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Published online: 15 Jan 2024.

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'Cold spots' in language degree provision in England

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ABSTRACT

People have been raising the alarm about a language education crisis in the UK, particularly in England, for twenty years. Yet the crisis continues: the number of young people studying languages at school is low, especially in socioeconomically less-privileged areas. University programmes – particularly in universities with below average entry tariffs – are closing, but we do not understand the regional impact of this decline. This paper fills that gap by identifying 'cold spots': areas of the country where no universities offer language degrees. The programming language R was used to analyse the location of universities at various entry tariffs, and areas of the country further than a commutable distance of 60 km were identified. Large cold spots were found in the North, East and South West of England for universities offering languages at below average entry tariff, with the cold spot in the South West also present at higher entry tariffs. This is a social justice issue, since most students attend university close to home, with students from less-privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and some ethnic minority backgrounds more likely to commute. This leads to a key strategic recommendation: to open language degree programmes at one lower tariff university in each cold spot.

Introduction

People have been raising the alarm about a language education crisis in the UK, particularly in England, for at least the last two decades. Newspaper headlines include 'Language crisis facing UK schools' (Asthana 2006), 'Why is UK language teaching in crisis?' (Ratcliffe 2013b) and 'The death of modern foreign languages' (Dean 2016). During this time, various reports on the language education crisis have been written including 'Languages: the next generation' (Nuffield Foundation 2000), 'Languages for all: languages for life. A strategy for England' (Languages National Steering Group 2002), 'Languages in the UK: a call for action' (British Academy et al. 2019), 'A national recovery programme for languages' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages 2019), and 'Towards a national languages strategy: Education and skills' (British Academy et al. 2020).

Yet the crisis continues, with low numbers of young people studying languages. In 2002, 76% of young people took a language GCSE (examination typically taken at age 16). That dropped to 40% by 2011 and has hovered below 50% since (Collen 2022: 22; Tinsley and Doležal 2018). The government's stated ambition is to raise the proportion of young people taking a language GCSE to 75% by 2022 and 90% by the year 2025 as part of an English baccalaureate (Department for Education

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2019). However, the actual proportion is stuck stubbornly at around 50% (Collen 2022: 22; Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 3), and some view the English baccalaureate as being 'done for' due to the low take up of language GCSEs (Martin 2022). For A level (Advanced level, typically taken at age 18), the picture is similar: 40,000 language entries in 1996 dropping to 27,000 in 2005 (Tinsley and Doležal 2018) and staying low since (Collen 2020).

Importantly, access is not equal: young people from less privileged backgrounds have less access to formal language study. In selective schools, 76% of young people took a language GCSE in 2017; at the other extreme, only 29% of young people in Middlesbrough took a language GCSE the same year (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 3). More than one in three state schools do not even offer languages in Year 9, the year before the GCSE preparation years; the latter are concentrated in areas of the country where there is a high proportion of children eligible for free school meals, particularly in urban areas in the North of England (Tinsley and Doležal 2018: 5). These disparities were highlighted during the recent coronavirus lockdowns, when schools in less privileged areas were more likely to suspend the teaching of languages (Collen 2021).

In order to tackle the language education crisis, successive governments have focussed on language teaching in primary schools (Hagger-Vaughan 2016: 364), first through Labour's National Languages Strategy (Languages National Steering Group 2002: 15), and later through the Conservative Government's inclusion of languages in the Primary School National Curriculum (Ratcliffe 2013a, 2013b). More recently, the government has turned its focus to GCSE languages, announcing funding to support the teaching of Latin, Mandarin and German, and a new National Consortium for Languages Education (British Council 2023; Department for Education 2021; UCL 2023).

University language degree provision

The number of undergraduate language students in the UK dropped by 52.7% between 2003 and 2014 (Wyburd 2018: 174). That would imply there were as many as 160,000 in 2003, given that there were 84,520 in 2014 (HESA 2021a). And they have dropped further still, to 75,000 in 2019 (HESA 2021c). Because of the fall in student numbers, numerous universities have closed language programmes: 105 universities in the UK offered languages in the year 2000, dropping to 62 in 2013 (Boffey 2013). As with schools, access is not equal: lower tariff universities, who generally have students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, are less likely to offer languages to degree level (Muradás-Taylor 2023), as described in detail below.

A cross-party group of politicians recently recommended 'strategic oversight of MFL provision [in higher education] to ensure changes in provision are implemented with due consideration on regional and national impact' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages 2019). This would appear to go against the prevailing free-market approach, where each university decides independently which programmes to run, with no government-imposed caps on student numbers (Hillman 2014; Morgan 2013). However, even if there was political will to act on the regional impact of the decline in language degree provision, we do not have sufficiently good understanding of the geographic spread of universities offering – or not offering – languages on which to base any targeted support. This paper fills that gap by identifying 'cold spots': areas of the country where there are no universities offering languages to degree level.

Cold spots matter because the majority of students attend university close to home, with students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic minority backgrounds more likely to commute. Fifty-six percent of all students in 2014–15 attended a university less than 91 kilometres from home (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018: 11), rising to 80% for students from the least privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018: 13) and nearly 90% for British Bangladeshi and British Pakistani students (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018: 14). As Lampl (2018) argues, 'it is […] important for those who wish to – or indeed need to – stay at home that there are excellent local options for everyone'.
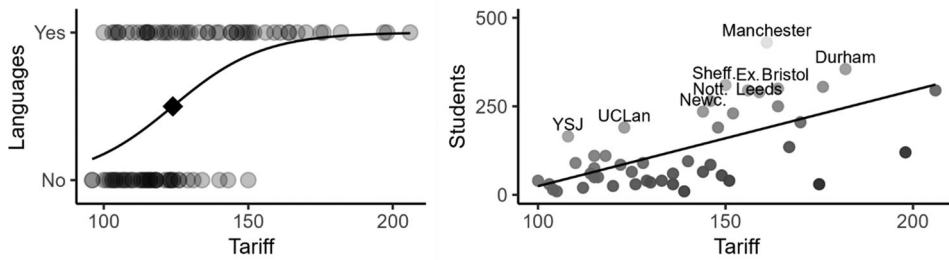
Figure 1. Key results from Muradás-Taylor (2023), adapted from Figures 1 and 5.

Muradás-Taylor (2023) analysed the relation between language provision and university entry tariff in England, using data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the UK admissions service for higher education. The analysis focussed on England, rather than the UK, since approaches to language education differ considerably: in England, a language is compulsory from age 7–14 (Dobson 2018: 76; Ratcliffe 2013a), whereas Wales has a policy of 'bilingualism + 1' with Welsh compulsory from age 3–16 (Jones 2016: 1) and Scotland has committed to the European Union's '1+2 model' of teaching two languages in addition to English (Lanvers et al. 2018: 779).

Figure 1 shows the key results from Muradás-Taylor (2023). On the left are the English universities, from low tariff to high tariff, plotted against a binary yes or no as to whether they offer languages to degree level. Most universities that do not are lower tariff universities. The diamond is the crossover point, at 124 UCAS points, above which most universities offer languages to degree level. This is close to the average tariff across all English universities, which is 128 UCAS points. The key finding from Muradás-Taylor (2023) is therefore that universities with above average entry tariffs generally offer languages to degree level but universities with below average entry tariffs generally do not. The chart on the right shows the number of students studying languages plotted against their entry tariff. There is a strong upward trend: the lower tariff universities have fewer language students and the higher tariff universities have more. Universities that recruit considerably more students than you would expect from their tariff are labelled.

The University Council for Modern Languages (UCML) and the British Academy (2021) analysed UCAS acceptances from 2012–2018 but were not able to identify cold spots. They reported that 'there is a need for ongoing watchfulness at a national level, to identify such "cold spots" if and when they begin to emerge' (UCML and British Academy 2021: 5). They followed this with an updated report analysing UCAS acceptances from 2012–2021 (British Academy and UCML 2022). This reported that the 'three regions with the largest declines in acceptances onto language courses over the past decade are the East Midlands, East of England, and the West Midlands' and that 'acceptances to courses at post-92 universities in the Midlands (both East and West) […] have now all but disappeared' (British Academy and UCML 2022: 15). They summarise their findings by saying that the 'variation in language learning by UK region [… .] threatens the emergence of cold spots [with] the near disappearance of language learning at post-92 institutions in some regions' (British Academy and UCML 2022: 4). The British Academy and UCML (2022) report therefore fulfils the important role of raising awareness of potential cold spots among post-92 universities. However, because percentage changes in acceptances are considered rather than the presence/absence of universities offering languages to degree level, it is not itself a cold spot analysis. In addition, the use of university type (pre-92 versus post-92) is an oversimplification that does not allow us to understand the geographic spread of language degree programmes at different entry tariffs.

Research questions

Building on the above literature, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

(1) Where are the cold spots where no universities offer languages?
(2) Where are the cold spots where no universities offer languages at below average entry tariff?
(3) How does the geographic coverage of language degrees in English universities compare to business and psychology, two subjects chosen because they are expected to have good geographic coverage?
(4) Which below average tariff universities are in or near cold spots?
(5) Where, in relation to cold spots, are the below average tariff universities that have more or fewer language students than expected for their tariff?
(6) Are there any cold spots at higher entry tariffs?
(7) How does this analysis compare to the regional analysis in British Academy and UCML (2022)?

Answering these seven questions will give us the data we need to inform any strategic regional oversight of languages provision, leading to concrete suggestions of what could be changed to improve geographic coverage of, and therefore access to, language degree programmes in England.

Method

Data collection

Building on the research of Muradás-Taylor (2023), a list of 97 English universities and their average entry tariffs was taken from *The Guardian* main league table (Guardian 2022). Each university was coded 'yes' or 'no' for whether or not they offer languages to degree level. The coding for language programmes was deliberately inclusive: all signed, oral, ancient and modern languages were included, whether they are taught alone, with another language or with another subject. The coding was updated from 2022 entry, which was used for Muradás-Taylor (2023), to 2023 entry, by checking individual university websites and also the UCAS website (https://www.ucas.com/explore/unis), where courses relevant to 'languages' at each university can be selected. Three universities have stopped offering languages to degree level since 2022: Coventry University, which used to offer a degree in Languages for Global Communication; Goldsmiths, University of London which used to offer International Relations and Sociology with Chinese; and the University of Huddersfield, which used to offer English Language and Literature with a Modern Language. Note that neither Birkbeck, University of London, nor the Open University are included in the data, because neither publish entry tariffs. This means that two more universities offer languages than are reported in this paper, but this does not affect the analysis of cold spots, since Birkbeck is in London, where several other universities offer languages, and the Open University is a distance learning provider.

Each university was also coded yes or no for offering business or psychology in 2023. This information was found by selecting each university on the UCAS website, choosing 'see all courses' and choosing courses related to 'business, management and administrative studies' or 'psychology'. For business, any undergraduate programme called business studies, business management or management was coded as yes. For psychology, any undergraduate programme with psychology in the title was coded yes.

A dataset including each university's longitude and latitude was downloaded from HESA (2021b). Some universities have more than one campus, and therefore more than one entry in this dataset; in this case, the location of the main campus was used.

Lastly, data on the number of language students who accepted a place to study at each university in 2020, which was collected originally for Muradás-Taylor (2023), was also used. It is not a straightforward process to count the number of young people that accepted a place to study languages because the UCAS codes do not map well to language programmes. As explained in Muradás-Taylor (2023), language programmes were identified by searching for: (i) a named language or (ii) a programme name which indicates a language (e.g. Classics, Modern Language, Translation) or (iii) a programme name which might include a language (e.g. including Ancient, Asia, Deaf, Hispanic)

confirmed with a web check for compulsory language up to at least level 5 or (iv) any other pro-gramme with a language-related UCAS code (e.g. 'Y Comb[ination]s of social studies/bus/law with languages') that has a compulsory language to at least level 5.

Cold spot mapping

Cold spot analysis was carried out in the programming language R (R Core Team 2021). The univer-sities' longitude and latitude were imported with the R sf package (Pebesma 2018) and transformed to points using the British National Grid projected coordinate system epsg: 27700 to allow accurate distance calculations. A subset of universities was selected as appropriate for each analysis: all uni-versities, universities offering languages, universities with below average entry tariffs, universities offering languages at below average entry tariff, universities offering business, universities offering psychology, universities offering business at below average tariff, universities offering psy-chology at below average tariff, universities offering languages at below 140 UCAS points, univer-sities offering languages at below 150 UCAS points, universities offering languages at below 160 UCAS points, and universities below average tariff with more than 30 students accepting a place to study languages.

A grid of 1-kilometre squares in the same coordinate system ('monads') was imported using the R raster package (Hijmans and van Etten 2012). For each data set (all universities, universities offering languages, universities offering languages at below average entry tariff etc.), the distance between each 1-kilometre grid cell and the nearest university was calculated. Cold spot bands were then created for the distances 60–70, 70–80, 80–90 and 90 kilometres+ using a binary distance calculation on the raster grid. These were plotted on an outline of England using the R package ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) in progressively darker shades of blue.

Donnelly and Gamsu (2018), who showed that the majority of students attend a university less than 91 kilometres from home, used a 'k-means clustering approach' to define short, medium and long-distances (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018: 10). However, because they combined data from stu-dents that move for university with data from students that commute for university, their 'short dis-tance' is a rather long 91 kilometres (57 miles). It is clear from their data that there are almost no commuters in the medium or long distance categories, implying that many students commute much less than 91 kilometres. A decision was made for this paper, therefore, to define a cold spot as anything further than 60 kilometres from a university, but to shade anything further than 90 kilo-metres in the darkest blue to allow cross-referencing with Donnelly and Gamsu (2018).

Results

Figure 2 show the results of the cold spot analysis for languages. Each university is represented by a dot. Cold spots, where there are no universities within at least 60 kilometres, are highlighted in blue, with each darker band of blue a further 10 kilometres away; areas further than 90 kilometres from a university offering languages are shaded the darkest blue.

The first map in Figure 2, from left to right, shows the 97 English universities. They have good geographic coverage: the vast majority of the country is within 60 kilometres of a university. The second map shows the 47 universities that offer languages to degree level. There is generally good coverage: five cold spots can be seen on the coasts and borders with Wales and Scotland, but they are small. The third map shows the 61 universities with entry tariffs below the average of 128. Despite the smaller number of universities than in the first map, there is good coverage again: the cold spots are small. However, the final map, which shows the 17 universities that offer languages to degree level at below average tariff, is in marked contrast to the first three, with large cold spots in the North, East and South West of England.

Figure 3 shows the results of the cold spot analysis for business and psychology, two subjects chosen because they were expected to have good geographic coverage. As before, each university
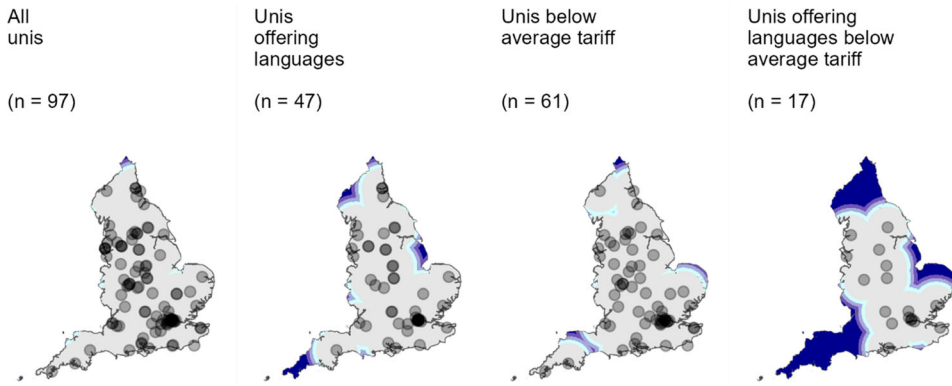
All
unis

(n = 97)

Unis
offering
languages

(n = 47)

Unis below
average tariff

(n = 61)

Unis offering
languages below
average tariff

(n = 17)

Figure 2. Cold spot analysis for languages.

is represented by a dot, with cold spots, where there are no universities within at least 60 kilometres, highlighted in blue. Of the 97 universities in total, 95 offer business and 93 offer psychology. Of the 61 universities below average tariff, all 61 offer business and 60 offer psychology. The cold spots on all four maps are small. Both subjects contrast strikingly with languages, where we saw large cold spots for universities with below average entry tariffs.

Figure 4 names those universities that have below average entry tariffs, do not offer languages to degree level, and are in or near cold spots. In the North, the universities of Cumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside are all in a cold spot. No universities are in the cold spot in the East, but several are nearby: the Universities of Hull, Lincoln, Anglia Ruskin and Suffolk. In the West, the Universities of Gloucestershire, West of England, Bath Spa, Falmouth and Plymouth are in the cold spot and Worcester and Bournemouth are nearby.

Figure 5 explores where, in relation to cold spots, the below average tariff universities are that have more or fewer language students than would be expected from their tariff. The chart on the left is adapted from Figure 1 to include all universities that offer languages to degree level below the average of 128 UCAS points. Two things stand out here. Firstly, UCLan and York St John have considerably more language students than expected for their tariff. The map on the right illustrates their locations in relation to the cold spots: both have a cold spot to the North and York St John is also close to the cold spot in the East. Secondly, of the four universities with the smallest number of language students, three form a band across the Midlands – De Montfort, Nottingham Trent and Wolverhampton – as can be seen from the map on the right.
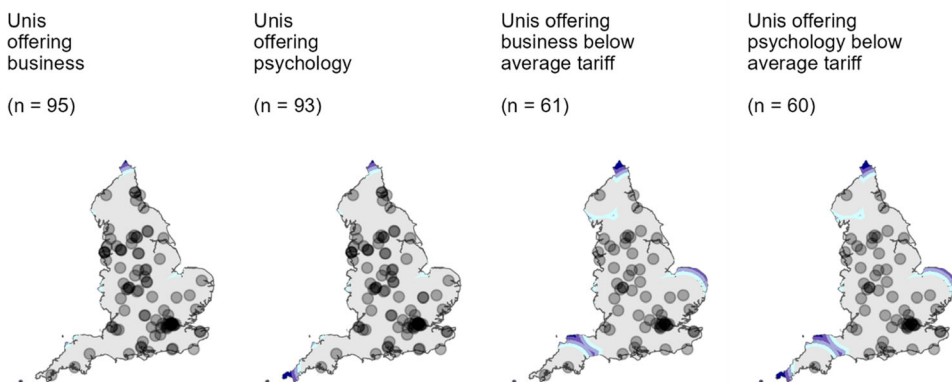
Unis
offering
business

(n = 95)

Unis
offering
psychology

(n = 93)

Unis offering
business below
average tariff

(n = 61)

Unis offering
psychology below
average tariff

(n = 60)

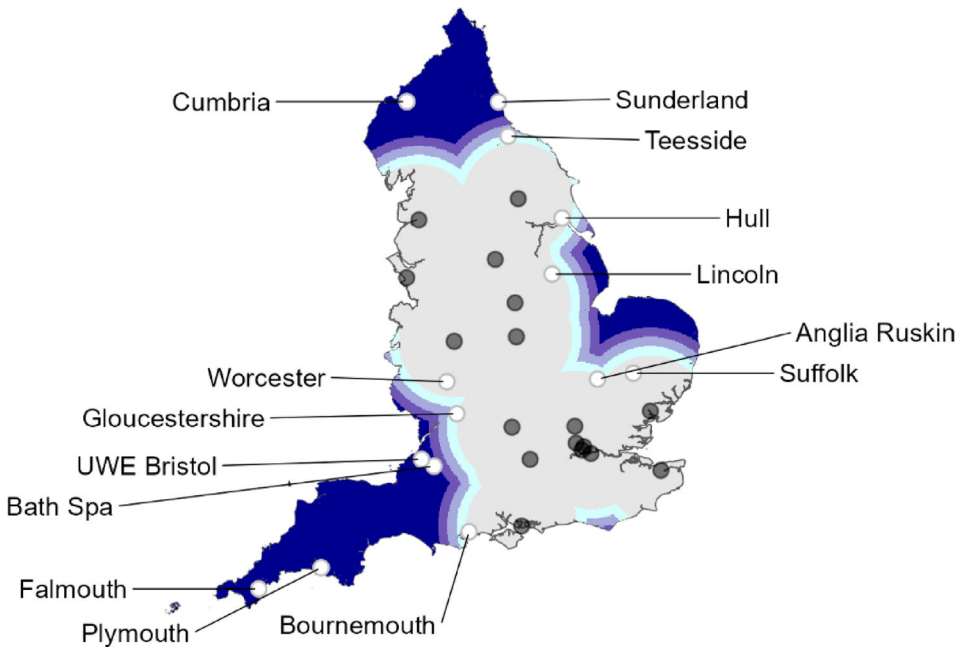**Figure 3.** Cold spot analysis for business/psychology.

Figure 4. Below average tariff universities without languages in or near cold spots.

We know that there are cold spots in the North, East and South West for below average tariff universities, and that these disappear if we include universities offering languages at any tariff. But at how high a tariff do we have cold spots? Figure 6 shows the cold spots for universities at below the English average of 128 UCAS points, below 140 UCAS points, below 150 UCAS points and below 160 UCAS points. By 140 UCAS points, the cold spots in the North and East largely disappear, due to the Universities of Northumbria and East Anglia (UEA). However, the cold spot in the South West is still present at 150 UCAS points, and only disappears at 160 UCAS points due to the University of Exeter.

It is clear that there are large cold spots in language programmes in lower tariff universities in the North, East and South West of England. However, British Academy and UCML (2022), in their recent regional analysis, concluded that the East and West Midlands were of most concern. So why this discrepancy? Figure 7 compares our analysis of lower tariff universities on the left, with the British Academy and UCML (2022) map on the right. The latter shows the percentage fall in the number
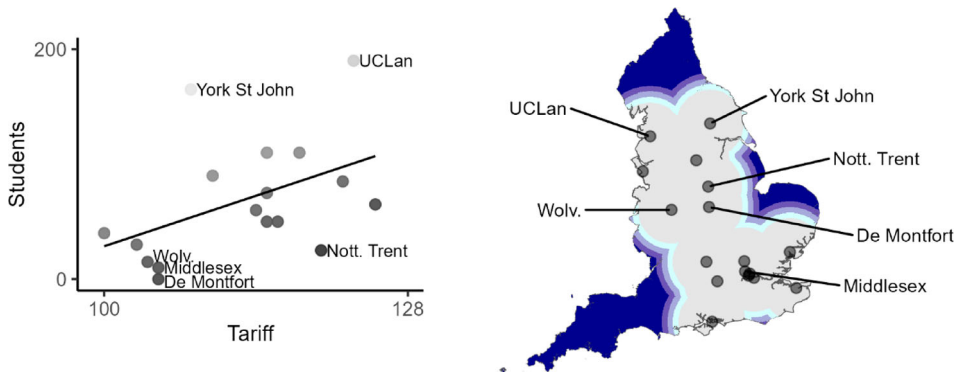

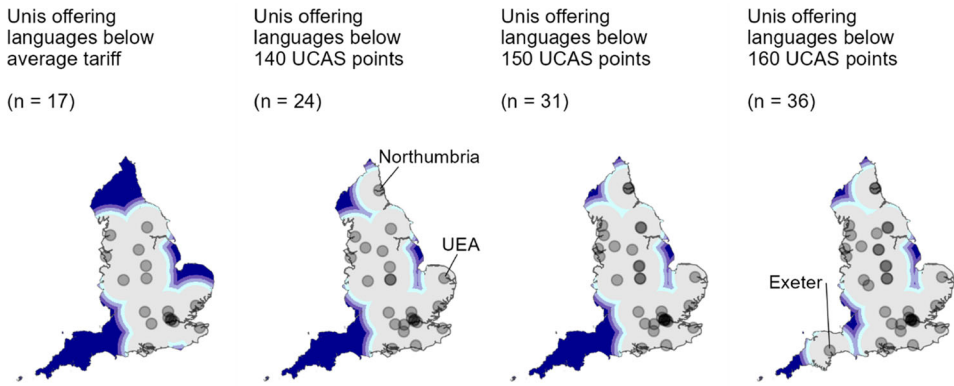**Figure 5.** Below average tariff universities offering languages.

Figure 6. Cold spots at varied tariffs.

of students accepting a place at a university to study a language from 2012 to 2021. It is clear that the East and West Midlands have suffered large falls. The middle map is an adaptation of our left-hand map to exclude universities which recruit fewer than 30 language undergraduates per year. As we saw in Figure 5, of the five universities with the smallest number of language students, three are in the Midlands – De Montfort, Nottingham Trent and Wolverhampton. While each of these offers a language to degree level, the provision is limited: De Montfort only offers Mandarin, Nottingham Trent only offers dual awards in International Business with French/Spanish, and Wolverhampton only offers British Sign Language. When these universities with smaller language programmes are excluded, the cold spots in the East and the South West join up across the Midlands. This will be returned to in the discussion.

Discussion

The key findings of this paper are as follows. Although only 47 out of a total of 97 English universities offer languages to degree level, geographically there is good coverage, with only small areas on the coasts and borders that are further than 60 kilometres from a university offering languages. However, when universities offering languages below the average tariff of 128 UCAS points are considered, large cold spots, where there are no universities within 60 kilometres, are found in the North, the East and the South West of England. At higher entry tariffs, the cold spots in the North and East disappear, but the cold spot in the South West persists up to 150 UCAS points.
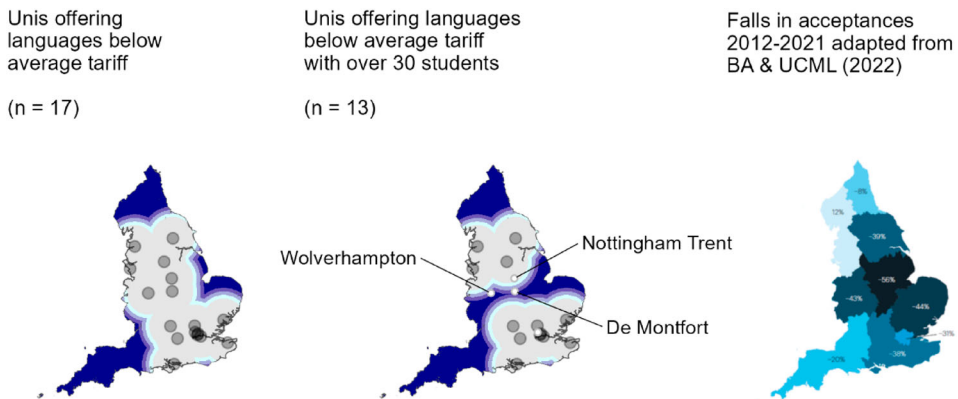

Figure 7. Comparison of cold spots with British Academy and UCML (2022).

This is a social justice issue. We know from Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) that most students attend university close to home, with students from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic minority backgrounds more likely to commute. And it is not the case for all subjects: psychology and business, for example, have good geographic coverage even when only lower tariff universities only are considered. The current regional distribution of universities offering languages therefore excludes people from university language study.

We also saw how easily the cold spots could grow. At an entry tariff of 140 UCAS points and above, there is no cold spot in the North because of the University of Northumbria, and no cold spot in the East because of UEA. However, Northumbria only offers two programmes (International Business Management with French/Spanish) after the closure of their French and Spanish degree (Reisz 2015) and UEA has recently announced a number of redundancies (BBC 2023), although the details of these are not yet clear. In addition, there is band of lower tariff universities in the Midlands that recruit fewer than 30 language students per year, and this area is therefore at risk of developing cold spots in the future.

This brings us to the difference between the findings of this study and that of the British Academy and UCML (2022), which highlighted the East of England and the Midlands to be of most concern. Both identified an issue in the East of England. However, the British Academy and UCML (2022) did not identify the North and South West as areas of concern, because they analysed percentage falls in acceptances, rather than the presence/absence of universities. Lastly, the current study showed that the Midlands does not yet have a cold spot – although, as we have seen, it is at risk of developing one in the future. Note that the method used in this study of identifying cold spots at different tariffs is more informative than the simplified pre-92 versus post-92 distinction made in the British Academy and UCML (2022) report, showing that we have cold spots in the North and East below the average entry tariff of 128 UCAS points, but that the cold spot in the South West persists up to 150 UCAS points.

Recommendations

The finding of cold spots in the North, East and South West for below average tariff universities leads naturally to a key strategic recommendation: to open, or re-open, language degree programmes at one lower tariff university in each of the cold spots. Offering languages to degree level at three additional universities, one in each cold spot, would have a significant impact on access. These universities could be one of Cumbria, Sunderland (whose programmes recently closed; Metcalfe 2020), or Teesside in the North; one of Anglia Ruskin, Hull (whose programmes also recently closed; Hull Live 2019), Lincoln or Suffolk in the East; and one of Bath Spa, Bournemouth, Falmouth, Gloucestershire, Plymouth, West of England or Worcester in the South West.

As discussed in the introduction, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2019) recently recommended 'strategic oversight of MFL provision to ensure changes in provision are implemented with due consideration on regional and national impact'. Any intervention of this sort from government would go against the prevailing free-market approach to university provision. But no government intervention would be needed to launch language degree programmes at one university in each cold spot, given that universities decide independently which programmes to run.

Launching language degree programmes where none currently exist represents a unique opportunity for innovative programme design. UCML and British Academy (2021: 4) recommend that 'language departments re-examine their course offerings with a view to both expanding the range of courses in combination with other [… subjects and …] a greater range of non-European languages'. But starting from scratch would allow for an even more radical design, perhaps focussing on community or heritage languages or languages that are not offered elsewhere, paired with tailor-made combinations of modules from existing subjects. Lessons in designing and managing language programmes at widening participation universities could perhaps be learned from UCLan and York St John University who, as we have seen in this paper, attract considerably more language students than expected for their tariff.

The findings of this paper also highlight how important it is to support the small – and falling – number of universities that offer languages at below average entry tariffs. The Widening Participation Languages Network, a special interest group of the University Council For Languages (UCFL, previously UCML) chaired by the first author of this paper, was launched to do this (UCML 2022). As a community, we are sharing good practice and supporting each other with challenges. Importantly, we are gaining mutual understanding of the unique aspects and strength of the programmes offered by each university in the network, meaning that members of the network can promote other members of the network, for example to prospective students at open days.

Future research

According to Tinsley and Doležal (2018), schools with particularly limited language provision are concentrated in areas of the country where there is a high proportion of children eligible for free school meals, particularly urban areas in the North of England, with only 29% of young people in Middlesbrough taking a language GCSE in 2017. Additional research could compare the locations of cold spots in university language provision with language provision in schools and/or patterns of social deprivation. Additional research could also explore university cold spots further by asking: (i) how many people live more than a commutable distance of 60 kilometres from a below-average tariff university offering languages to degree level; (ii) how far, on average, people have to travel to a below-average tariff university offering languages to degree level; and (iii) how these compare with business and psychology, subjects with good geographic coverage.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the geographic location of universities offering languages to degree level in order to identify cold spots, areas of the country more than a commutable distance of 60 kilometres from a university. Large cold spots were found in the North, East and South West of England for universities below the average tariff of 128 UCAS points, with the cold spot in the South West persisting up to 150 UCAS points. This is a social justice issue, since most students attend university close to home, with students from less-privileged socio-economic backgrounds and some ethnic minority backgrounds more likely to commute. Two recommendations were made based on this analysis: (i) to open language degree programmes at one lower tariff university in each of the cold spots and (ii) to support existing universities that offer languages at below average entry tariffs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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