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Survey of curricula: Linguistics and language-related degrees in Europe

UPSKILLS Intellectual output 1.1

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UPSKILLS: UPgrading the SKILLS of Linguistics and Language Students

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Executive Summary

The needs analysis of the UPSKILLS project is the foundation for all subsequent project activities, and the SoC as its first step is designed to provide insights for finetuning the interventions and materials that will be designed during the lifetime of the project, as well as for enlarging the pool of stakeholders to whom the project results will be disseminated. The SoC has several steps: drawing a list of European language and linguistics degrees from international ranking websites, selecting and analyzing a representative sample of degrees based on a set of indicators agreed upon by all partners, and additional study of a selection of degrees that the partners identified as exemplary in the context of the UPSKILLS project.

The list of European language and linguistics degrees was initially drawn from institutions on two QS subject area lists, which provide rankings based on performance in the areas of linguistics and modern languages. All UPSKILLS project partners added additional relevant degrees. The final list includes 535 degrees in 30 European countries.

The representative sample was drawn taking into account the share of countries where the degree is offered, level of study, and position in QS rankings in the area of linguistics (as a primary focus of the project). The final sample includes 122 degrees, for which detailed information was gathered, including the learning outcomes and subject lists wherever available. For the study of exemplary curricula, 12 degrees were selected. This data was then analyzed in the context of the UPSKILLS project proposal and the job ad analysis that ran parallel to this study in the overall needs analysis.

The SoC showed that all the identified skills, knowledge, and experience are indeed underrepresented in the descriptions, learning outcomes, and subject lists of the representative sample of European linguistics and language degree curricula. In general, there were no major differences in terms of levels of study, institutional ranking or country in this respect. However, it should be noted that the identified relative lack of mentions of research skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes and subject lists could indicate a corresponding lack of content, but also a lack of awareness that these skills need to be explicitly mentioned as part of the curricula. That fortifies the merits of UPSKILLS's dual approach of creating additional learning content and also promoting the profile of a linguistics and language graduate for the 21st century.

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
SoC	Survey of curricula
RSA	Representative sample analysis
STD	Study of top degrees
BA	Undergraduate degree, usually Bachelor of Arts,
MA	First level graduate degree, usually Master of Arts

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1. Rationale

The needs analysis of the UPSKILLS project is the foundation for all subsequent project activities, and the SoC as its first step is designed to provide insights for finetuning the interventions and materials that will be designed during the lifetime of the project, as well as for enlarging the pool of stakeholders to whom the project results will be disseminated. The SoC will inform the project partners to what extent the skills, experience, and knowledge identified as being underrepresented in the project proposal (i.e., more forward-looking skills, such as problem-solving, research design and project management, as well as specific technical skills) are indeed absent from the curricula of current language-related degrees, and whether there are differences in that respect between levels of study and universities in different countries and of different rankings. The SoC will also shed light on the structure of the programs, the applied teaching methods and what kind of information about career prospects universities offer their students.

2. Methodology

The SoC has several steps. The UPSKILLS project proposal envisioned that first a list of all European language and linguistics degrees from international ranking websites would be drawn, then a representative sample of degrees would be selected based on a set of indicators agreed upon by all partners and finally, the sample would be surveyed. During the implementation of the SoC, the need for an additional step arose, so the survey included both the representative sample and a selection of degrees that the partners identified as exemplary in the context of the UPSKILLS project. The steps performed are presented in detail in the respective sections below.

1.1 Drawing a list of European language and linguistics degrees

In order to draw a list of European language and linguistics degrees from international ranking websites, upon consultation of all project partners, it was established that the best and most feasible and appropriate approach for this project is to start with the QS area ranking. The QS area lists in question rank institutions based on their performance in the areas of linguistics and modern languages, thus ensuring that the institution offers relevant degrees. As a second step, all partners were asked to add degrees to the list from their countries and those they know are relevant but might not have been included.

The QS 2020 rankings in Linguistics¹ and Modern Languages² were used. All the ranked European universities were listed (161 institutions in total). Then, each institution was surveyed for relevant degrees. A table was made, listing the institutions' name and country, the total number of students, the rank in the areas, global rank, graduate employability ranks, a link to the page where the degree was found (or leading to more detailed information on the degree), with separate entries for each degree listing the school or department (if available), degree name and level of study. Where readily available, additional relevant information was also included. The focus was on language and linguistics degrees at all levels of study. Where degrees in linguistics were offered, degrees focusing more on philology, literature, culture, translation, or language education were not included, assuming that any relevant courses would be included in the linguistics degree. That yielded 504 degrees. The list was then sent to all partners, who added 37 more degrees. After cleaning the data, the final number of degrees was 535.

1.2 Selecting and analyzing a representative sample of degrees

Based on the list and needs of the project, the following indicators for drawing a representative sample were agreed upon by all partners:

- Country: include all the countries on the list, relatively representatively sampled (ensure all countries are included but add more from countries with a higher number of degrees);
- BA/MA share: proportionate number of undergraduate and graduate degrees, with all types of Master degrees grouped into one category, and without PhDs;
- Rank share: proportionate number of degrees from institutions ranked in the following seven bands in the area of Linguistics: 1-50, 51-100, 101-150, 151-200, 201-250, 251-300, not ranked.

The sample was selected randomly following the above criteria. In line with the number of degrees per country, the final sample included 122 degrees. The structure of the sample based on the given indicators is shown in Figures 1-3.

¹ <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2020/linguistics>

² <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/university-subject-rankings/2020/modern-languages>

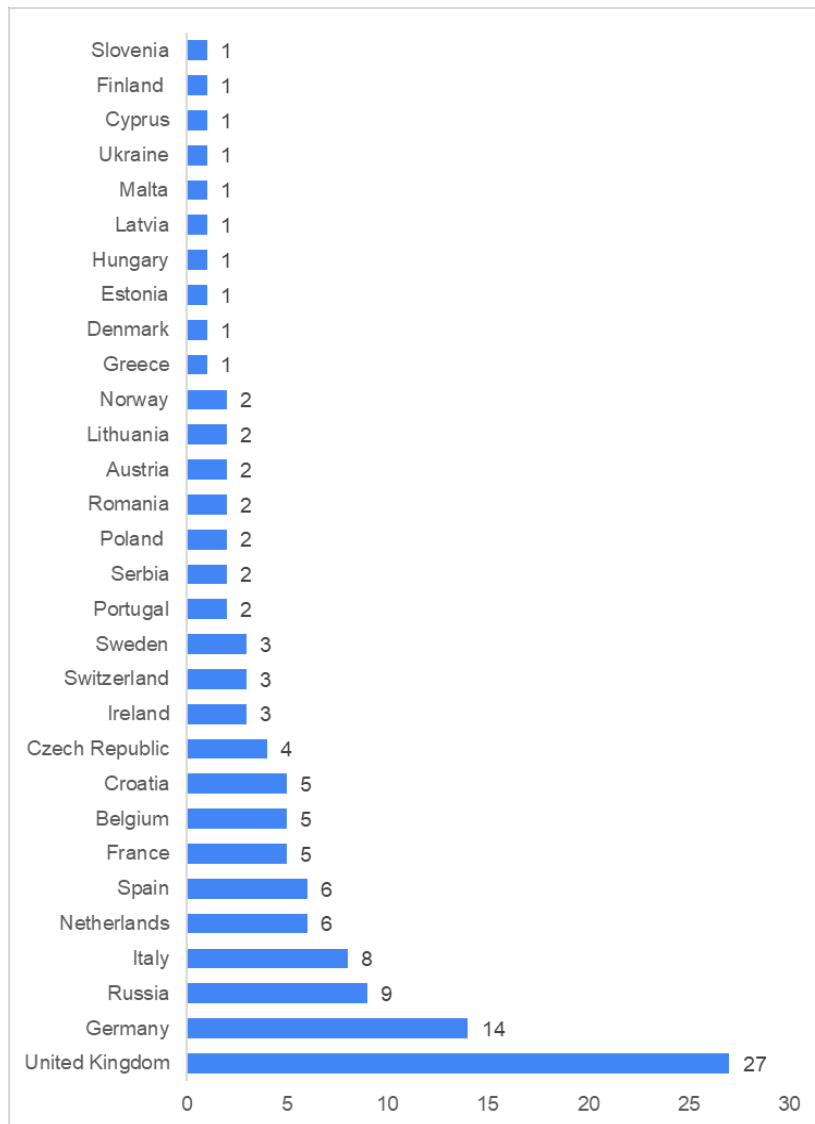


Figure 1. Share of degrees in sample per country

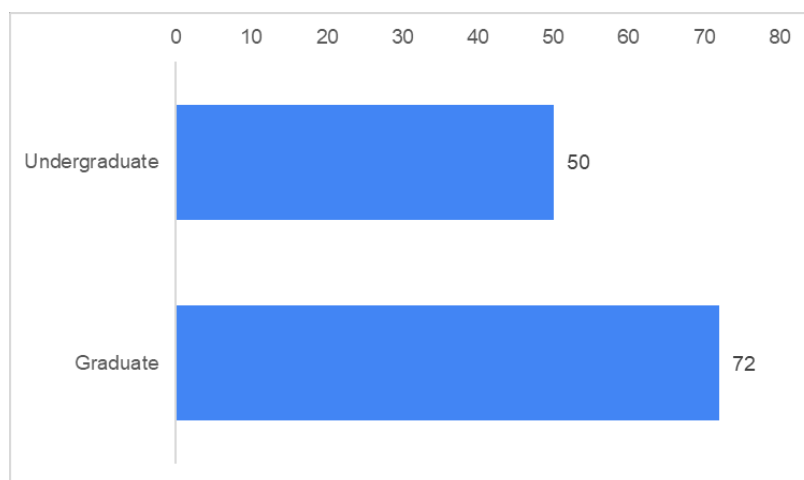


Figure 2. Share of degrees in sample per degree level

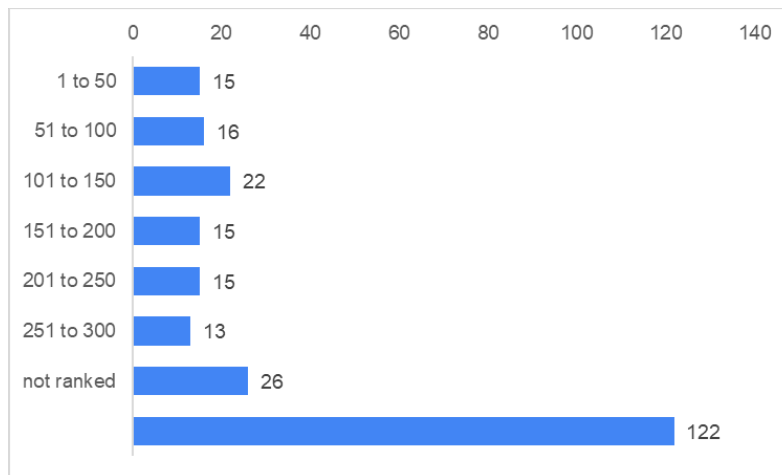


Figure 3. Share of degrees in sample per QS Linguistics ranking

Each degree was then surveyed on the institutions' websites, and detailed information was gathered wherever available on:

- Degree ECTS
- Title Earned
- Number of years
- Language of instruction
- Languages taught
- Degree overview and learning outcomes
- Subjects offered (compulsory & electives)
- Additional relevant details

This data was then analyzed in line with the goals outlined in the above rationale, using Microsoft Excel, LancsBox, and Voyant Tools. In addition to the general characteristics of the sample, the following skills, experience, and knowledge, identified as relevant in the project proposal, were searched for in the descriptions of the degrees and lists of courses:

- Research skills (analytical thinking, problem solving, scientific research, project management)
- Data acquisition skills (collecting data, programming, text processing, collecting and analyzing corpus data, text and speech processing, machine learning, language data science, language data standards, and repositories)
- Cross-cutting skills (research and data management, linguistic theory)

Additionally, as the analysis of job ads in UPSKILLS' needs analysis ran parallel to this SoC, the skills, experience, and knowledge required by employers identified therein were also included in the study.

1.3 Selecting and analyzing the most relevant degrees

When collecting the sample for the RSA, UPSKILLS project partners also identified degrees that they see as exemplary in the context of this SoC. Specifically, they identified degrees that might provide content that overlaps with that UPSKILLS plans to create and/or that are highly regarded among specialists, regardless of current international rankings. The degrees in question were also selected to make sure they are analyzed, as they might not end up in the representative sample considering the method used was random sampling. A total of 12 degrees were identified, 3 BA, 3 MSc, and 6 MA. The STD was performed, focusing more on qualitative analyses of the curricula. The results are given in a separate section after the main RSA.

3. Representative sample analysis

3.1 General characteristics of European language and linguistics degrees

The surveyed sample covers curricula in 30 countries, which is also reflected in the languages of instruction (Figure 4). However, while BA degrees are mostly taught in the local language, more than half of the MA degrees are taught in English. That may mean that new materials targeting BA students should be localized. However, it may also be interpreted as a need to expose undergraduate students to more English language materials, as they will likely need English language skills in the job market.

In terms of workload, most MA degrees require 120 ECTS points, while most BA degrees require 180 ECTS (Figure 5). Conversely, most MA degrees last 1-2 years, while around two-thirds of BA degrees take 3, and around one-third four years (Figure 6). The typical number of ECTS and duration of study can guide the scope of activities designed under UPSKILLS, as they will ideally be incorporated into existing degree programs.

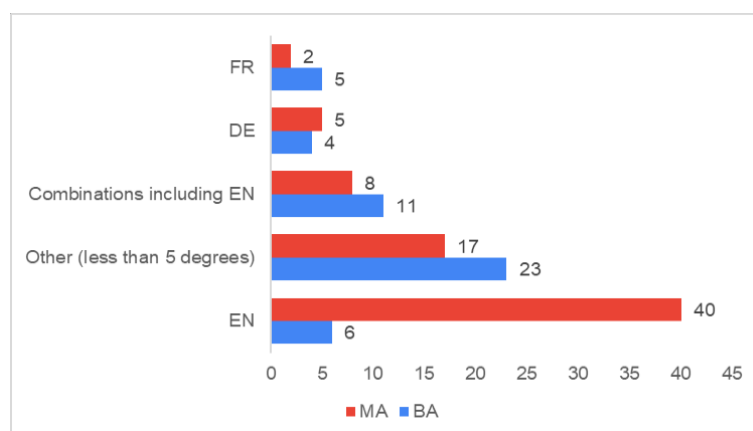


Figure 4. Language of instruction (ISO 639-1 coded)

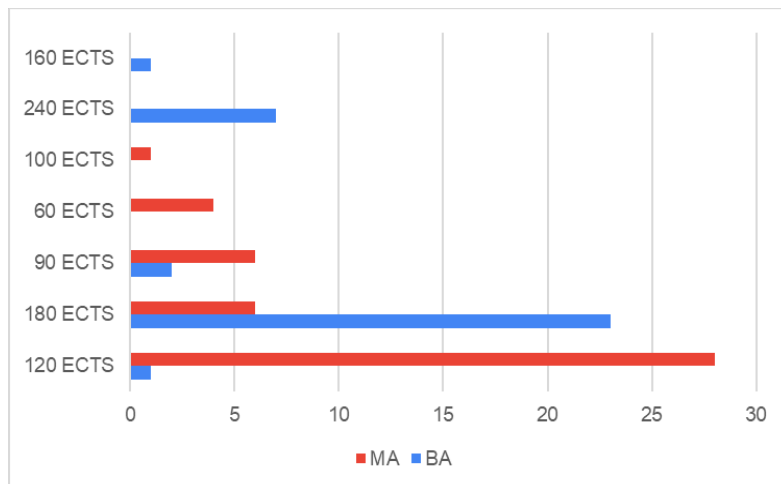


Figure 5. Number of ECTS points

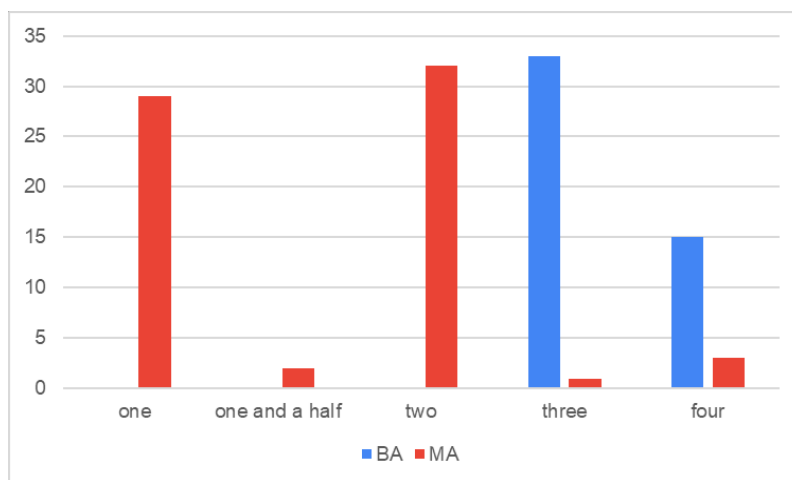


Figure 6. Number of years required to graduate

The institutions offering the surveyed degrees vary in size, the smallest having under 5000 students in total and the largest more than 80000. They also vary in terms of general global rankings and graduate employability rankings (in the 2020 QS World University Rankings). However, only 5 degrees in the sample are at institutions that are ranked top 50 globally both in terms of general quality and the employability of their graduates. These are the same four universities in the United Kingdom, which are also in the top 50 in the two subject rankings relevant for this SoC (Linguistics and Modern languages).

About 10 percent of the surveyed degrees are offered by universities ranked top 50 in the two relevant areas. An almost equal number of BA and MA degrees are offered by institutions that are top 50 in the Linguistics ranking, while for the Modern languages ranking, there are around two-thirds of BA degrees (Figure 7). In terms of geographic distribution, again, the highest number of degrees at top 50 institutions are offered in the United Kingdom, with the

remainder being at institutions in Western and Northern Europe and one in Russia (Figure 8). Additionally, it should be noted that eight of these are the same degrees, i.e., at institutions ranked top 50 in both subject areas. This matching excellence additionally confirms the close link between the areas of linguistics and language.

The distribution of the surveyed degrees across rankings and the continent highlights that the degrees likely to be considered the strongest are concentrated in countries and regions with a long tradition of highest-ranking higher education institutions. The modules created in the UPSKILLS project could thus be targeted slightly more towards institutions in other parts of Europe, which could use these resources to enhance their course offerings.

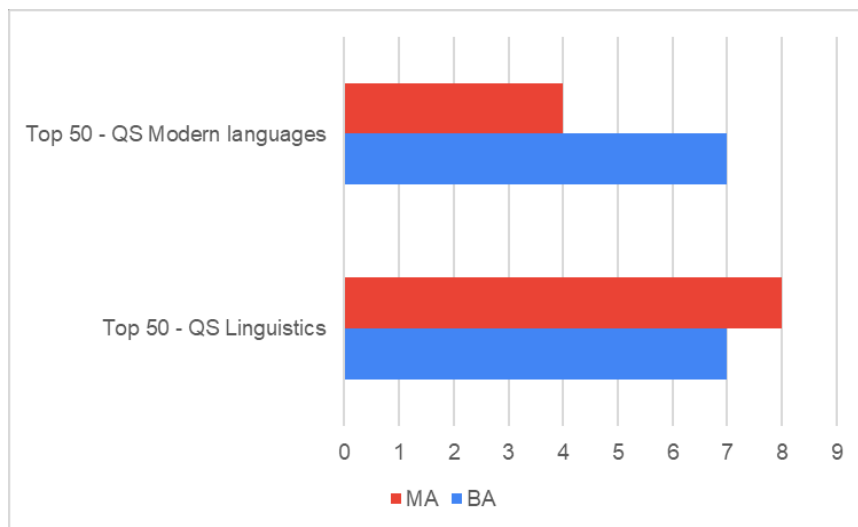


Figure 7. Number of degrees offered by universities ranked top 50 in the relevant areas (BA/MA share)

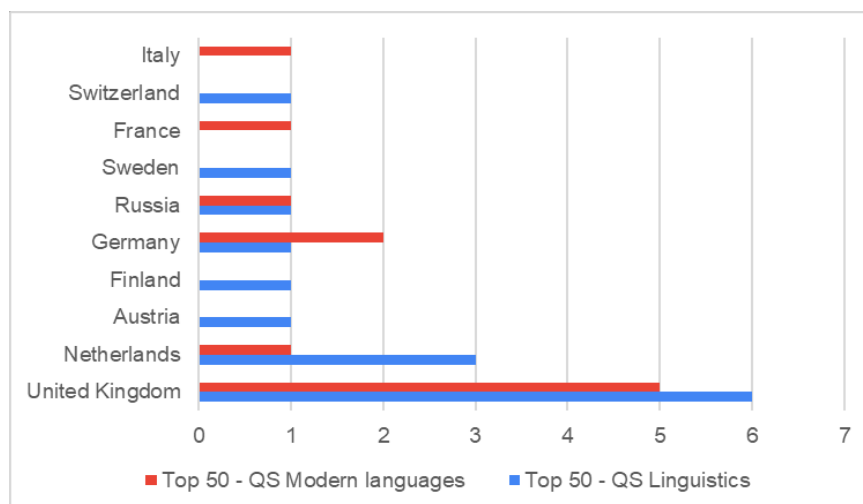


Figure 8. Number of degrees offered by universities ranked top 50 in the relevant areas (country share)

in terms of levels of study, institutional ranking, or country. The most present are scientific skills, and those in only around one-quarter of the sample and focusing primarily on academic research skills. The second most frequent are mentions of problem solving skills, followed by analytical and project management skills in less than one-fifth of the sample.

Research skills	Number of degrees	Percentage of sample	Context	Courses
<i>Analytical</i>	14	11.5	Skills, thinking, reading, approaches, techniques, procedures, methods, tools	1 BA
<i>Problem</i>	27	22	Solving, identifying, recognizing, formulating, interpreting	1 MA
<i>Scientific</i>	33	27	Knowledge, literature, texts, approach, study, methods, research, reporting	11 BA & MA (academic research skills or translation of scientific texts)
<i>Project</i>	21	17	Management, research (project, in the context of the studies)	27 BA & MA (including projects undertaken for ECTS)

Table 1. Mentions of research skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes, and subject lists

The identified relative lack of mentions of research skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes, and subject lists could indicate a corresponding lack of content, but also a lack of awareness that these skills need to be explicitly mentioned as part of the curricula. That fortifies the merits of UPSKILLS’s dual approach of creating additional learning content and also promoting the profile of a linguistics and language graduate for the 21st century.

3.3 Data acquisition and handling skills in European language and linguistics degrees

Similar to research skills, the data acquisition and handling skills identified as being underrepresented in current language-related studies in the UPSKILLS project proposal were also found to be present in few descriptions and learning outcomes of the surveyed degrees (Table 2). There were no significant differences in terms of institutional ranking or country, while slight differences in the level of study are indicated in the table. The most present are

general data-related skills in slightly over one-quarter of the sample. Programming and machine learning are most present in MA curricula. Finally, standards and repositories are not mentioned at all.

Data acquisition and handling skills	Number of degrees	Percentage of sample	Context	Courses
<i>Data</i>	34	28	Gather, interpret, handle, produce, process, systematize, analyze	18 BA & MA (analytical and theoretical orientation)
<i>Programming</i>	12	10	Python, R, C++	21 BA & mostly MA
<i>Text</i>	15	12	Analysis (in the academic / philological sense), mining, corpora	25 BA & MA
<i>Corpus</i>	9	7	Linguistics (as a field), methods	24 BA & MA
<i>Processing</i>	20	16	NLP, information, speech	35 BA & MA (mainly language processing)
<i>Machine learning</i>	5	4	Methods, techniques, theory	17 BA & mostly MA
<i>Data Science</i>	2	1.5	/	1 MA
<i>Standards / Repositories</i>	0	0	/	0

Table 2. Mentions of data acquisition and handling skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes, and subject lists

As in the previous section, the lack of mentions might indicate both lack of content and/or emphasis, which will be tackled with UPSKILLS project activities. Additionally, the fact that standards and repositories are not mentioned at all could indicate a potential significant added value of UPSKILLS, as the learning content created in the project will likely provide a rare opportunity for linguistics and language students to enhance their skills in that domain.

3.4 Cross-cutting skills in European language and linguistics degrees

Cross-cutting skills, the final group identified as underrepresented in the UPSKILLS project proposal, were also found to be present in few descriptions and learning outcomes of the surveyed degrees (Table 3). There were no significant differences in terms of institutional ranking or country, while slight differences in the level of study are indicated in the table. Management of research and data seems to be present only implicitly in more general management content, and that is only around 10 percent of the sample. On the other hand, linguistic theory is covered mainly at the MA level, in less than one-fifth of the sample.

Cross-cutting skills	Number of degrees	Percentage of sample	Courses	Focus
<i>Management</i> (research and data)	14	11.5	7 BA & MA	project management, translation project management, business management, management of bibliographic and documentary information
<i>Theory</i> (linguistic)	22	18	30 BA & mostly MA	linguistic and language theory

Table 3. Mentions of cross-cutting skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes, and subject lists

The general underrepresentation of skills identified in the UPSKILLS project proposal found in this SoC confirms the feasibility of the project plan, while the above outlined specific findings provide direction for finetuning project activities.

3.5 European language and linguistics degrees and the job market

3.5.1 Students' career paths

In the RSA, 14 degree descriptions were found to discuss the students' future career prospects explicitly. As stated, most of these curricula are designed to prepare students for a wide range of careers, including further research and work in academia but also jobs focused on data, language technologies, management, and other industries (e.g., marketing, PR, tourism). One institution even explicitly describes the prospects for its BA graduates as follows:

As a modern linguist you will have excellent communication, analytical and research skills combined with the proven ability to communicate fluently, alongside practical skills such

as translation and interpretation. You will have developed the kind of sensitivity to different cultures that is highly prized in the workplace.

This description corresponds well to the skills, knowledge, and experience required in job ads, as identified in the UPSKILLS broader needs analysis (further outlined in the next section). Such curricula can serve as guidance for project activities.

Finally, the fact that most of the descriptions list modern, non-traditional occupations for linguistics and language graduates (beyond academia and translation) might show that those institutions that make an effort to explicitly state the future prospects for their graduates in the curricula also make an effort to familiarize themselves with the current job market. This insight can help UPSKILLS better direct its activities related to connecting higher education and the world of business, i.e., making universities more aware of the needs of the job market on the one hand, and the business sector more aware of the skills, knowledge, and experience of modern linguistics and language graduates on the other.

3.5.2 Skills, knowledge, and experience required in job ads

In addition to the skills identified in the project proposal, the top skills (more than ten mentions), experience (more than 5), and knowledge (more than 5) mentioned in the job ads analysis that is part of the UPSKILLS general needs analysis were also studied in this SoC (Table 4). Few of these are mentioned explicitly in the descriptions of the degrees and the learning outcomes – almost all in only under 5 percent of the sample. The only exception is language skills, with 7 percent. However, here it should be mentioned that language skills might have been more prominently present if the SoC sampled individual language-focused degrees as well, and not mainly those with a focus on linguistics.

Top job ad requirements	Number of degrees	Percentage of sample
<i>Communication skills</i>	5	4
<i>Organizational skills</i>	4	3
<i>Analytical skills</i>	5	4
<i>Language skills</i>	9	7
<i>Interpersonal skills</i>	1	1
<i>Annotation (experience)</i>	1	1
<i>Structural aspects of the language (knowledge)</i>	4	3
<i>Data processing needs (knowledge)</i>	1	1

Table 4. Mentions of skills, knowledge, and experience required in job ads in the descriptions and learning outcomes of degrees

Again, similarly to the previous sections, the lack of mentions might not indicate a lack of content, but it certainly shows a need to provide better content and/or to empower students and educators to identify and emphasize the skills that might be only implicitly present in the curricula.

4. Study of top degrees

The degrees selected for the STD are offered at institutions in the United Kingdom (4 in total), Netherlands (2), one each in Belgium, Germany, Ireland, and Slovenia, with two Erasmus Mundus degrees involving institutions in several EU countries. They are mostly taught in English, with two exceptions (one in Dutch and one in Slovene). Other general characteristics are similar to the RSA, except for rankings – interestingly, almost half the degrees in the STD are not ranked in the two relevant QS subject area rankings. That could be due to the recent increase in the quality of the programs or the specific focus of UPSKILLS project partners. In terms of general and graduate employability rankings, only two institutions are in the top 50 (both located in the United Kingdom), while four are not ranked at all.

Several common characteristics of these curricula stand out and might make them exemplary in the context of the UPSKILLS project, namely:

- A strong offer of a wide variety of diverse, very modern subjects, with topics ranging from specific areas of theory to real-world practical skills
- Flexible and/or modular structure – allows students the freedom to design their path within a wealth of options
- Innovative teaching methods – a mixture of lectures, practical and hands-on exercises, workshops, tutorials and supervised work, individual work, internships, year abroad
- Small-group teaching and selection of highly motivated and skilled students
- State-of-the-art facilities and/or strong researchers among lecturers

Additionally, most of the degrees in the STD mention the skills identified in the RSA as lacking: analytical skills, data processing, programming, machine learning, etc. However, transferable skills seem to still focus primarily on academic work or traditional language professions, e.g., critical thinking in the context of research methodology or project management in the context of translation. In terms of research-related skills, even in these exemplary curricula, there seems to be a lack in statistics and experimental skills education.

The majority of curricula in the STD are MA level, even though the main focus of the UPSKILLS project is on the BA level. That is likely because MA courses are more specialized, and hence already relatively strong in at least one of the areas UPSKILLS aims to cover (e.g., programming or research methods). The STD should thus be used chiefly as a model of what lecturers might perceive as already good and perhaps what can also be transferred onto the BA level.

In terms of differences among countries, there appear to be different trends in the United Kingdom compared to institutions in the EU. Degrees at institutions in the United Kingdom tend to accept fewer BA students and focus more on supervisions, tutorials, and other forms of individual and work in small groups. Also, students typically write essays or other forms of

long papers and they need to be able to develop an argument, in addition to a BA dissertation. Through these activities, curricula that do not have research methods as a subject seem to cover at least some parts of what UPSKILLS aims to do.

5. Concluding remarks

The SoC aimed to inform UPSKILLS project partners to what extent the skills, experience, and knowledge identified as being underrepresented in the project proposal, and identified as required in the job ads analysis, are indeed absent from the curricula of current language-related degrees, and whether there are differences in that respect between levels of study and universities in different countries and of different rankings. The SoC showed that all the identified skills, knowledge, and experience are indeed underrepresented in the descriptions, learning outcomes and subject lists of the representative sample of European linguistics and language degree curricula. In general, there were no major differences in terms of levels of study, institutional ranking or country in this respect. However, it should be noted that the identified relative lack of mentions of research skills in the descriptions of degrees, learning outcomes and subject lists could indicate a corresponding lack of content, but also a lack of awareness that these skills need to be explicitly mentioned as part of the curricula. That fortifies the merits of UPSKILLS's dual approach of creating additional learning content and also promoting the profile of a linguistics and language graduate for the 21st century.

Additionally, the SoC shed light on the structure of the programs, the applied teaching methods, and what kind of information about career prospects universities offer their students, especially in the STD, which could be used as a model of what lecturers might perceive as already good, and what can also be transferred onto the BA level. Specifically, flexible programs offering a wide range of foundational and modern (i.e., innovative and up-to-date with latest research and job market needs) subjects seem to make high-quality curricula. In terms of teaching methods, again, a wide variety of offerings seems to be preferred. Finally, the descriptions of curricula that include mentions of career prospects seem to be those quite in tune with the current job market. This insight can help UPSKILLS better direct its activities related to connecting higher education and the world of business.

The SoC also revealed several findings that could help guide future UPSKILLS project activities. Specifically, the workloads of the surveyed curricula can provide guidance for the scope of activities designed under UPSKILLS. Materials should be localized, but BA students might also benefit from more English language materials. The modules created in the UPSKILLS project should be targeted slightly more towards European countries without a long tradition of highest-ranking universities, which could use these resources to enhance their course offerings.

In terms of content, the fact that teaching about standards and repositories was not identified at all in the RSA could indicate a potential significant added value of UPSKILLS,

which aims to create learning content in that domain. The STD also showed space for content teaching transferable skills more in line with the modern job market and more materials in the domain of statistics and experimental skills. Finally, the STD also showed the potential for enhancing and recognizing the skills learned implicitly through activities that are not directly focused on teaching research methods.

The SoC clearly shows the need to provide better content and to empower students and educators to identify and emphasize the skills that might be only implicitly present in existing curricula.