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New Courses 2012: The impact on enrolments in Italian at the University of Western Australia

Abstract

This study explores the recent introduction of a new course structure at the University of Western Australia (UWA), called 'New Courses' and the impact this structure has had on first and second year enrolments in Italian. After a brief discussion of the new degree structure in general, we consider some overall trends on how it has affected language enrolments at UWA, and then Italian in particular. Using data from enrolment numbers in past years and a survey we created, we show how a large percentage of students studying Italian at UWA are not from the Faculty of Arts, how this new degree structure has impacted on our student cohort and what implications this may have for pedagogy. The study concludes by offering some suggestions for further research and what implications this model may have for language teaching in universities around Australia.

1. Introduction

This study explores the recent introduction of a new course structure at the University of Western Australia (UWA), called *New Courses*, and the impact this structure has had on first and second year enrolments in Italian. This new course structure was implemented in the context of global pressures that are prompting a re-evaluation of higher education around the world, particularly in terms of the content and delivery of tertiary courses. The new course structure at UWA is seen as forming part of this trend identified at universities both internationally and locally. For example, the Bologna Process introduced a three-year general Bachelors degree followed by a two-year Masters. In Australia, the University of Melbourne's 'Melbourne Model' also adopted a generalist undergraduate course structure leading to professional degrees.

Introduced in 2012, the new UWA degree structure responded to this changing environment. The purpose of this paper is to gauge what impact this new structure has had on enrolments in Italian at UWA, and to consider the challenge of how to maintain and increase student numbers. This study forms part of a broader discussion throughout the tertiary language sector in recent years on retention strategies (Nettelbeck et al. 2009) and on the need for the "creation of processes to ensure that universities collect data in a readily accessible form on the LOTE experience of their students" (Nettelbeck et al. 2007: 6). As discussed below, the introduction of *New*

Courses at UWA has led to unprecedented levels of enrolment in Italian, providing substantial evidence that enrolments are directly related to issues of access and degree structure.

The new UWA degree structure “ensures [students] have the time and flexibility to choose their career path and gain the skills and knowledge to succeed in an international workplace”,¹ meaning no decision has to be made on a narrow field of study straight from school. UWA’s website on *New Courses* lists the following six features as the main characteristics of this new degree structure:

1. Broad education, in-depth knowledge
2. More choices, better choices
3. Highly developed communication and research skills
4. Community engagement
5. Opportunities to study abroad
6. Professional degrees at a postgraduate level

From over 150 undergraduate degrees under the previous model, there are now five offered at UWA. These are the Bachelor of Arts, Commerce, Design, Science and the exclusive Bachelor of Philosophy for students with high entrance scores. A major consists of completing eight semester-long units in a certain discipline. The other subjects of the degree come in part from one’s own area of study and from other areas. At the base of this model is the intention to offer students the opportunity of acquiring a broader general knowledge so that they can be better prepared for the workplace. In short, students take a wide range of subjects in first year and specialization in successive years, as is summarized in the slogan of the degree “Broad education, in-depth knowledge”.

One important change to the degree structure is that students are required to take what are called *Broadening units*. Essentially, students must enrol in at least four units over the course of their degree that are from a different Faculty (there is no maximum to the number of Broadening units a student can include, subject to them meeting the rules of their course). For example, a student studying a Bachelor of Commerce may take four units from the Faculty of Arts. One way of satisfying the Broadening requirement is to take a language, which is explained for students in the Handbook.² In contrast to the Melbourne Model, UWA allows students from the Faculty of Arts to choose a language as a Broadening unit, which results in some further flexibility to satisfy the requirement.

The predictions of language academics at UWA were that languages would be an attractive choice for students. This was for three reasons. The first was that students would probably have had some exposure to a language in high school, and so taking an extra course in a language would seem a preferable option to other Broadening units. Secondly, for students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (BA), enrolling in a language unit can count as their Broadening unit even though it was still within their own Faculty. Thirdly, the increase in enrolments for languages had been observed

after the introduction of the Melbourne Model in 2008 and after consultation with the colleagues from that university it was reasonable to assume that this would happen at UWA as well.³

This study considers what impact the introduction of this new degree structure has had on enrolments in Italian at UWA, and offers considerable evidence that university enrolments in languages are directly related to access opportunities. Before an analysis of these results in Section 3 below, it will be helpful to consider patterns of language enrolments more generally as well as the previous retention rates in Italian. This will provide a necessary context for our survey as well as to clarify the position of Italian overall at UWA.

2. Languages and *New Courses*: overall trends

The introduction of *New Courses* at UWA saw enrolments increase dramatically for all eight (classical and modern) languages taught in the Faculty of Arts.⁴ This information was confirmed when the first data of enrolments in first year first semester units came through after the new degree structure's introduction in 2012, and were confirmed in 2013. As can be seen in Figure 1, in some cases, levels of enrolment doubled from 2011 to 2013.

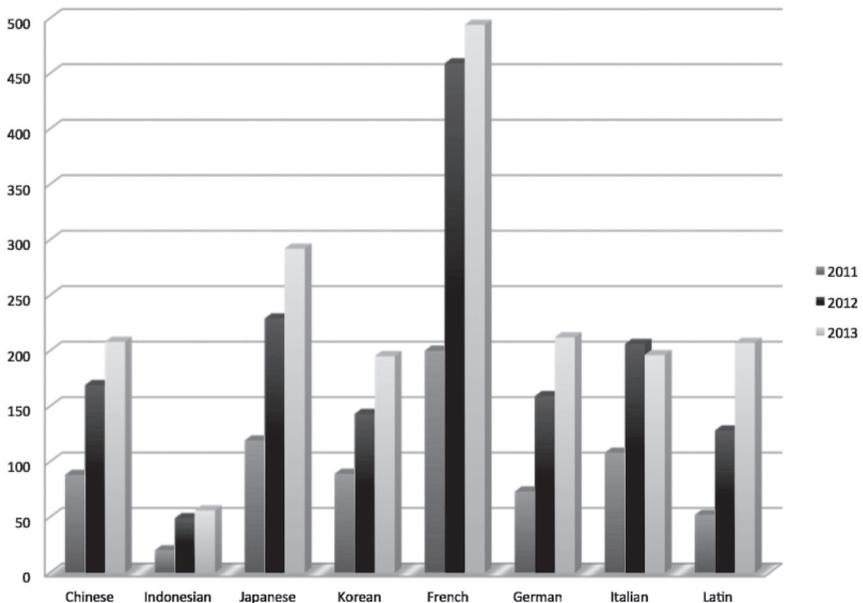


Figure 1: Beginner enrolments in first year language units in 2011, 2012 and 2013 (figures provided by Philippa Freegard, Faculty of Arts, UWA)

All languages increased from 2011 to 2012. As shown in Figure 1, French has by far outstripped other languages offered at UWA with almost 500 students enrolled in their first year beginners' course.⁵ With regard to Italian, enrolments almost doubled from just over 100 in 2011 to 200 in 2012, before seeing a slight dip in 2013, for which there is no apparent explanation. In general, the effects of *New Courses* after its introduction in 2012 have been clearly positive for languages. This result is seen more clearly when we contrast the percentage of non-BA students who took two Level 1 units in Arts in 2012, as shown in Figure 2:

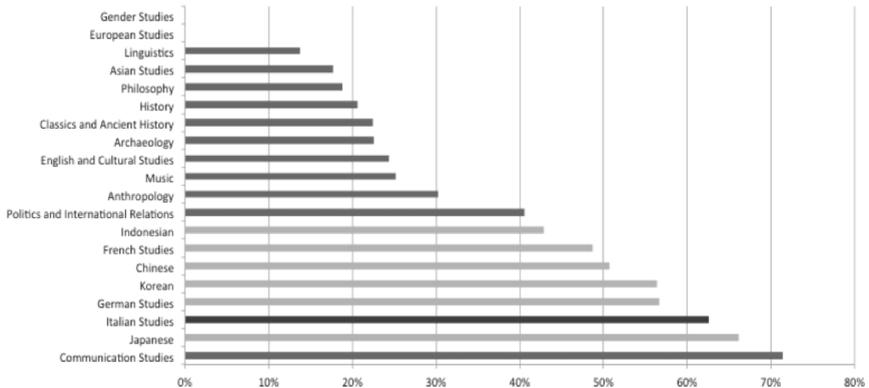


Figure 2: Percentage of non-BA students taking two Level 1 units in Arts in 2012 (figures provided by Philippa Freegard, Faculty of Arts, UWA)

The eight languages offered at UWA have been highlighted above in red, and Italian is shown in dark red. Of the twenty disciplines represented above, languages are a clear preference for students not enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts. Only Communication Studies had a higher percentage of enrolment than any language. Informal and anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the students enrolling in first-year language units from non-BA students do so in order to satisfy the Broadening requirement of the degree. On the other hand, it may be indicative of the opportunity to study languages in their degree which now allows them to fulfil a deeper educational goal.

With regard to Italian, there have been significant increases in enrolments over the past three years. Figure 3 shows the overall increase in first and second year courses in Italian in the first semester from 2011 to 2013:

This figure shows increases over the two first year courses and two second year courses for which data are available. The two first year courses are Italian Beginners (*ab initio* students) and first year post-WACE (Western Australian Certificate of Education at Year 12). The first year Beginners, first year post-WACE and second year *ab initio* courses have all increased by over 60% between 2011 and 2013 and, in second year post-WACE, the increase has been over 180%. This increase must be

due, at least in part, to the introduction of *New Courses* and the requirement for students to take a Broadening unit. Nevertheless, the question of whether students continue with Italian into second year must also be taken into consideration because these students could potentially go on to complete a major in Italian.

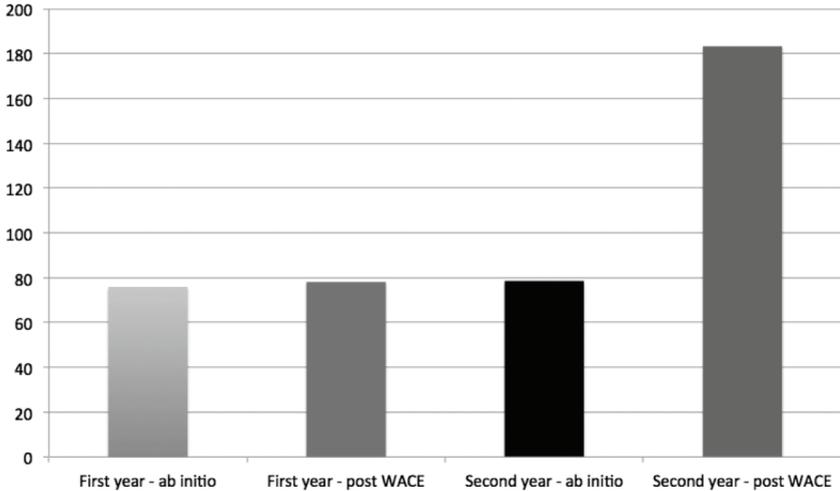


Figure 3: Increases in Italian enrolments from 2011 to 2013 (first semester only)

Overall, the retention rate of all courses has remained relatively high. Students enrolled in an *ab initio* course who continue with Italian in their second year of study have a retention rate of 50%, slightly down from 2011 to 2012. It is important to remember that, since the introduction of *New Courses*, a large component of students are from a non-BA degree. Given this changing demographic, the retention rate of 50% appears remarkable. In other words, this rate could have been expected to be maintained with the pre-*New Courses* student cohort. But even with a wide proportion of non-BA students, the retention rate remained at a relatively stable level.⁶ This may point to the preference for language study over other subject areas, since the post-*New Courses* cohort have decided to re-enrol in second year units of Italian—continuing with their first year preference—rather than switching to other subjects from different disciplines and faculties.

For those who studied Italian at high school, then completed first year Italian at UWA, the retention rate from first to second year in 2013 is over 70%, slightly up from the previous year, as shown in Figure 4.

Given this increase in language enrolments, we wanted to have a clearer picture of whether this was a sustained trend and whether retention levels had increased, decreased, or stayed the same with respect to previous years. We wanted to know what degree students were enrolled in, what majors they were doing, whether they took Italian as a Broadening unit and whether they intended to study Italian in the

future. The next section of this study explains how a sample of students was selected and data collected to clarify the backgrounds, motivations and goals of this new cohort.

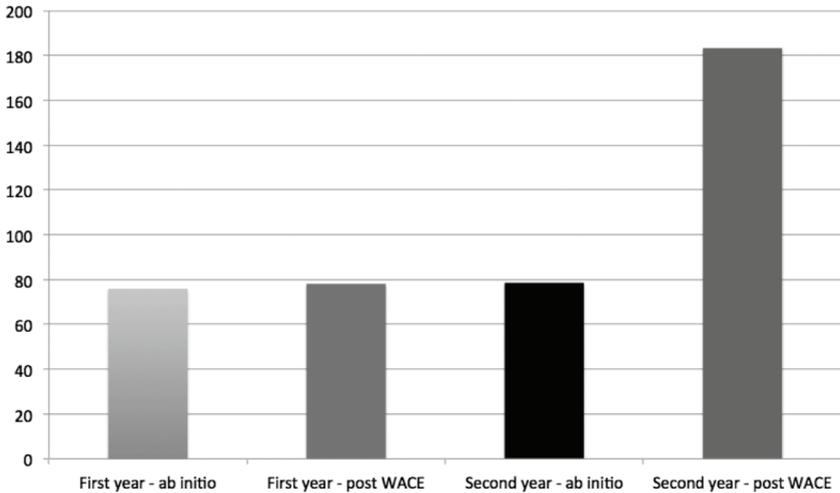


Figure 4: Retention rates from first year to second year, post-WACE

3. Data collection

In order to obtain an adequate sample of students who had enrolled since the introduction of the new degree structure, we chose three different cohorts of students who were enrolled in a *New Courses* degree. In order to get a comprehensive picture, and to allow comparison with data from 2012, we investigated three 'streams' of language learners enrolled in first and second year courses via a survey we created. The year level and number of surveys we collected is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Target groups and number of surveys collected

Year level	Entry type	Surveys collected	Total enrolled in the course
First year	post-WACE	59	60
Second year	<i>ab initio</i>	37	50
Second year	post-WACE	31	34

A further reason for choosing these three groups was to see whether there were different characteristics between students who had studied Italian at high-school (post-WACE) and those who were *ab initio* students.

The survey we devised comprised eight questions. It was made up of yes-no questions and also required students to select which degree they were enrolled in and which discipline they would like to major in. The eight questions included in the survey were:

1. I enrolled in a Bachelor of (Arts/Commerce/Design/Science/Philosophy)
2. I would like to major in ...
3. I am thinking of taking Italian as a second major (yes/no)
4. I took ITALxx03 as a Broadening Unit (yes/no)
5. I obtained the Bonus for Languages (yes/no)
6. The Bonus for Languages helped me be admitted to the degree of my choice (yes/no)
7. I will continue with the next unit of Italian in second semester (yes/no)
8. I think learning a language is important for my education and my future career (yes/no)

The survey was distributed to the students at the start of the semester in early 2013. We wanted to investigate whether students had indeed taken Italian as a Broadening unit, or whether they planned to major in it already from their first or second year of study. We also wanted to know whether they planned to continue studying Italian, and whether they were thinking of taking it as a second major. Students who take a second language at high school in Western Australia are also credited with an extra 10% to their entrance score at UWA (see Section 3.3 below), and so we also wanted to find out whether this language bonus helped them in making their decision to study Italian and come to UWA. Finally, we wanted to assess the students' attitudes towards the importance of learning Italian and the teaching of culture.

Our survey was designed simply to obtain an initial picture of what background this new cohort of students came from. The remainder of this study explores what impact the introduction of *New Courses* has had on enrolments in Italian at UWA based on the results of our survey.

3. The impact of *New Courses* on enrolments in Italian at UWA

3.1 Impact on student cohort

One clear impact of *New Courses* on enrolments in Italian is the changed composition of our student cohort. Simply put, in the *ab initio* stream, students enrolled in a Bachelor of Science represent the largest non-BA group, but there is still a majority of BA students in the first year post-WACE stream. When we group all the responses together for those enrolled in a non-Arts degree and contrast them against those in Arts, the distinction between first and second year enrolments becomes more obvious:

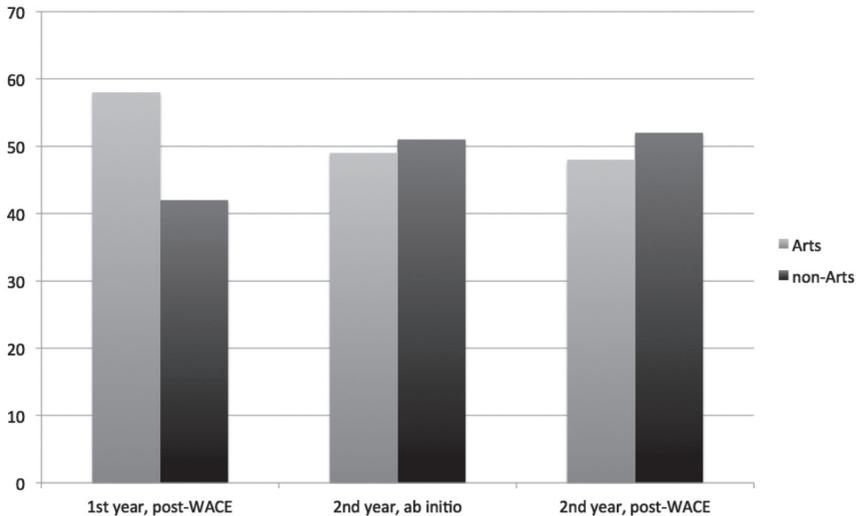


Figure 5: Students enrolled in a BA vs. non-BA degree

In our second year courses, students enrolled in a non-Arts degree slightly outnumber those from Arts. This change in the make-up of our student cohort ultimately impacted on pedagogy and prompted a reflection on curriculum. For example, our first year programs were revised and a decision was taken to make greater use of technology in language learning. In order to incorporate greater use of technology at UWA, we introduced a group project involving iMovie to dub films from English to Italian (see Caruso and Brown, this volume),⁷ hoping to appeal particularly to those students who may have a ‘problem-solving’ orientation in their learning style. Further use was made of online discussion boards and external language learning websites for students as well. Additional rationale for this decision was provided by Brussino and Gunn’s (2008) study of language learners and Italian internet media, contributing to the growing body of evidence that use of technology promotes “effective learning and development of effective learning strategies” (Brussino and Gunn 2008: 17).

This change in the student cohort caused us to ask other questions: would students from other disciplines prefer to learn Italian by discussing topics that related more directly to their chosen area of specialization, rather than traditional topics such as literature or Italian history? And is language acquisition their major motivation for enrolling in Italian? This question was previously raised by Schmidt (2012) in her discussion on student diversity in German Studies. She concluded that “although nowadays language students are enrolled in the whole spectrum of degrees available, they nevertheless share common motives and expectations with regard to their language study” (Schmidt 2012: 232). Schmidt also found that this diversity has resulted in languages being studied for only a few semesters, i.e.

language study was not the focus of the degree for many students. While more research is needed to provide an answer to the questions above, we decided to revise our *ab initio* first year curriculum. This consisted of introducing five lectures during the semester devoted solely to cultural content into a curriculum that had previously been designed only for language acquisition. These lectures therefore represented a departure from language being the unique focus of our first year course, in an effort to appeal to a broader cohort of students. The topics chosen for the lectures varied from Italian-Australian economic relations, to contemporary Italian cinema, to Italy-China contact.

These modifications were made to adapt to the students who were understood to have a different learning background from students enrolled in an Arts degree.⁸ At the same time, new questions arose. We were cautious, for example, not to place too much emphasis on topics or learning strategies related solely to the scientific domain. This was felt to be important particularly since the principal idea behind requiring students to take a Broadening unit was to enable them to acquire skills and learning methodologies outside of their chosen area of specialization. The complementary nature of this part of their degree, it is hoped, will encourage students to take more units in Italian and possibly a major.

3.2 Impact on choice of major and unit type

Our results show that *New Courses* has also impacted on the number of students who have decided to major in Italian, and what type of units they would like to study. Italian is preferred as a second major rather than a first. In all three groups, only a minority of students said they would like to major in Italian, less than 20%. In this regard, the promotion of Italian as a Broadening unit could make it appear that it is ideally taken as a major alongside another principal subject of specialization, but not as the primary focus of a student's program of study. This argument would therefore be valid for all languages, not just for Italian, since all eight languages of UWA are promoted as being one way of fulfilling the Broadening requirement.⁹ On the other hand, the promotion of languages and of Italian outside the Faculty of Arts opens up the possibility of language learning to a wider variety and higher number of students, meaning that Italian has become more popular as a second major than a first in our sample, as can be seen in Figure 6.¹⁰

In the second year *ab initio* stream, the percentage of students who responded that they are thinking of taking Italian as a second major is close to 50%, and 35% of students in the first year post-WACE stream said that they are also considering Italian as a potential major. This argument is supported by students responding to a question about their potential interest in taking units just on Italian culture or language. For *ab initio* students in their second year, 70% of students said they would take a unit solely on Italian culture, and this figure rose to 84% for the post-WACE stream. Nevertheless, there is clearly a subset of respondents who are interested purely in language acquisition units, and for second year *ab initio* students, this was almost one third. In short, the increased number of students taking Italian as a Broadening

unit is potentially leading to a new kind of non-specialist cohort of student who may decide to major in Italian while being interested primarily in language acquisition.

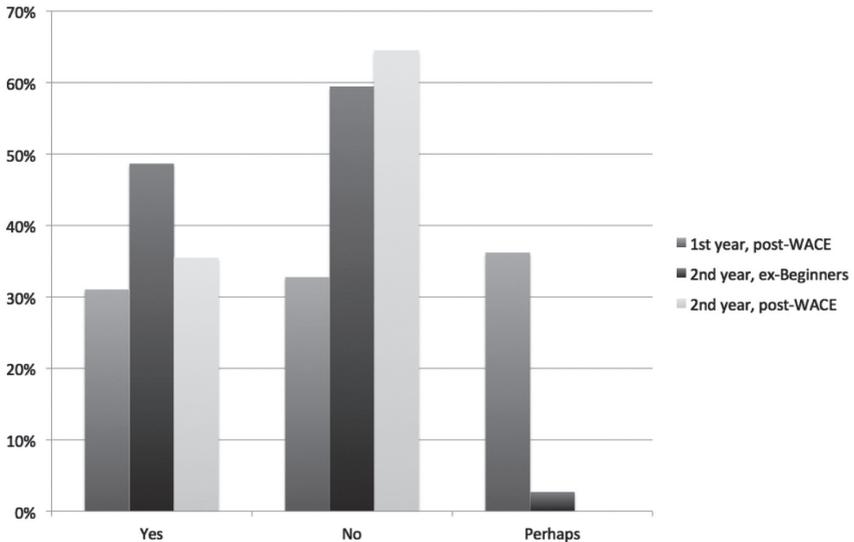


Figure 6: Percentage of students considering Italian as a second major

These results seem to confirm the perception that, overall, students are interested in obtaining a full picture of what Italy has to offer and the culture surrounding the language they have already learned. The more language study that students are exposed to, the more cultural interest they acquire in Italy as a whole. In this regard, it is essential that course descriptions available on university websites are kept up to date, and aim to provide as much detail as possible regarding the unit's content and the cultural skills students will acquire during the course.¹¹ Schüpbach and Hajek (2012: 101) note that “the use of the internet to profile language programs in Australian universities is not being maximised yet, despite the undeniable importance of the web for global visibility”.

3.3 Impact of efforts to promote languages

In 2011, UWA introduced a 10% entry bonus for students taking a Language Other Than English (LOTE) as part of their WACE in Year 12, for admission to the University in 2012. This measure was taken “to encourage students to continue studying another language to the end of secondary school”.¹² As Hill (2011: 12) reports, the Group of Eight have declared particular support for a language bonus “although the specific form of the ‘bonus’ varies considerably”.¹³ In order to gauge whether the adoption of this bonus motivated students to continue further with Italian, our survey asked

questions about the success of such an initiative to promote languages in Western Australia.

In our study, a large proportion (90%) of first year post-WACE students obtained the bonus for languages. Whether this bonus then helped students to be admitted to their course is a separate issue. Indeed, only 15% said it helped them. One must keep in mind, however, that this finding does not reflect the usefulness of the bonus across the university, but only indicates that this particular group of students did not find the bonus useful. Despite the debatable success of the language bonus, encouraging results were shown when students were asked whether they thought learning a language is important for their education and future career. This result is reported in Figure 7:

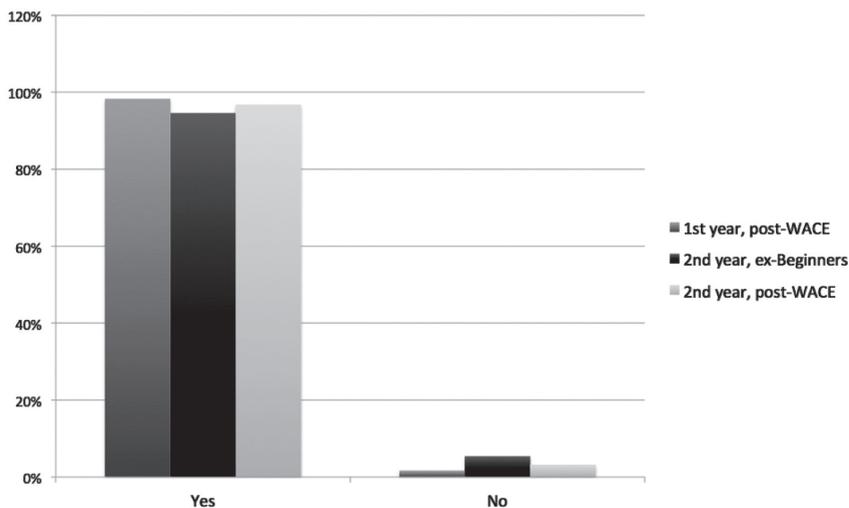


Figure 7: "I think learning a language is important for my education and future career"

Almost all students demonstrated a positive attitude towards learning a language. This is not an obvious result, given Australia's so-called 'monolingual mindset', and reflects the generally positive attribute associated with LOTE-learning at university level and students' self-perceptions of their future careers. It is hoped that this finding will correlate with a larger uptake of a LOTE into the future. What impact the introduction of *New Courses* has had on the overall enrolment in a language major will only be able to be assessed once data become available on majors in 2014.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that there have been a number of impacts on enrolments in Italian from the recent introduction of a new degree structure at UWA. In general, it appears that all these impacts have been positive.

There has been an overall increase in enrolments, with more students of Italian continuing into second year. Broadening units are attracting students to all languages, not just to Italian, and not just in their first year. Many students are taking second year Italian as a Broadening unit as well. The intake of both first year and second year students has changed. There is a large group of non-BA students at first year level, but the majority in second year are from Arts. This change in our student cohort prompted members of staff to redesign parts of our curriculum at first year level, in order to appeal to a broader range of students' backgrounds and therefore encourage them to continue with their language study in second year. With regard to retention, the percentage is higher in the post-WACE stream. Italian appears to be becoming more attractive as a second major rather than as a first. Also encouraging is the strong interest students have in wanting to study units focussed entirely on culture.

The new degree structure has had implications for the way in which classes are taught and what content is taught not just at UWA, but has raised questions which are applicable to Italian departments around Australia as well. For example, should we adapt our teaching to suit the varied motivations and learning techniques of our students given they come from such diverse faculties and learning areas? And should our language classes contain a larger 'cultural' component? Moore, Rizzi and Ristaino (2012: 94) have recently observed "it is regrettable that little or no recent literature exists on the integration of culture and language in Italian *ab initio* programs". Their comments point to the importance of further research into how language and culture can be successfully combined. In light of the increase in student diversity as shown in our results above, these questions take on new meaning and require different solutions to previous years, when almost all students came from Arts. In particular, how do we address the question of the integration of language and culture in the light of increased student diversity, and what can we do to ensure our course offerings appeal to a broad range of student's backgrounds, interests and specializations?

Notes

1. <http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/about/nc2012>, accessed 15 October 2013.
2. <http://handbooks.uwa.edu.au/undergraduate/courses/about/broadening>, accessed 15 October 2013.
3. For information on the introduction of the Melbourne Model, see the report *The Melbourne Model: Report of the Curriculum Commission*, in which it states that "Students will be encouraged to develop competence in a language other than English" (The University of Melbourne 2006: 26).
4. The modern languages currently offered at UWA include Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese and Korean. Ancient Greek and Latin are also offered.

5. The largest increase at the University of Melbourne after the introduction of the *Melbourne Model* in 2008 was in Spanish (up 539 per cent across three years). See Lane (2012).
6. It would be interesting to see what insights could be gained from students who decided to discontinue taking a LOTE to fulfil their Broadening requirement, and which other discipline(s) they chose to enrol in. In order to increase the overall number of Italian majors, retaining the increased number of students following the introduction of *New Courses* will be vital. In this regard, further research into attrition and retention levels is needed (cf. Martin and Jansen (2012: 176) “the problem of attrition in Australian university language and culture courses has not until recently been studied systematically”).
7. See “Part II: Teaching Italian with technology” in Occhipinti (2008) for other recent innovations in Italian language teaching using technology.
8. Horwitz’s study of beliefs about language learning of 241 first-semester language students in German, French and Spanish at the University of Texas found that “two commonly encountered beliefs about differential language learning ability were not supported by any of the respondent groups. Few subjects endorsed the statement that people who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages” (Horwitz 1988: 287-288). On the question of variables affecting choice of language learning strategies by university students in general, see Oxford and Nyikos (2011).
9. If a student decides to fulfill their Broadening requirement by taking all four units in a language, this would mean they would have only two years of language instruction, but not a major.
10. Citing similar studies by Nettelbeck et al. (2009) and by Martin and Jansen (2012), Schmidt (2012: 232) notes that low retention rates “cannot be linked to student dissatisfaction with their language course”.
11. <http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/courses/italian-studies>, accessed 15 October 2013.
12. <http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/mar-2008/students-get-bonus-points-studying-languages>, accessed 15 October 2013. A language bonus is being introduced also at Edith Cowan University and Murdoch University from 2014.
13. For example, in Western Australia, 10% of a student’s final scaled score in a WA Curriculum Council-approved course in a LOTE will be added to that student’s Tertiary Entrance Aggregate. In Queensland, however, students applying to the University of Queensland through the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre are awarded two bonus points (on a 1-99 scale) towards their entry for passing an approved LOTE (with a similar two bonus points also available for passing the relevant Mathematics exam). For further details on the UQ Bonus Rank Scheme, see <http://www.uq.edu.au/study/index.html?page=86632>, accessed 15 October 2013.

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