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This is a contribution from Australian Review of Applied Linguistics 40:3
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Continuity in foreign language education in Australia

The Language Bonus plan

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This article discusses the validity of the bonus for languages other than English (known as the Language Bonus) established in Australia to boost participation in language education. In subjecting this incentive plan to empirical investigation, we not only address a gap in the literature, but also continue the discussion on how to ensure that the efforts made by governments, schools, education agencies and teachers to support language study in schooling can have long-term success. Using data from a large-scale investigation, we consider the significance of the Language Bonus in influencing students' decisions to study a language at school and at university. While this paper has a local focus – an English-speaking country in which language study is not compulsory – it engages with questions from the broader agenda of providing incentives for learning languages. It will be relevant especially for language policy in English speaking countries.

Keywords: language policy, Language Bonus, incentives, motivations, participation in languages education, enrolment trends, foreign language learning

Introduction

Discussion about how to encourage participation in language education is gaining relevance around the world across various sectors of education. With English increasingly becoming a basic skill at a global level, countries in which English is the official or de facto language, like Australia, may be faced with the risk of raising a generation of citizens who will be disadvantaged in their traditional monolingualism and unprepared for “active and responsible citizenship in a global world” (Pauwels, 2007, para. 1).

Although language education in Australia continues to be in “permanent crisis” (Martín, 2005), and school education programs are described as “extremely

fragile” (Scarino, 2014, p. 294), some positive signs of recovery have been identified in recent years. At tertiary level, enrolments in languages have risen since 2002. As Hajek (2014) explains, “the significant increase in university enrolments over the period 2002–11...is a positive indication of rising student interest in languages, and institutional attempts to address that interest” (p. 22). Brown and Caruso (2014, 2016), and Caruso and Brown (2015), provide substantial evidence that Australian students are indeed interested in learning a language, and that the study of a language at university is directly related to issues of access and degree structure. While not connected to issues of access, an initiative established to promote language learning in Australia is the Language Bonus for university entry, that is, bonus marks for having studied a language in the last year of high school, which is the focus of this paper.

In all Australian states and territories, students apply to university through a state-run organization, which ranks all students who apply to a university in their final year of study. This ranking is given as a percentage, based on the marks that each student achieves in their final year of matriculation. The Language Bonus encourages students to study a foreign language in their final year of schooling by taking their final percentage, and then adding a bonus percentage to their final rank if they have studied a language. Universities then decide which students should be made offers based on this ranking. For school leavers, this is the typical pathway for entry into a first-year university course.

Although there is anecdotal evidence that the Language Bonus has positively influenced students in continuing the study of a language beyond the years of compulsory education, the incentive plan has not been subjected to empirical investigation until now. This paper is an attempt to address this gap in the literature by gauging the impact of the incentive, while at the same time continuing the discussion on how to ensure that the efforts made by governments, schools, education agencies and teachers to support language study in post-compulsory schooling can have long-term success. For this reason, it is vital that we monitor any interventions and policies aimed particularly at the upper secondary level, the so-called “business end of schooling” (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p. 49), where subject choice and marks matter the most. As indicated by Liddicoat et al. (2007), the students’ perception that their realistic prospects in their language end of high school examination will impact negatively on their overall scores (and therefore on entry to university) is partly responsible for the lack of interest in languages at school.¹

1. In Australia a typical course of study involves: one year of preschool, 6 years of primary school and 6 years of secondary school (Year 1 to Year 12). Examinations are held in the last year of secondary school, Year 12, and determine university entry.

In this paper we present the results of a large-scale investigation undertaken in 2014 involving students enrolled at The University of Western Australia (UWA). The main aims of the study were to investigate the impact of the bonus as a strategy to encourage students to continue studying a language at post-compulsory level and to verify whether it had helped them with their admission at the authors' home institution. Before discussing the project, it is important to outline briefly the Australian context relating to language education and policies in secondary schooling, as this is the setting that the Language Bonus programs more directly address. While this paper has a local focus – an English-speaking country in which language study is not compulsory – it engages with questions from the broader agenda of providing incentives for learning languages. It will be relevant particularly to policy in other English-speaking countries.

Language education in Australia

Australia's levels of participation in language education, despite the country's increasing number of bilinguals due to revitalization by new migration (Rubino, 2007; Scarino, 2014), are, paradoxically, extremely low. This is the case particularly in secondary schooling, and they have reached an all-time low in recent years. Once praised for the acknowledgement of the role of languages in normal educational provision,² Australia, which lacks a national policy on languages and languages education, is clearly lagging far behind the rest of the world. Only about 10% of the school population study languages in the last two years of secondary school (Cruickshank & Wright, 2016; Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). Clyne (2005, p. xi) rightly attributes such resistance to a "persistent monolingual mindset". Scarino (2014, p. 302) advocates the "unlearning of monolingualism" as necessary in languages education, in order to fully understand "the integral way in which languages and cultures (plural) come into play in learning and shape success in learning".

The need for increased participation in language study has been addressed repeatedly in the last twenty years of language policies but with little impact, especially at post-compulsory schooling level (Absalom, 2011; Baldwin, 2011; Clyne, 2005; Liddicoat, 2010; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010). Some policies are described as failing to recognize the need to *revise strategies*, rather than change goals. Other

2. The exemplary 'National policy on languages' (Lo Bianco 1987) was the push for mainstreaming language classes in compulsory education. Extra and Yağmur (2004, especially par. 5.2) take the languages programs in the state of Victoria as a model of good practice for linguistic pluralism.

policy revisions clearly responded to the problematic low up-take of languages study with a restricted focus, neglecting key needs such as teachers' education and supply (Norris 2010). The 1990s policy activity, in particular, prioritized the elective study of Asian languages for primarily commercial purposes, and it is suggested that this shift of emphasis had the effect of reducing the expectation that students would study a language in senior school (Liddicoat, 2010, as cited in Taylor-Leech 2012). With a stronger focus on languages for economic benefit came a narrowing focus on fewer languages, followed by a "general apathy at national level in language policies and a corresponding weakening of the position of languages in schools (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010, p. 2). On the other hand, continued funding and support have been proven to increase participation in language study. Spence-Brown (2014) reports that the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools program, instituted in 1995, did result in increased numbers of students of Asian Languages. At the same time, as the author indicates, the program's withdrawal a few years later suggests that "the underlying structures are not able to support language learning without continued additional boosting and incentives" (Spence-Brown, 2014, p. 184–185).

Policy activity intensified in the first decades of the new millennium. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for all Young Australians, signed in 2008, established language learning as essential for the education of all students. The year 2011 saw the development of a National Curriculum, which provided a more central role for languages. Language learning came to be finally recognized as one of the Key Learning Areas in the curriculum for all students, together with English, Mathematics, Science and Humanities. Another central assumption of the National Curriculum is that continued learning needs to be provided via different pathways into the senior secondary years. This set of pathways accounts for different types of learners (e.g., second language learners, background³ speakers and first language speakers), and highlights the interrelationship between languages education and multiculturalism policies (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010; Scarino, 2014). In recent years, the debate on language education is being shaped by the need to maintain and legitimize diversity in language education (Lo Bianco, 2010). It is in this context that the bonus point programs were introduced by Australian universities.

3. Other countries of immigration (e.g. USA, UK) present the same typology of learners, although the terminology may differ. What is referred here as 'background' learners, that is students who have or have had exposure to the language through their family's country of origin, in the USA is referred to as 'heritage' learners.

The Language Bonus point plan⁴

The Language Bonus, also referred to in the literature as the LOTE (Language Other Than English) Bonus or Languages Bonus, commonly consists of an extra percentage added to the university entry mark for students who have studied a language at senior secondary school level.

In Australia there are two types of bonus points programs:

1. an automatic Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) bonus: available to all students who successfully complete a language course at the senior secondary level.⁵ This plan is operational in the state of Victoria. The bonus points can be used for entry to any degree program; and
2. a course-based bonus: available to students who wish to gain entry into a particular university where languages are typically offered. The bonus points are usually administered by the university, and the number of bonus points depends on the student's attainment in their course at the senior secondary level or on the university specific requirements.⁶

The Language Bonus was first introduced in the state of Victoria in 1994 as an attempt to boost language enrolments in schools (Elder, 2000). The bonus entailed the addition of five points to the university entrance score of students who studied a language for their final examinations. While it was welcomed by many language education specialists, the bonus also caused controversy and concern that it would advantage background speaker learners by allowing them easy access to university.⁷ This is an issue that emerged in our investigation and will be addressed further on in the discussion.

4. The official name of the plan in Australia is 'The Language Bonus Point Scheme'. Given the negative connotation that the term 'scheme' tends to have outside of Australia, the more neutral terms plan or program are used in this paper.

5. The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is well described by Spence-Brown (2014, p. 193): it is "used in ranking students for tertiary entrance purposes (except in Queensland). It represents the student's percentile rank in relation to all other students in their cohort. This score is based on scaled marks in eligible year 12 subjects but is calculated differently in different states."

6. For details on which type of bonus is offered by universities see the document 'Go8 Languages Incentives Schemes' at <https://go8.edu.au/programs-and-fellowships/go8-languages-incentive-schemes>.

7. The Language Bonus was the reason behind the establishment of the 'special consideration program' in Victoria, whereby the 'genuine' language learners would have their tertiary entrance ranking incremented, on set conditions, to compensate them for their alleged disadvantage with respect to background speakers (Elder, 2000, pp. 91–92).

More recently, a group of research intensive Australian universities (the Group of Eight universities, also known as Go8) have encouraged a variety of incentives to reward students who choose to study a language at upper secondary level (Group of Eight Incentive Scheme, 2014). Launched in 2007, the Group of Eight universities' Language Bonus program had the key goal "to establish direct incentives, an increased and universal bonus for tertiary entrance for students who graduate from Year 12 with a language" (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p. 58). Through collaborative work with other education stakeholders, it also aimed to extend "such schemes from those few individual universities and education jurisdictions... towards an increased and comprehensive system of incentives by 2012" (Lo Bianco & Slaughter 2009, p. 58). In 2017, the establishment of a uniform university entry Language Bonus points program is yet to be achieved, however significant progress has been made. In Western Australia alone, the bonus is now offered by four of its five universities.⁸

The number of bonus points given, as indicated above, varies across states and/or depending on the individual university. For example, at the Australian National University students who have successfully studied a language to Year 12 "and have an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) of 70 or higher will be eligible for five bonus points for all degree programs other than programs with an ATAR cut off of 98 or higher" (ANU website, para. 1). At The University of Western Australia "ten per cent of a student's final scaled score in a WA Curriculum Council-approved course in a language other than English will be added" (UWA website, para. 1). The languages that are eligible for attracting the bonus vary depending on the individual state curriculum or university.

The popularity of the present incentive programs has led some languages policy educators to further their proposal. Victoria's current agenda for the future is to work with higher education providers "to identify and implement additional incentives to encourage students to continue their languages learning into senior secondary years and beyond" (Victoria Languages 2025, 2012, p. 12). David Hill (2011), a well-known Professor of Southeast Asian Studies and language learning advocate, encouraged universities such as Charles Darwin University not only to include a language bonus for tertiary admission and support language studies alongside any main degree, but also to consider offering a tax exemption for language units.

There is little information on the actual impact of the Language Bonus in terms of continued participation in language study. It is reported that in Victoria there has been an increase of 7% in the overall number of secondary students studying languages, and more boys were choosing to study languages than previously so

8. The fifth university is private and has its own admission pathway.

(Long, 2007). Furthermore, Spence-Brown (2014, p. 193) mentions the Language Bonus among the measures that “provide a powerful incentive for students to continue language study to year 12 level in Victoria”, and sees in such a combination of factors a possible “major cause of the significantly higher retention to year 12 in Victoria compared to other states such as New South Wales and South Australia”. The 2016 Senior Secondary Languages Education Research Project, on students’ motivation in furthering language study in the senior years, found that the possibility of gaining a Language Bonus does influence some languages students in continuing with their chosen language (Asia Education Foundation, 2016).

Incentives and motivation

While the aim of this paper is to focus on the effectiveness of the Language Bonus plan, the study also ties into motivational theory and language learning. Previous investigations into motivation have only referred to the plan in passing. For example, Martín, Jansen and Beckmann’s (2016) recent study canvassed a variety of reasons why students do or do not continue with languages. They point to Curnow and Kohler’s 2007 investigation into high school students’ motivation for continued language study, which reported that the bonus plan is a notable factor for continuation. De Kretser and Spence-Brown (2010) similarly noted the structure of senior courses and the availability of bonus points (as partial compensation for the difficulty of the subject) as an important factor in motivation (Northwood, 2013). Northwood and Kinoshita Thomson’s study (2012) of motivation in ongoing learners of Japanese provides a series of motivational factors as reported by students, but does not report the bonus (despite the second-least important item being ‘good marks’).⁹

One of the most extensive discussions of the language bonus is provided by Murray (2010). His somewhat critical view concludes that the language bonus may run real risks in promoting language study. He says the plan may encourage students to pursue languages who are “entirely disinterested in or averse to languages”. Murray reports anecdotal evidence that students are innately suspicious of such bonus points, and that “this kind of initiative can set alarm bells ringing in students savvy and cynical enough to think that you don’t get something for nothing” (p. 91). He suggests promoting languages as being highly prized by

9. Here it is worth noting that Northwood & Kinoshita Thomson’s 2012 study was (1) conducted in NSW, where language bonuses were not generally applied, and; (2) refers to continuation at university, even if a separate part of their study did look at study at school level. The lack of reference to the language bonus in this study, therefore, needs to be interpreted in this context. The authors are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this acute observation.

employers, and as entrees to cultures and cultural difference. This point picks up previous work into theoretical motivation for second language study, and ties incentives such as the language bonus plan to broader work in language policy. For example, Ager's work (2001) on motivation in language planning and language policy points to a complex mix of variables in second language acquisition at the macro level, including identity, ideology, image creation, insecurity, inequality, integration with a group, and instrumental motives for advancement. We do not investigate these factors here. But policies such as the language bonus undoubtedly interact with a wide variety of variables which influence whether students continue learning a language or not.¹⁰

Methodology

Our investigation was carried out in 2014 via an anonymous survey distributed to students enrolled at The University of Western Australia, where the language bonus was implemented for entry into all courses in 2011. In 2014, when our survey was distributed, students from first, second and third year had potentially benefited from the bonus, whether or not they were enrolled in a language unit.

The aim of our project was to assess the impact of the bonus point program as a language policy tool and, more specifically, to investigate its multiple effects on study continuity of languages in high school and possibly at UWA. To this end, we designed a survey that would allow us to collect quantitative data about the impact of the Language Bonus on students' study choices from the perspective of university students, as well as some degree of qualitative data on university students' perceptions of the value of the incentive program. We were interested in finding out particularly:

- a. if students knew about the bonus
- b. if it had influenced their decision to continue studying a language at secondary school
- c. if the extra 10% had helped them be admitted to their preferred degree at UWA
- d. whether there were signs that increased study of languages at the secondary level would translate into increased study at the tertiary level.

10. The literature on motivation and second language learning is large. For recent investigations, see Dörnyei, Henry and Muir (2016), Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) and Dörnyei, MacIntyre and Henry (2015) and bibliography cited there.

We complemented our results with data on participation rates in government schools from 2010 to 2013, as well as enrolment rates at UWA for the same period, that is, *pre-* and *post-*bonus. The findings have therefore been identified via triangulation of key data.

The survey was designed and distributed through the online software Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) in March 2014. It comprised 17 questions, 15 of which were multiple choice and the other two were open-ended questions: “Q. 10 What is your opinion of offering a Language Bonus?” and “Q. 17 Do you have other comments you would like to make about the Language Bonus?”. The survey was divided into two parts. The first collected general information such as the students’ gender, degree, year of study, whether they were studying a language, whether they had studied a language at school and to what level, and what their opinion of the bonus was. The second part of the survey contained specific questions about the bonus and was accessible only to those students who had completed a language to year 12 level and therefore had obtained the bonus.

The survey was distributed to all first, second and third year students enrolled at UWA (a total of 9,766 students¹¹) via a centrally-operated mailing list in March 2014. The survey could be taken only once, and no type of reward, credit or prize was given as encouragement to complete it. Each survey response is a unique and individual record. The survey was closed in May with 912 surveys completed, corresponding to 9.33% of the student population to which it was addressed. In addition, a total of 169 comments were elicited through the two open-ended questions. Associations were tested using a Chi-squared test or Fisher’s exact test where appropriate. Proportions were tested for equality. Significance was set at the 5% level and data were analyzed using the R environment for statistical computing (R Core Team 2017).

The comments were coded following traditional guidelines for qualitative research in language education (Zacharias 2012).¹² Brown and Rodgers (2002) highlight the importance of defining a coding system that provides a clear, unambiguous, and in the end useful way to classify qualitative research data. In our sample, students expressed a variety of attitudes related to the language bonus. The data from Question 10 “What is your opinion of offering a Language Bonus?” were assigned to four code categories that were used to assess students’ comments.

11. The survey was only distributed to students who had entered university directly from school, that is, only to students who could have been awarded the bonus.

12. On this method of analysis, see in particular Brown and Rodgers (2002) and especially pp. 63–64 “Coding of language data”. For further details on language coding, see Chapter 8 on “Coding” in Mackey and Gass (2005).

These categories provided a simple and effective way to interpret the data that were collected. They are:

- a. *Positive*: comments that expressed an overwhelmingly favourable opinion towards the language bonus plan were assigned to this category
- b. *Positive, but with reservations*: comments were generally favourable to the language bonus, but expressed ambiguity about its value in some way (such as the amount of points added, that there should be bonuses for other subjects etc.)
- c. *Negative*: comments that expressed a desire for the bonus to be discontinued for whatever reason
- d. *Other*: comments that expressed indifference, that did not express an opinion, or indicated that the student was unaware of the language bonus' existence

Answers to the second open-ended question “Q. 17. Do you have other comments you would like to make about the Language Bonus?” were coded on the basis of common themes or narrative discourse, and grouped under the headings of *keep it, it got me in, good for languages/good encouragement, no/little value, unsure, not enough, already convinced, more information/promotion, general* and *other*.

In discussing the results, it is important to consider that the survey investigated only one university, and that the data reflect the perspective of that part of the population, that is, students that went on to university rather than the entire student population. The results section begins, therefore, with clarifying the profile of the respondents. Major findings are then discussed in the next section.

Results

Profile of respondents

The 912 students who completed the survey are distributed in all of the five Bachelor degrees (Arts, Commerce, Design, Science and the exclusive Bachelor of Philosophy for students with high entrance scores), with the majority (56%) coming from the Science degree. This finding is consistent with the popularity of this study pathway at UWA. Respondents are also distributed among all of the three years of study, although the majority (49%) are first-year students (Figure 1).

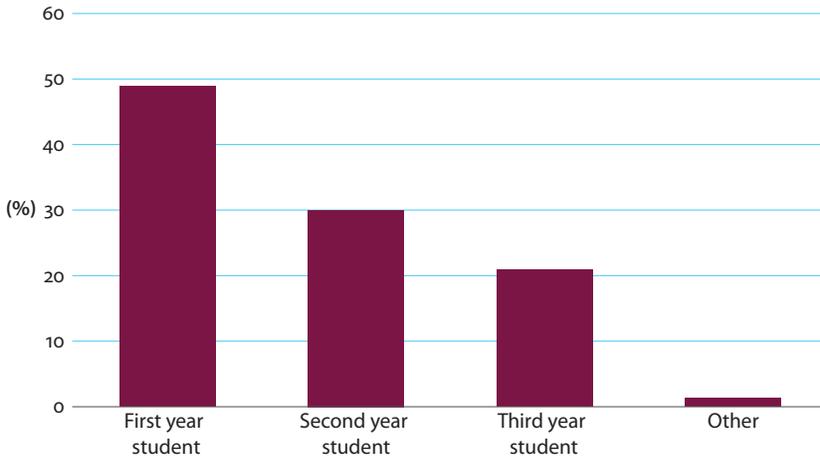


Figure 1. Year of enrolment at university

Most of this sample (52%) is not studying a language at UWA (Figure 2), with the rest enrolled in one of the seven modern languages offered.

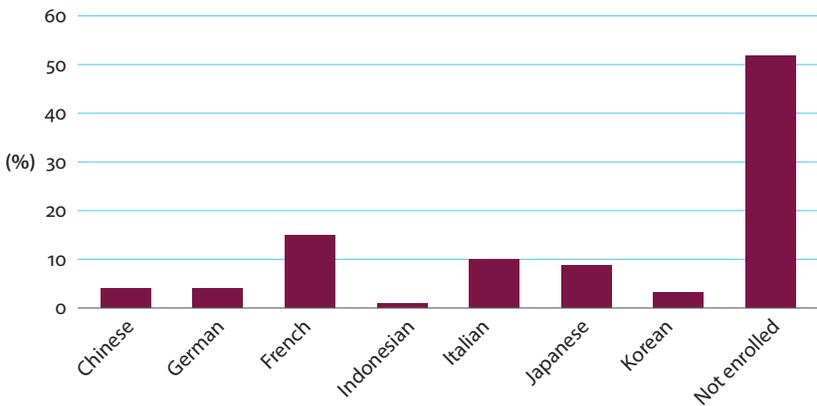


Figure 2. Enrolment in a language unit

The data also reveal that of all students studying a language, a large majority, 65%, are taking it as a ‘Broadening unit’, that is, not as part of their chosen major. Furthermore, of all first-year students studying a language (268 students), only 24% intend to study it for a major.

In summary, the sample of respondents can be described as a cohort of students from a prestigious university, predominantly first-year students and mostly enrolled in a Science degree. Less than half are studying a language, and only a minority are intending to major in that language. At the same time, with 48% of participants enrolled in a language course, this sample represents a higher

proportion of second language learners than the traditional UWA undergraduate student population.

General attitudes

The general attitudes and interest in languages were evaluated holistically by the question, “Do you think that learning a language is important for your education and future career?”, addressed to all 912 respondents. The largest majority, 80%, answered affirmatively (the other choice was ‘no’, 20%). The students’ perceptions of the Language Bonus program were assessed through their answers to the question “What is your opinion of offering a Language Bonus?”. As discussed in the methodology section above, the comments elicited (101 in total) were grouped on the basis of whether they displayed positive or negative opinions. Ten answers expressed positive opinions but with some reservations, while five comments could not be classified as either positive or negative and were included in the category of ‘other’.

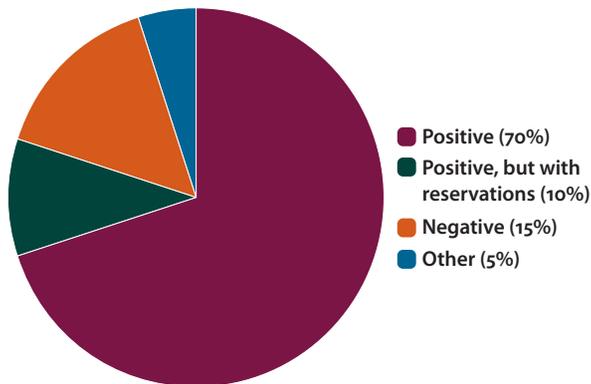


Figure 3. Students’ opinions about the Language Bonus

The majority of the comments were positive. Some examples for each category are following (for emerging issues see the discussion below):

Positive (total 71)

- A great and appreciated incentive to broaden academic and cultural horizons
- It helps offset the relatively low ATAR most people get for the amount of study they do for a language.

Positive but with reservations (total 10)

- I think a lot of people abuse it but it is still a good thing to have, to incentivise more people to learn language.
- Don’t disagree but there should be other bonuses for other subjects too.

Negative (total 15)

- It is unfair to students who don't study languages or study subjects harder than languages.
- It unfairly advantages students who choose to study languages in high school. Students who already speak a foreign language, or one of their parents speak it, are able to score very high marks with very little effort.

Other (total 5)

- I don't have an opinion
- I was indifferent because it only applied to some universities or courses

The next section presents further data on the students' assessment of the bonus, and recent figures on participation in language study at high school.

Enrolment trends and impact of the bonus on study continuity at high school

Figure 4 shows the number of respondents who studied a language at high school.

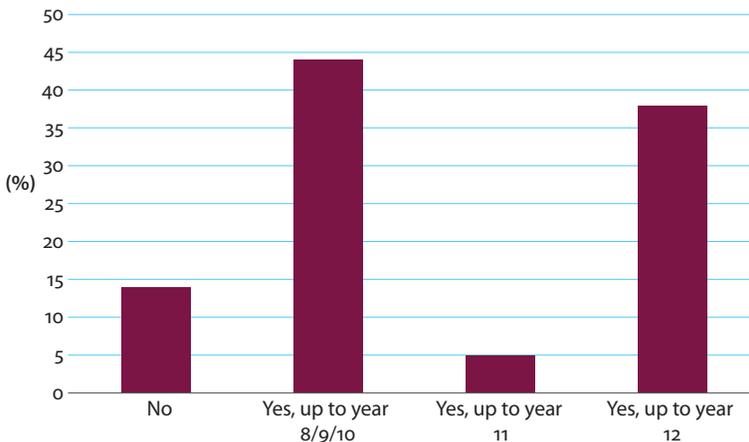


Figure 4. Language study at high school

This question was crucial also in identifying those students who had received the Language Bonus, that is, students who studied a language to year 12 level. These 338 students account for almost 40% of the total number of our sample (85 male and 253 female). Including those who studied the language in Year 11, this percentage rises to 43%. Those who had no formal language education in high school are 14%.

Figure 5 shows how many students (of the 338 who continued to Year 12) felt that their decision to study a language at high school was influenced by the bonus. 24% answered affirmatively, 30% chose 'somewhat', while 46% said 'no'.

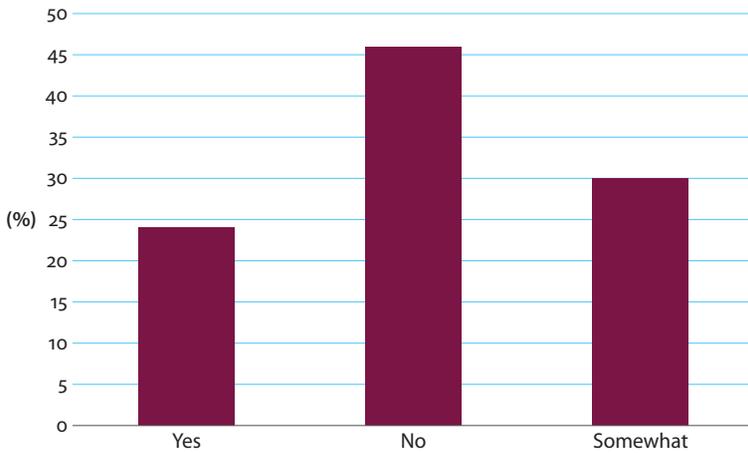


Figure 5. 'Did the Bonus influence your decision to study a language at high school?'

There is no association between whether or not receiving the bonus influenced the decision to study a language at high school and gender (p -value 0.575), but slightly more male students than female (57% vs. 52%) admitted that the bonus had influenced their study choices.

To verify whether the number of students studying a language to Year 12 had increased since the introduction of the Language Bonus, we looked at enrolment statistics from government agencies. Figures from the School Curriculum and Standard Authority of Western Australia reveal that an increase in the number of students who sat the Year 12 language examination did occur from 2010 to 2013, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Enrolments in Western Australian Certificate of Education 3 language courses (2010–2013)

Source: *The State of Play: Languages Education in Western Australia, 2014: 10*

Stage 3A courses (>12 students)	2010	2011	2012	2013
Chinese: Background Speaker	39	55	68	63
Chinese: Second Language	28	38	50	50
French	377	403	474	445
German	74	75	72	77
Indonesian: Second Language	45	65	73	84
Italian	211	265	262	276
Japanese: Second Language	182	233	308	263
Total	956	1134	1307	1258

All languages listed in the table witnessed an increase in enrolments from 2010 to 2011 (year of the introduction of the Language Bonus at UWA), with an overall increase of 24% over the four years.¹³ This increase, however, is based on absolute numbers and does not take into account the size of the year 12 WACE (Western Australian Certificate of Education) cohort in each year. For this reason, we carried out further analysis and identified the percentages of overall enrolments for the languages in the table above. The figures confirm that there has been a change in the proportion of students enrolled in those language courses between 2010 and 2013 (p-value <0.001) (Table 2).

Table 2. Enrolments in Western Australian Certificate of Education 3 language courses (>12 students) (2010–2013) shown as percentage of cohort size (cohort size retrieved from reports by School Curriculum and Standards Authority (WA) available at <https://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/secondary-education-statistics>)

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013
Enrolments	956	1134	1307	1258
Cohort size	1568	1555	15424	15189
% of enrolment	6.13	7.29	8.47	8.28

In order to further our understanding of the actual situation, enrolment figures at UWA were also considered. A statistical analysis of students enrolled at UWA *before* and *after* the Language Bonus (Table 3) reveals that an increase in the proportion of students with previous language study at upper secondary level has indeed occurred in the last few years (change significant to p-value <0.001), from 12.7% in 2010 to 19.1% in 2013.

Table 3. WA school-leavers who enrolled at UWA. Number who studied at least one language that attracted bonus marks

	Language status				Total
	Did language(s)		No languages		N
	N	%	N	%	
2010	303	12.7%	2066	87.2%	2369
2011	325	12.4%	2288	87.5%	2613
2012	486	16.6%	2438	83.3%	2924
2013	543	19.1%	2291	80.8%	2834

13. However, from 2012 to 2013 we see a decrease in the number of students (mainly due to loss of enrolments in Japanese and French) but, as indicated in Table 2 the size of the 2013 WACE cohort was smaller than in the previous year.

At UWA the bonus was introduced in 2011. The number of students who studied at least one language that attracted bonus marks did not grow immediately, but within the next couple of years this number increased by 6%. As discussed below, a direct cause-effect correlation with the bonus cannot be assumed.

The students' comments help us better understand the impact of the bonus. Before discussing the qualitative data, it is important to recall that the comments were written only by those students who received the Language Bonus. Of these students, 58% were enrolled in a language course and therefore with an interest in languages. In total, 68 comments were elicited. As expected, most of the comments show support for the plan, but they also offer insights into its value from the student perspective. The examples quoted below are representative of the different benefits that students associate with the bonus. The first two emphasize the need for an incentive in connection with the challenges and the workload involved in learning a language:

- The reason why many students don't take a language is because of the high workload of languages (...)
- It's still very hard to do well in a language at school, especially if you can't afford to go on exchange.

Some comments from the first open-ended question (addressed to all respondents) reveal the same perspective, for example:

- It's an incentive to continue learning a language in high school even when it gets hard and stressful with exams
- Learning a new language is much more difficult than learning science or maths etc. (...).

Other comments confirm the impact of the bonus on the students' decision to continue studying a language for the benefit of a higher mark:

- (...) It is one of the main reasons I chose to study a language through to year 12, which got me higher marks and I am glad I can now communicate through means other than English
- (...) I kept going because I knew I'd get a bonus.

The comment below illustrates how, from the student's perspective, the bonus can impact positively on access and equity.

- (...) If it weren't for the bonus then Italian wouldn't have been offered at my high school and I wouldn't have been able to study it as there wouldn't have been enough students.

Impact on admission to university

The next question to consider is how the students’ improved final mark impacted on their university admission. When asked if the bonus had helped them be admitted to their chosen degree, 30% answered positively, while the remaining 70% answered negatively. The latter does not distinguish between those who already had the ATAR they wanted from those who did not get it. Cross tabulation between this question and the student’s degree of enrolment (Table 4) reveal that there is an association between whether or not the bonus assisted admittance into a degree and degree type (p-value 0.018). The data show that the bonus helped the students from the Bachelor of Philosophy more than from the other degrees (15 students are enrolled in this degree, which requires a minimum ATAR of 98.00). In addition, slightly more students from Arts than from Science (36% vs. 25%) stated that the bonus helped them be admitted to their chosen degree.

Table 4. Benefits for admission to university and degree of enrolment

		Please select your degree						Total
		Arts	Science	Commerce	Design	Philosophy	Other	
Did the Language Bonus help you be admitted to your chosen degree at UWA?	Yes	38 (35.51%)	38 (24.68%)	16 (33.33%)	1 (12.50%)	9 (60.00%)	0 (0.00%)	102 (30.18%)
	No	69 (64.49%)	116 (75.32%)	32 (66.67%)	7 (87.50%)	6 (40.00%)	6 (100.00%)	236 (69.82%)
	Total	107 (100.00%)	154 (100.00%)	48 (100.00%)	8 (100.00%)	15 (100.00%)	6 (100.00%)	338 (100.00%)

No significant difference was recorded on the basis of gender (p-value 0.051), although a few more female students (33%) than male (21%) indicated that the bonus helped them with university admission (Table 5).

Table 5. Benefits for admission to university and gender

		Please select your gender		
		Male	Female	Total
Did the Language Bonus help you be admitted to your chosen degree at UWA?	Yes	18 (21.18%)	84 (33.20%)	102 (30.18%)
	No	67 (78.82%)	169 (66.80%)	236 (69.82%)
	Total	85 (100.00%)	253 (100.00%)	338 (100.00%)

Some of the comments from students who did profit from the bonus include the following:

- For me it was the difference between a BSc and BPhil (Hons) with Assured Med Pathway
- It helped me get the ATAR I wanted and I am so thankful for it!
- It is really worthwhile and it helped me get into UWA and more

On the other hand, some students commented that the additional 10% did not make any difference to their university entry:

- It makes little difference to someone with an already high ATAR (only gave me .1 ATAR extra)
- Very little impact on final results

Impact on study continuity at university

In order to investigate the impact of the bonus on language study beyond high school, we asked students if the bonus had influenced their decision to continue studying a language at UWA (Figure 6).

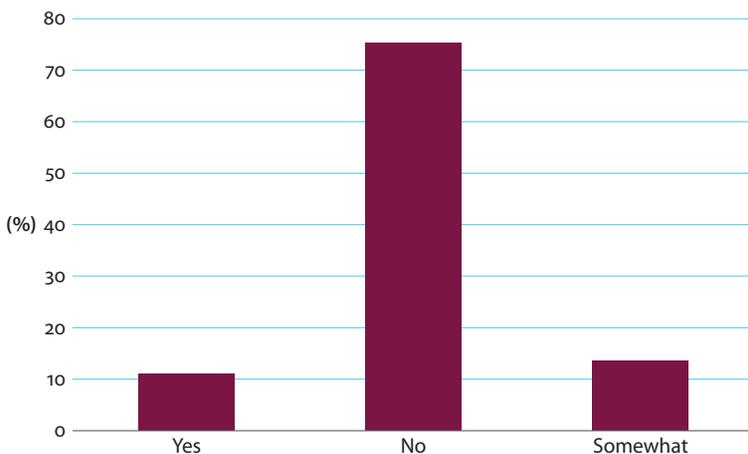


Figure 6. ‘Did the Language Bonus influence your decision to continue studying a language at UWA?’

The majority (75%) answered negatively. This was not a surprise, as the bonus is not designed to support tertiary language study. Cross tabulation of these data with results on enrolment in language courses shows that, for most students, the decision to continue studying a language was independent from the bonus obtained. Looking at the students’ degree of enrolment, we found that there is no

association between whether or not the bonus influenced the decision to continue studying languages at university and degree type (p-value 0.376). Proportionally, however, more students from Science than from other degrees reported that the bonus influenced their decision to study a language (Table 7).

Table 7. Influence of the bonus for language study at university and degree of enrolment

		Please select your degree						
		Arts	Science	Commerce	Design	Philosophy	Other	Total
Did the Language Bonus influence your decision to continue studying language at UWA?	Yes	8 (7.48%)	22 (14.29%)	6 (12.50%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (13.33%)	0 (0.00%)	38 (11.24%)
	No	77 (71.96%)	112 (72.73%)	39 (81.25%)	7 (87.50%)	11 (73.33%)	6 (100.00%)	252 (74.56%)
	Some-what	22 (20.56%)	20 (12.99%)	3 (6.25%)	1 (12.50%)	2 (13.33%)	0 (0.00%)	48 (14.20%)
	Total	107 (100.00%)	154 (100.00%)	48 (100.00%)	8 (100.00%)	15 (100.00%)	6 (100.00%)	338 (100.00%)

Only a few comments make reference to the study of languages in the tertiary context.

- I'm very impressed with the support UWA gives to students pursuing a second language, and I hope the language bonus remains for future high school graduates.
- I think it is a fantastic way to promote the study of languages other than English (an important enterprise), both at a high-school and tertiary level.

Awareness about the incentive plan

A further result that emerged from our study relates to the lack of information about the bonus plan. 13% of all students declared they were not familiar with the plan (77% were aware). Students' comments too point to the need for more and better information, for example:

- Make the process clearer and more simple to understand. It was explained to us in a fairly confused manner and I didn't feel that many people knew exactly how it worked and was calculated.
- I think people need to be made more aware of this Bonus, as I did not know anything about it until now.
- It should be promoted more to students before selecting their (...) course pathways.

Equity issues

Finally and very importantly, our study shows that students are conscious of equity issues associated with the Language Bonus plan. This emerged clearly from the comments elicited by the two open-ended questions, as exemplified by the following examples:

- But language bonuses are only fair if the student enrolled in a language unit doesn't normally speak that language. For example, to give a language bonus to a Japanese student or a Chinese student who does speak that language at home is just giving them a bonus for being part of that cultural group, not a bonus for actually making effort to learn another language or taking part in studying that culture.
- Unfair for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or high schools. My high school did not offer any WACE language and we did not know about the 10% Language Bonus.
- I think it should be expanded to more languages, as not all schools offer the languages that get a language bonus
- I disagree with it. Other units can be just as hard, but no bonus is given.

Discussion*Attitudes*

One of our first findings is that the general attitude towards language learning seems largely positive. The fact that most students are not enrolled in a language course at university and are enrolled in a Science degree suggests that the value of language education is acknowledged not just by those already inclined towards language study, but more generally across the student population. On the other hand, we need to consider that the majority of the respondents had had some exposure to language study at high school, which could have influenced their attitudes. Of course, a single question addressed to students from a single university is not sufficient to reach definite conclusions on students' attitudes to language learning. UWA recruits students that tend to be of a high socio-economic background (see Teese, 1996), so comparison with other universities is necessary to provide a complete picture. More specifically, the students' opinions of the bonus are positive, especially (but not only) among those who obtained the credit points. Several comments acknowledge the value of the bonus in promoting languages for the purpose of learning about 'other cultures...and ways of life' or 'open[ing] a lot more doors'. On the other hand, as discussed further, students expressed

concern in relation to a need for better information, the amount of credit points and equity issues.

Enrolment trends and impact on study continuity at school

In terms of whether study continuity has been affected by the bonus, our investigation has identified the results summarized as following:

- a. proportion of respondents who studied a language to Year 12 level: 40%;
- b. enrolments of UWA students with language study at Year 12 level *pre-* and *post-*bonus: increase of 6% over 3 years;
- c. enrolments in language courses among WA high school students (as percentage of yearly cohort) *pre-* and *post-*bonus: increase of 2.14% over 4 years, with a slight drop from 2012 to 2013.

In 2007 it was reported that only 15% to 20% of the students had studied a language at upper school level (UWA Academic Council minutes, 2007). The corresponding 40% recorded in our survey seems therefore a large improvement. However, it is only representative of our sample of students and cannot be over-generalized to the entire university student population (nor the entire secondary population). Therefore a comparison with the previous proportion of students with language study cannot be made. Official enrolment figures, confirming an increase among students with previous language study, are a stronger indication of the effectiveness of the bonus. The question, however, remains – Did the language bonus determine this outcome? We believe that this result cannot be attributed necessarily or solely to the language bonus, as other factors may have been at play, such as the university’s specific recruitment strategies or simply a newly generated interest in language study or other factors. Similarly, the increase over four years in participation in language study at year 12 level supports an interpretation of the bonus as effective, but at the same time we should consider that enrolments in languages are affected by a wider variety of factors, and there are also likely to be variables that are language-specific (as the drop in enrolments for French and Japanese in 2013 would suggest). In conclusion, on the basis of our findings, while there is no direct evidence that the bonus affected participation in language study, it is safe to assume that the language bonus may have been an influencing factor. This is confirmed by the findings from the participants’ own perspective, in the form of the answer to the question “Did the Bonus influence your decision to study a language at high school?”. More than half of the students acknowledged that the bonus had some impact on their decision to continue language study, with the rest probably deciding to study the language for personal and strategic reasons other than an improved final mark. These results are consistent with the

previously mentioned investigation by the Asia Education Foundation, in which the Language Bonus figures among the extrinsic factors that motivate students to continue with language study, although not to a major extent.¹⁴ With respect to gender differences, our sample identified a slightly higher proportion of male students who admitted being influenced by the bonus (57% vs. 52%). While the difference is not statistically significant, the result could signal a trend (already noticed in the state of Victoria¹⁵) of increased participation in language learning among boys, who traditionally have shown little interest in languages (Hajdu, 2005; Pauwels & Carr, 2006).

Admission to university

Our investigation reveals that for one student out of three, the bonus was an influencing factor for entry into their chosen degree program, with more students from Arts and BPhil likely to have benefited from the bonus than other students. More female students than male students reported that the bonus helped them with university admission. These results allow us to make further comments about the way the bonus is perceived by certain students. The 10% awarded by the bonus to a student's score has led to discussion about whether the points should be increased. Clearly there exists a view that 10% is simply not reward enough for the time and effort that goes into studying a language during the final year of school for some students. Before such a decision can be made, however, further research would need to investigate how many students are admitted into courses thanks to the bonus alone, and whether it is having its desired effect of incentivising students to study languages. On the other hand, some students reported that 10% did indeed make a difference to whether they were admitted into their chosen university course or not. It is the testimonials from these students that should be spelled out loud and clear to students who are deciding whether to invest the time and effort in matriculating in a language during the final year of high school.

14. In the Asia Education Foundation project, senior students were asked via a survey to what extent the Language Bonus had influenced their choice to study a language in Year 12. The results were: 45% Not at all; 30% Minor Extent; 12.5% Moderate Extent; 12.5% Major Extent (total surveys 40; Asia Education Foundation 2016, p. 69).

15. "Another positive indicator for language study has been the slow but steady increase in the percentage of males studying a language through to the year 12 level. While a roughly equal number of males and females study languages at Years 7 and 8, the number of males studying languages drops dramatically from Year 9 onwards, with students who continue language study through to Year 12 being predominantly female. However, the percentage of males enrolled in Year 12 who study a language has increased from 30.0% in 2002 to 36.7% in 2008" ('Languages Other Than English in Victorian government schools 2008', 2009, pp. 12–13).

Study continuity at university

With only 25% of the students answering positively to the question “Did the Language Bonus influence your decision to continue studying a language at UWA?”, it is clear that the bonus does not have a strong impact on enrolments in a language course at university. It is possible however that the personal attitudes and perspective of Australian students are affected by the ideological discourse on language education that surrounds them. In this sense incentives and policies would act indirectly to promote an appreciation and learning of languages. The fact that more Science students than students from other degrees reported being influenced by the bonus may suggest that the incentive is effective in promoting languages beyond those already inclined to the subject.

Awareness of the plan

Both the quantitative and the qualitative data reveal that some students were not informed about the bonus. These findings have very practical implications in terms of effective promotion of the Language Bonus plan, and improved collaboration between secondary and tertiary sectors of education. First, clearer communication between universities and schools must be established to make the Language Bonus known to students at all levels. Secondly, a clear graphic or example must be provided to students so they understand completely and transparently just how the bonus is calculated, and in what way it will (positively) affect them if they are seeking admission to university. Any confusion or lack of certainty on how the study of a language might impact their future studies and final mark will likely discourage students from language study rather than encourage them.

Equity

Three separate questions emerge with respect to equity issues deriving from the additional points awarded to language students. Some comments from our survey highlight the potential for inequality in connection with the distinction between second language learners and background/native learners. Other comments relate to the difference between resource-rich schools versus disadvantaged schools, while others raise the question about why languages should be supported when other ‘hard’ subjects are not. In relation to this final issue, the key is to consider the “depth of the crisis” (UWA Academic Council 2007, Section 11). In other words, while it is true that students study other ‘challenging’ subjects, language study could die out completely if not supported and prioritized, whereas subjects like mathematics and science would not, due to their established value in schooling and ongoing support from Federal bodies.

The other two issues are more complex. The debate surrounding the perceived advantage that background speakers have in language programs goes back to the early 1990s, precisely when a Language Bonus was first introduced in Victoria, as mentioned above (see *The Language Bonus point plan*, above). There is also a significant body of literature on the conceptual problems underlying the classification of different types of learners but this goes beyond the scope of our paper.¹⁶ This issue is being addressed by the introduction of the National Curriculum, which established language learning to be provided via different pathways into secondary schooling with targeted curricula and assessment for different types of learners. Streaming students in the upper years of high school however has recently proven problematic, and different approaches to promoting language study continuity have been proposed (see Cruickshank & Wright, 2016).

The inequity deriving from lack of resources is also of great concern and brings to the surface the deeper problems of language education in Australia (see Teese, 1996). The central assumption of the National Curriculum is that *all* students will learn a language. This is a great opportunity to renew emphasis on language education, but to achieve this goal the underlying structures must first be in place. Incentives can only boost participation, not create it.

Conclusions

Our study reveals that the Language Bonus plan had some influence in encouraging students to pursue their language studies. About half of the students from our sample (54%) stated that the Language Bonus influenced their decision to study a language at high school. At the same time, language study continuity does not appear to be determined purely by the incentive, and some of the students' comments acknowledge that the purpose of the plan is to incentivize motivation, not to spark it. As one student commented, 'a language should be learnt out of interest not because of an incentive'.

In terms of growth in language study, we have identified the following figures:

- a. a statistically significant increase over the last four years in year 12 students' enrolments, as provided by government agencies. This increase cannot be attributed solely to the introduction of the bonus plan, but it needs to be kept part of the picture;

16. For an overview on the issues surrounding the background speaker debate in Australia see Elder, 2000.

- b. the number of respondents who had studied a language at year 12 level corresponds to 40%. While this is based on our sample and is not indicative of the entire university population of WA, nor the high school population of the state, it is indeed in sharp contrast with the much lower national average of 10%;
- c. a statistically significant 6% increase in the official number of UWA students with previous language study at upper secondary level since the introduction of the Language Bonus. Again, it is not possible to attribute such increase to the Language Bonus. However, it is possible to speculate that the bonus contributed to this outcome.

With regards to the impact of the bonus on university admission, a proportion of students (30%) indicated that the bonus helped them be admitted to their preferred university course. For some, it made the difference between one degree program and another.

Some students (25%) also declared to have been influenced by the bonus in their decision to study a language at university, which was not a predictable outcome considering that the bonus does not support language study at university in the way it does for secondary schooling. This suggests that incentives can operate rather indirectly, as a statement on the value of languages education, independently therefore of their specific target. Hence, the necessity on behalf of government and education agencies to maintain a type of discourse that acknowledges the need to support languages study.

Finally, with 13% of students being unaware of the incentive plan, our recommendation is to ensure that information about the bonus plan is distributed throughout schools and the secondary sector more broadly in Australia.

The limitation of our study is that despite the large amount of surveys collected (912), the percentage of respondents over the total university population addressed reaches just below 10%. It would have been preferable to elicit more responses. However, triangulation with other sources of information, as well as the amount of qualitative data, do offer useful insights into the role that the incentive plays in supporting continuity in language education and the challenges that need to be addressed. A further point to remember is that our findings about the impact of the bonus among high school students are based on data elicited via university students, who are enrolled at a single university, a prestigious university whose students are likely to be of a high socio-economic background. The next step would be to survey high school students within a variety of schools and compare the results.

Another important point that we have not been able to address, but needs a mention, concerns the implications that continuing language study to year 12 can have for university achievement. After all, if students do not continue to the final

year, they cannot *continue* to university (despite being able to start as *ab initio* students in many universities). Nevertheless, if students begin language study in lower school and then drop out early, this is a huge waste of potential. If we assume that the most competent and valuable language graduates are those who commence at the post year-12 level, then dropping out beforehand is a major factor. If students can be encouraged to continue to year 12, as the language bonus intends students to do, then we do not just potentially enhance the number of Australians who have year 12 level language skills, but also the number who can graduate at a higher level from university.

Our study also shows that the Language Bonus does not meet everyone's favour. Some students raised issues of fairness and equity, and particularly concerning are those comments that point to inequity deriving from resources and access. These are serious questions, which demand more than incentives on behalf of education agencies but rather fundamental structural change in the form of a national language policy. Our investigation allowed us to obtain empirical evidence to show that there are several advantages in offering incentives such as the Language Bonus. The discussion on how to support language study in post-compulsory schooling and beyond, however, must continue and more must be done for languages education in Australia.

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Appendix. Survey

Q1 Please select your gender

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Q2 Please select your degree

- Arts (1)
- Science (2)
- Commerce (3)
- Design (4)
- Philosophy (5)
- Other (6) _____

Q3 Are you a

- First year student (1)
- Second year student (2)
- Third year student (3)
- Other (4) _____

Q4 Are you enrolled in a language unit at UWA? Please select

- Yes, Chinese (1)
- Yes, German (2)
- Yes, French (3)
- Yes, Indonesian (4)
- Yes, Italian (5)
- Yes, Japanese (6)
- Yes, Korean (7)
- No (8)

Q5 Is your language unit one of your Broadening Units?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not applicable (3)

Q6 If you are a FIRST YEAR student, how long do you intend to study this language?

- For a major (three years) (1)
- For two years (2)
- For one year (3)

- I don't know (4)
 - Not applicable (5)
- Q7 If you are NOT enrolled in a language unit, would you consider studying a language at UWA in the future?
- Yes, Chinese (1)
 - Yes, French (2)
 - Yes, German (3)
 - Yes, Indonesian (4)
 - Yes, Italian (5)
 - Yes, Japanese (6)
 - Yes, Korean (7)
 - No, I'm not interested (8)
 - No, I have no space in my degree (9)
- Q8 Do you think that learning a language is important for your education and future career?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- Q9 Have you taken part in a study abroad program with your high school? If so for how long?
- No (1)
 - Yes, 2–4 weeks (2)
 - Yes, more than a month (3)
 - Yes, more than three months (4)
- Q10 What is your opinion of offering a Language Bonus?
- Q11 Did you study a language at high school?
- No (1)
 - Yes, up to year 8/9/10 (2)
 - Yes, up to year 11 (3)
 - Yes, up to year 12 (4)
- Q12 Were you aware of the Language Bonus in high school?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- Q13 Did it influence your decision to study a language at high school?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Somewhat (3)
- Q14 Did the Language Bonus influence your decision to continue studying a language at UWA ?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
 - Somewhat (3)
- Q15 Did the Language Bonus help you be admitted to your chosen degree at UWA?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- Q16 Do you think that 10% is an attractive enough incentive to encourage students to study a language at high school?
- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
- Q17 Do you have any other comments you would like to make about the Language Bonus?
- Comments (1) _____

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