discontinuation

Students who had previously participated in higher education language learning but later discontinued their studies ($n = 50$) were asked to identify the factors that contributed to their decision to stop (Figure 9). Multiple responses were permitted.

Limited alignment between language learning and degree pathways was the most frequently reported challenge (44.0%), followed by unsuitable level or progression pace (30.0%), conflict with other modules (20.0%), high assessment pressure (16.0%), heavy workload (16.0%), and limited alignment with career plans (16.0%). A smaller but still notable proportion of students reported feeling behind compared with others in the class (14.0%).

Students selected an average of 2.08 discontinuation challenges ($SD = 1.63$), with responses ranging from 0 to 7. Open-ended responses provided further insight into these findings. Several students described language learning ending when elective modules concluded, following study abroad experiences, or because further progression opportunities were unavailable. Others highlighted difficulties arising from mixed proficiency classes, unsuitable course levels, or assessment arrangements that they perceived as challenging for beginners.

Interview data echoed these experiences. Teachers and programme coordinators described the challenges of supporting learners with diverse educational backgrounds within the same class and emphasised the importance of appropriate placement and clear progression pathways for sustaining participation.

One respondent reflected on the experience of studying alongside more advanced learners:

Student: “My grades were judged based on comparison to others who have already done honours [Language] for the Leaving Cert in a beginner’s [Language] course...”

Other respondents also highlighted concerns about programme design and progression:

Student: “The delivery of the programme didn’t seem tailored to people just beginning to learn the language...”

Student: “In my non beginners’ courses, more difficult work.”

No statistically significant differences were observed in discontinuation challenge count across discipline groups, continuation intention, or prior Irish school experience. The consistency of these findings across student groups suggests that the challenges associated with discontinuation reflect broader institutional and curricular conditions rather than characteristics of particular student populations.

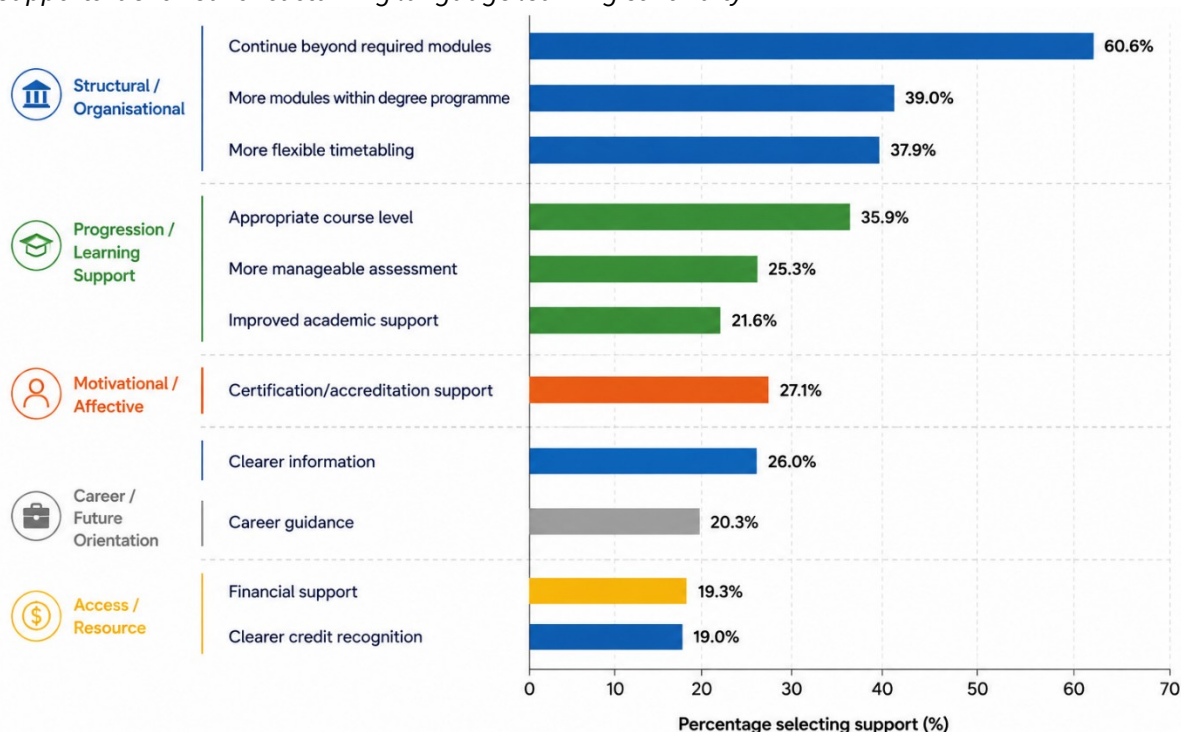
The findings indicate that both barriers to participation and challenges to continuation were primarily structural rather than motivational. Students rarely identified lack of interest as a reason for not studying a language. Instead, participation was constrained by programme availability, workload, curricular flexibility, and limited opportunities to integrate language learning within degree pathways.

Support needed to sustain language learning continuity

Participants identified a range of supports that could strengthen access to, participation in, and continuation of higher education language learning (Figure 10). The findings indicate that students prioritised improvements to the availability, organisation, and recognition of language learning opportunities, alongside greater flexibility to accommodate diverse academic pathways.

Figure 10

Supports identified for sustaining language learning continuity



Respondents selected an average of 3.32 support needs ($SD = 2.44$), with responses ranging from 0 to 11. The most frequently identified support need was the opportunity to continue language learning beyond compulsory or required modules (60.6%). This was followed by greater availability of language modules within degree programmes (39.0%), more flexible timetabling (37.9%), and access to courses at an appropriate level (35.9%). Respondents also identified the importance of certification (27.1%), clearer information about available options (26.0%), and more manageable assessment structures (25.3%).

One participant emphasised the importance of intercultural engagement:

Student: “There needs to be more facilitating of cross-cultural exchange. PEOPLE make languages worth learning.”

Differences in support needs were observed according to continuation intention, prior Irish school experience, home language background, and discipline group (Table 6). The strongest relationship was observed for continuation intention ($\eta^2 = .267$), with students who did not intend to continue language learning identifying substantially more support needs than those intending to continue. Differences associated with prior Irish school experience and home language background further indicate that students enter higher education language learning through diverse educational and linguistic pathways, and consequently prioritise different forms of institutional support.

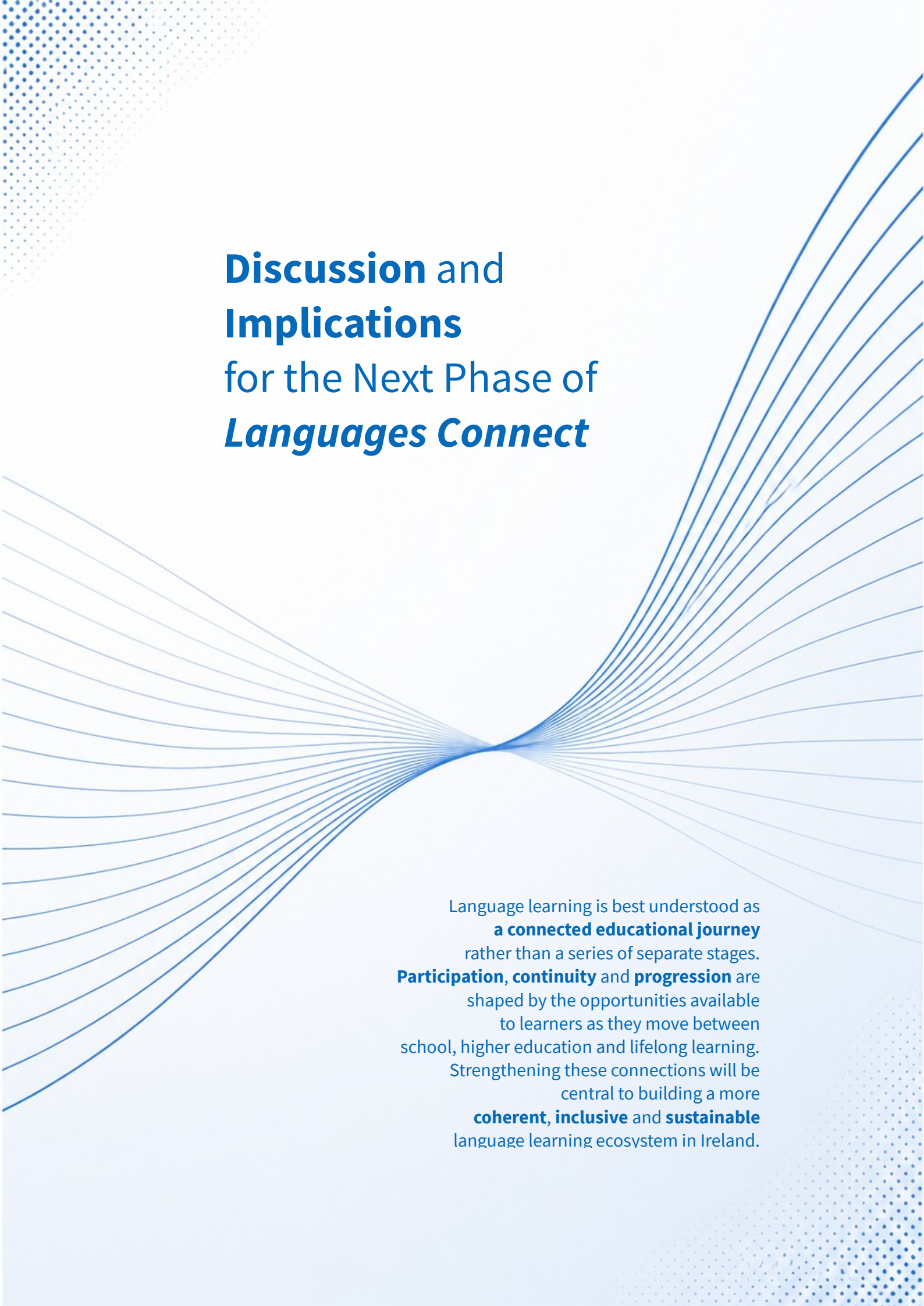
An important finding was that the need for institutional support for language learning extended across higher education rather than being confined to traditional language disciplines. Although a statistically significant difference was observed across discipline groups, this reflected a small difference between Social and Professional students and STEM students ($\eta^2 = .017$). Arts and Humanities students did not differ significantly from either group. These findings suggest that demand for institutional support for language learning exists across higher education and should not be viewed as an issue for language disciplines alone. One participant commented:

Student: “The chance to study a language as a minor while having a STEM major would be a great improvement.”

Table 6

Variation in support needs across student groups

Student characteristic	Statistical finding	Policy interpretation
Continuation intention	Students who did not intend to continue language learning identified significantly more support needs than those intending to continue ($\eta^2 = .267$, large effect).	Students least likely to continue language learning also perceive the greatest need for institutional support, highlighting opportunities for targeted interventions to improve retention.
Prior Irish school experience	Support needs differed significantly according to students' prior Irish school experience.	Students entering higher education through different educational pathways may require different forms of support to access and sustain language learning.
Home language background	Students from different home language backgrounds prioritised different forms of institutional support.	A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to meet the needs of an increasingly linguistically diverse student population.
Discipline group	Arts and Humanities students did not differ significantly from either Social and Professional students (adjusted $p = .715$) or STEM students (adjusted $p = .095$).	Demand for institutional support for language learning extends across higher education and is not confined to traditional language disciplines.



Discussion and Implications for the Next Phase of *Languages Connect*

Language learning is best understood as
a connected educational journey
rather than a series of separate stages.
Participation, continuity and **progression** are
shaped by the opportunities available
to learners as they move between
school, higher education and lifelong learning.
Strengthening these connections will be
central to building a more
coherent, inclusive and **sustainable**
language learning ecosystem in Ireland.

Positive attitudes provide the foundation for sustained participation

Students participating in this study consistently recognised the value of language learning. Interest in languages and cultures, personal enjoyment, communication, intercultural understanding and opportunities for international engagement all emerged as important motivations. Although career development remained an important consideration, employability was rarely viewed as the sole or primary reason for learning languages.

Language Trends Ireland 2025/26 (McKelvey et al., 2026) provides an important point of comparison. The report found that post-primary students generally recognised the benefits of language learning for communication, travel and future careers, while also highlighting practical factors influencing subject choice and continuation. The present study suggests that, as learners progress into higher education, their understanding of language learning continues to broaden. While career-related benefits remained important, students placed greater emphasis on intercultural competence, personal development, global engagement and lifelong learning. This progression suggests that learners increasingly view languages not only as academic subjects, but as capabilities that support participation across educational, professional and personal contexts.

These findings reinforce the importance of continuing to foster positive attitudes towards language learning throughout formal schooling. They also suggest that positive attitudes alone are unlikely to sustain participation unless learners are able to continue their language learning through accessible, coherent and flexible pathways beyond school. Continuity therefore involves more than maintaining progression opportunities. It also enables learners' understanding of the value of language learning to develop alongside their educational and personal experiences.

Continuity across the language learning continuum

The findings suggest that continuity should be a guiding principle for the future development of language education in Ireland. While *Languages Connect* has strengthened language learning across primary and post-primary education, this study highlights the importance of supporting learners beyond school. The transition to higher education is a point at which learners either build on previous experiences or discontinue language study altogether. Strengthening continuity across these transitions therefore has implications for both higher education participation and the effectiveness of the language learning continuum as a whole.

Continuity extends beyond progression between educational sectors. It also encompasses flexible learning opportunities, interdisciplinary pathways, institutional support and opportunities to re-engage with language learning throughout life. The findings suggest that learners value opportunities to combine languages with other disciplines, pursue language learning alongside professional studies and continue developing linguistic and intercultural competences throughout higher education. Such flexibility enables learners with different aspirations and backgrounds to remain engaged without requiring a single or uniform pathway.

This perspective also invites a broader understanding of success in language policy. Success is not measured by every learner progressing to advanced proficiency, but by ensuring all learners can experience the educational, cultural and personal benefits of language learning, while those wishing to continue can do so through coherent, accessible and well-connected opportunities. Continuity therefore supports both broad participation and sustained progression, recognising that learners engage with languages in different ways and at different stages of life.

The distinctive contribution of higher education

Higher education occupies a distinctive position within Ireland's language learning landscape. It enables learners from diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds to deepen existing language knowledge, begin new languages, combine languages with other disciplines and apply their linguistic and intercultural competences beyond school. In doing so, higher education broadens the role of language learning across academic, professional and personal contexts.

A key strength of higher education lies in its flexibility. Students valued opportunities to combine languages with disciplines such as business, science, engineering, healthcare and education, recognising that language learning can support diverse academic and professional pathways. Rather than requiring a choice between languages and other disciplines, higher education can enrich study, broaden career opportunities and foster lifelong engagement with language learning.

Higher education also provides opportunities less readily available within formal schooling. International mobility, interdisciplinary collaboration, specialist language study, research and engagement with diverse linguistic and cultural communities enable learners to apply language learning in authentic contexts. These experiences strengthen language proficiency alongside intercultural competence, communication, adaptability, confidence and critical thinking, while reinforcing the personal value of language learning beyond formal education.

Multilingualism, Artificial Intelligence and the future of language learning

The findings highlight the need to consider language learning within a rapidly changing educational and societal context. Increasing linguistic diversity, technological change and international interconnectedness are reshaping how languages are learned, used and valued. Rather than diminishing the importance of language learning, these developments reinforce its role in preparing learners to communicate effectively, engage across cultures and participate confidently in an increasingly multilingual society.

The study also suggests that multilingualism should be recognised as an educational and societal resource. Students bring diverse linguistic experiences, cultural knowledge and international perspectives to higher education. Recognising these strengths supports not only language learning but also inclusion, intercultural understanding and wider educational outcomes. This perspective aligns with the growing emphasis on plurilingual and intercultural competences within European language education (Council of Europe, 2022).

The findings also indicate that students viewed AI as a tool for supporting, rather than replacing, language learning. Participants recognised its potential to support language practice, translation and independent learning while continuing to emphasise the importance of authentic communication, intercultural understanding and human interaction. As AI becomes more embedded across education, the distinctive contribution of language learning increasingly lies in developing the linguistic, intercultural and communication competences to engage with these technologies effectively, responsibly and ethically (Department of Education and Youth, 2025).

These findings suggest that future policy should continue to recognise language learning as an educational capability that supports communication, intercultural understanding and personal development. This perspective is consistent with international evidence identifying communication, collaboration and intercultural competence as increasingly important capabilities in an AI-mediated world (OECD, 2023).

Policy Recommendations



Recommendation 1:

Strengthen continuity across the language learning continuum

Rationale

The findings consistently indicate that sustaining participation in language learning depends not only on learners' motivation and positive attitudes, but also on the availability of coherent, flexible and accessible opportunities to continue language learning throughout different stages of education and across the lifespan. Positioning continuity as a guiding principle for the next phase of *Languages Connect* would strengthen the language learning continuum while recognising that learners follow diverse educational pathways and engage with language learning at different stages of their lives.

Potential policy actions

- Position continuity as a guiding principle for the next phase of *Languages Connect*, recognising language learning as a continuum extending across primary, post-primary, higher education and lifelong learning.
- Develop coherent and flexible language learning pathways that enable learners to begin, continue and re-engage with language learning across different educational settings and stages of life.
- Strengthen coherence across educational stages by supporting smoother transitions and sustained opportunities for learners to continue language learning.
- Encourage collaboration across educational sectors and language learning providers to support a more connected language learning ecosystem.
- Explore mechanisms for recognising learning across different educational settings, enabling learners to build on prior learning throughout the language learning continuum.
- Strengthen alignment between *Languages Connect* and wider national policy priorities where shared objectives contribute to learner progression, lifelong learning, graduate capability and national competitiveness.

Recommendation 2:

Recognising language learning as a strategic capacity

Rationale

The findings suggest that language learning should be understood not only as a curriculum subject, but increasingly as a strategic capability that enables learning, communication and participation across a wide range of educational, professional and societal contexts. Students consistently recognised the value of language learning beyond linguistic proficiency alone, highlighting its contribution to intercultural understanding, personal development, global engagement and future opportunities. Recognising this broader role provides an opportunity to strengthen the relevance of *Languages Connect* within the wider educational and policy landscape.

Potential policy actions

- Position language learning as a capability that supports communication, intercultural understanding, learner agency and participation across education, society and employment.
- Recognise multilingualism as a national resource by valuing learners' diverse linguistic repertoires and promoting plurilingual and intercultural competences.
- Align language learning with wider educational priorities, including inclusion, wellbeing, digital education, internationalisation and global citizenship.
- Support the responsible and ethical integration of AI within language education, reinforcing the continuing importance of human communication, intercultural competence and critical engagement.
- Strengthen collaboration between education, research and policy communities to ensure language learning continues to respond to changing educational, technological and societal contexts.

Conclusion

This study addresses an important evidence gap in understanding higher education language learning in Ireland and provides new evidence to inform the next phase of *Languages Connect*. Students consistently recognised the value of language learning for communication, intercultural understanding, personal development, international engagement and future employment, demonstrating that positive attitudes towards languages remain strong.

The findings also show that participation depends less on motivation than on the opportunities available to learners. Barriers to participation, challenges associated with discontinuation and the supports identified by participants consistently pointed to structural rather than motivational factors. The evidence suggests that higher education language learning in Ireland does not face a motivation problem. It faces a continuity and participation pathway challenge.

The study further demonstrates that language learning has relevance across higher education. Students from diverse educational, linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds identified a need for institutional support, reinforcing that language learning should not be viewed solely as the domain of traditional language disciplines. As Ireland becomes increasingly multilingual and AI reshapes communication, the value of language learning lies not only in linguistic proficiency, but also in developing intercultural competence, communication and global engagement.

The next phase of *Languages Connect* provides an opportunity to build on these strengths by strengthening continuity across the language learning continuum, supporting flexible participation pathways and recognising language learning as an educational capability that contributes to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.

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