

# Learners open to languages just before they make GCSE option choices, report shows

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Half of all students are open to language learning at the point they make their option choices, new data shows.

The study, undertaken by Cardiff University's Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) Mentoring Project, sought the opinions of 5,800

[young people](#) in years eight and nine in Wales, just before they were due to make a decision on which GCSEs they would take. It is the largest known data set in the UK directly addressing [learners'](#) opinions on studying languages.

The results show 48% of all learners surveyed were open to considering learning a [language](#) at GCSE, despite a national average of 14.4% of Year 11 pupils being entered for a GCSE modern foreign language in 2021.

There are also large disparities in attitudes between international languages and Welsh compared to English in schools in Wales. The results show that out of 13 subjects, international languages were among the least enjoyed subjects, ranking 11th. Welsh was the least enjoyed subject, while English was the most enjoyed.

The MFL Mentoring Project began in 2015 and works with 140 schools to increase the number of young learners taking international languages in Wales. External evaluation shows that between 40–50% of pupils who are mentored as part of the initiative opt to study a GCSE language.

Project director Lucy Jenkins, based at Cardiff University's School of Modern Foreign Languages, said: "Although the national picture remains hugely concerning, the openness of learners to languages indicated in this survey offers reason for hope. Not least, offering us opportunity to capitalize on the linguistic diversity of Wales to support positive choices towards international languages at GCSE.

"However, these results also provide a stark reminder that without urgent intervention, it may not be feasible for schools to continue to offer an international language as a choice for GCSE and A Level if the current decline continues. Although we've heard anecdotally from teachers about the views of learners, this report gives us the clearest picture yet of

learner attitudes towards languages in relation to other subject areas.

"As the Curriculum for Wales is rolled out, it is paramount that we harness the opportunity to improve learners' overall appreciation of languages—which includes English, Welsh and international subjects—as an important part of their personal and professional development."

According to the data, the majority of pupils believe the core, compulsory subjects are more important for their careers than an international language. And although English came out top overall, STEM subjects were chosen 1.3 times more than humanities subjects and four times more than arts subjects.

Initial findings also suggest that learners from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and those whose parents speak more than one language are more likely to opt for an international language at GCSE.

Disparities in the profile of learners opting for an international language remain strong, with female learners twice as likely to study a language as male learners.

Professor Claire Gorrara, Academic Lead for the MFL Mentoring Project added: "Learning a language offers so much to students. As well as improving their future prospects, it gives them confidence, an expanded outlook and a whole range of highly transferrable skills.

"Our work with student mentors and schools demonstrates what a difference an improved emphasis on language learning can have on students. It is vital that more is done to make languages a more attractive proposition for students, so they feel it could be a realistic option for them."

There has been a 64% decline in the number of Welsh students studying a modern language at GCSE. In England, uptake has fallen by 48% over a similar period.

As part of the MFL Mentoring Project, university mentors from across five partner universities are trained to work with learners in Years 8 and 9 to inspire an intrinsic love and motivation for language learning and intercultural communication.

**More information:** The study is available online:  
[mflmentoring.co.uk/publications/](https://mflmentoring.co.uk/publications/)

Provided by Cardiff University

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