

Studying modern languages at a UK university

A modern languages degree.....

Is designed to provide you with the opportunity to study your chosen language(s) in order to improve efficiency and understanding. By the end of your degree you should be pretty fluent, and able not only to converse in the language but also translate and, if you choose the relevant modules, interpret.

You can also learn about the history, politics, philosophy and socio-economic context of the country, as well as study a range of cultural topics from literature to film to social media.

Other useful things to know

You may wish to focus on one language (single honours) which means that you have more time to study the language and the country in more depth. Alternatively, you can study two or more languages or combine a language with another subject, such as linguistics, history, English or philosophy (joint honours). Many universities offer the chance to study a language *ab initio*. This is an exciting opportunity to learn a new language, to help broaden your skill set and to keep your love of languages fresh.

Typical entry requirements (modern languages)

Entry requirements are usually quoted as A*/A/B etc. The Pre-U equivalents are D1 (A*+), D2 (A*), D3 (A*/A), M1 (A/B), M2 (B). The top grade requirement is usually for the language you wish to study. At some universities, entry requirements can be lower for single honours languages (e.g. French at Edinburgh is ABB).

A*AA **Cambridge**

AAA Bristol, **Durham**, Edinburgh, **Oxford**

AAB Bath, Exeter, **Glasgow**, KCL, Leeds, Southampton, **St Andrews**, UCL, **Warwick**

ABB Birmingham, Cardiff, **Lancaster**, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham

Those in **bold** are listed in the top five UK universities for French, Spanish or German (Complete University Guide). However, please don't rely on league tables and read carefully what data they take into account. Also note that a university which ranks highly for, say, French may not rank as highly for another language.

How to choose a university

Applicants often ask 'how do I know which university to apply to?'. This is hard to answer as choice is a subjective thing.

The league tables might confuse you. Reputedly Cambridge tops the list for all languages, with Durham in second place for French and Spanish; but for German, it's St Andrews. Oxford's highest position is fourth, for French; it ranks seventh for Spanish. Lancaster scores highly with students for teaching and feedback, while St Andrews and Newcastle score well for student satisfaction.

It is far better to look carefully at the degree courses on offer, rather than choose the university before the course. Language degrees are so diverse that it is important to do your research, to check that the modules on offer match your areas of interest. For example, Oxford does less assessed oral training but is strong on literature and thought of all periods, medieval to modern. Durham and Exeter have compulsory modules in written and spoken language and a range of optional modules from contemporary cinema to medieval literature, the political scene to intercultural communication. Bath offers an untraditional non-literary course, particularly strong on European history and politics.

Once you have compiled a long list of courses which appeal, ask yourself other questions to narrow it down: what is the teaching like, how much contact time will I get with lecturers and tutors, how will I be assessed, what are my job prospects? All this information is available on the university websites.

Interesting fact no.1

Employers are 65% plus more likely to favour a graduate who can speak at least one foreign language over a similar candidate with no languages other than his/her native tongue.

What will you actually do during a typical week?

Obviously, this varies from university to university, but you are likely to have between 10 and 15 hours contact time a week. This will include language work in the lab. The rest of the time, you are expected to work on your own, reading set texts and newspapers, listening to podcasts and the radio, studying films, etc., all in the original language(s). You will also need to make time for wider, critical reading which will inform and enrich your essays and dissertations. This additional reading and study is critically important in a languages degree, as it will help you formulate your own views. The more you can read in the original target language, the better, firstly because it will help develop your vocabulary and grammar, and secondly because you will not miss any of the cultural and linguistic nuances that can be lost in translation.

The year abroad

Every student of languages is expected to spend the third of the 4-year degree abroad, dividing the time between countries that are relevant to your chosen languages, including any language that you study ab initio (as a beginner). You will be expected to explore the culture and society for yourself, while either studying at a partner university, teaching English or undertaking a work placement. Be aware that you will be expected to sort your year abroad out yourself and you won't necessarily get much help from the university. Work placements are sometimes advertised on online university noticeboards and there will be a number of places available for study at partner universities (some of these are allocated on how well you do in your second-year exams). You will be far less stressed if you organise this well before the end of your second year as it can be quite a time-consuming process. During your year abroad, some universities will ask you to write an essay about an aspect of the culture of the country/ies in which you have stayed.

You need to be good at

the language! For the main languages (French, Spanish, German), the top entry grade requirements are usually expected to be in the language(s) you are studying at Pre-U. You also need to be good at communication skills, listening skills, time management and independent learning. You need a genuine love of and interest in culture, literature, society and topical issues (you need to be up to speed for your oral exams if nothing else). You need to enjoy reading. There is a lot of it! Other key competencies you need to demonstrate include analytical skills (of texts/critics/opinion pieces), referencing and providing evidence to back up your argument or point of view.

Improve your application by.....

- reading about topical issues such as Brexit, trade, immigration, feminism, from the perspective of the country whose language you want to study
- reading key classic works and more contemporary literature
- listening to foreign language radio and podcasts
- completing a MOOC, entering an essay competition, doing some extended writing

Consider studying languages with..

another compatible subject, such as English, history, politics, philosophy, history of art, economics, either as part of a joint or combined honours degree at universities like Durham, Exeter, Newcastle, UCL and Birmingham. Or look at Liberal Arts degrees like those at Durham or Exeter where you can combine languages with a range of other subjects.

Possible careers

Foreign Office & diplomacy
Translation/interpreting
Journalism/marketing/communications/PR
International finance/trade/aid/negotiations
Law
Teaching

Average starting salary

£20,000 - £25,000

Interesting fact no.2

Contrary to popular belief, expertise in modern languages has never been more important, as the UK forges a new relationship with its European partners and seeks to develop its trading and cultural ties throughout the world.