

Foreign languages in Swedish Higher Education – Trends since Bologna and effects of the pandemic

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Abstract

Few academic subjects have come under as much pressure as languages other than English (LOTEs) over the past decades. This study examines how foreign language education in 39 subjects within Swedish Higher Education (HE) has evolved since the implementation of the Bologna reform in 2007/2008. Particular attention is given to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The results show a long-term decline in volumes across most foreign languages, despite expansions in the HE sector. While English has contracted mainly in first-cycle stand-alone courses but grown within professional programmes, French, German, and Spanish have seen the greatest losses in professional qualification programmes and modest gains in stand-alone courses, especially among older students. Advanced-level study remains limited throughout the period. The pandemic introduced further fluctuations. Government investments boosted overall enrolments, but foreign languages were unevenly affected. LOTEs experienced notable increases in first-cycle stand-alone courses, a trend that has continued beyond the crisis but accompanied by declining performance rates. Overall, the findings underscore the vulnerability of LOTEs in a HE system focused on employability and degree programmes, raising questions about how Swedish HE policy can support progression beyond the first cycle, and ensure that smaller language subjects can survive and thrive in an increasingly marketised HE landscape.

Keywords: *Higher Education, Sweden, foreign languages, LOTE, English, Covid-19 pandemic*

1. Introduction

Few academic subjects have come under as much pressure as languages other than English (LOTEs) over the past decades. In their article *The Canary in Coal Country: Educational Policy, Politics, and the Dissolution of a Language Department*, Thompson et al. (2025) describe how instruction in nearly all world languages at the University of West Virginia was discontinued in 2023. Following a neoliberal ideology and several years of declining enrolments in LOTE courses, later reinforced by contemporary anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) agendas, the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics was ultimately closed.

In the autumn of 2025, petitions protesting the closure of modern language programmes at the UK universities of Nottingham and Leicester have been circulated widely, gathering thousands of signatures.¹ The rationale for discontinuing these programmes largely mirrors the situation in the United States. Universities cite sector-wide financial challenges, including frozen tuition fees, increasing operational costs, and shifting student demand (Times Higher Education, November 2025). Several other UK universities are currently reviewing the status of their modern language departments. A recent report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) shows that 17

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK have lost their modern language degrees since 2014 (Bowler, 2025, p. 26).

Sweden, a country traditionally recognised for a strong commitment to foreign language education (e.g., Cabau-Lampa, 2005), has also seen the closure of language departments and a reduction in LOTE provision in Higher Education (HE) in recent decades (Alberius et al., 2017). As in many other countries (e.g., Mula-Falcón & Caballero, 2022), Swedish HE has been reshaped by neoliberal policies and reforms, including increased marketisation, performance-based funding, intensified competition between universities, and the introduction of new public management (Ahlbäck Öberg & Boberg, 2023; Börjesson & Dalberg, 2021). In practice, these developments mean that smaller subjects attracting relatively few students—such as LOTEs—risk becoming structurally underfunded, especially if they are not embedded within larger educational units where operational costs can be shared. The challenge of maintaining high-quality education and research in such small subjects, not least in LOTEs, has been a recurring concern in Swedish HE for several decades (Government, 2025; Högskoleverket, 2003), with no lasting solution yet in sight.

In recent years, the challenges facing LOTEs in Swedish HE have intensified. Sweden's HE system is comparatively open and flexible, with a high proportion of stand-alone courses (sw., *fristående kurser*) complementing degree programmes. The vast majority of language students in Swedish HE enrol in stand-alone courses (Alberius et al., 2017). At the same time, marketisation has aligned with a policy shift in which successive Swedish governments have emphasised utility, employability, and degree completion. Together with the performance-based funding model introduced in the 1990s, these policies incentivise universities to prioritise full-time degree programmes leading to clearly defined professions (Amnéus & Fredman, 2024; SOU, 2015). The Bologna reform, implemented in 2007/2008, further contributed to the creation of new programmes and, in some cases, to the expansion of existing ones (Börjesson et al., 2019). Although the number of language programmes remains comparatively low in the Humanities, second-cycle (master's level) LOTE studies have since Bologna increasingly been organised as degree programmes at many HEIs (SOU 2015:70, p. 109). However, little is still known about how these structural changes have affected foreign languages in HE. The present study therefore examines national developments in English and LOTE studies since the implementation of the Bologna reform.

A further factor shaping Swedish HE in recent years has been the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to the anticipated recession in 2020, the government expanded funding for HE, introducing both temporary and permanent increases in university budgets. This led to a substantial rise in student numbers. According to the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ, 2022), just under 142,000 students applied for the autumn 2020 term—an increase of nearly 16,000 compared with the previous year (UKÄ, 2022, p. 24). Yet again, little is known about how English or LOTEs, specifically, were affected by the government's efforts and the pandemic.

In view of the above, the aim of the present paper is to examine how foreign languages have fared in a changing Swedish HE landscape since the Bologna reform, with particular attention paid to the pandemic period. We begin by outlining the organisation of Swedish HE and the provision of foreign language education, including a summary of relevant policy changes that may have influenced enrolment to foreign languages. Government measures introduced during the pandemic are also briefly described. The method section presents the database and parameters used in this study, followed by the findings, which show trends in Full-time equivalents (FTEs) and Annual performance equivalents (APEs) for three groups of foreign languages: (i) English, (ii) French, German, and Spanish, and (iii) a broader group of other LOTEs. The comparison between the three languages groups is relevant because of the different status of these languages in the educational

system and in Swedish society at large. The findings are then discussed in relation to recent developments in Swedish HE.

2. Higher Education in Sweden and foreign language education

Compared to many other educational systems, including those in the other Nordic countries, HE in Sweden is considered to be open and flexible (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; UKÄ, 2023). The educational offer is course-based, meaning that in addition to complete degree programmes leading to general or professional qualifications (in e.g. engineering, medicine, economics etc), universities and university colleges offer many stand-alone courses (sw. *fristående kurser*) that students can take without being admitted to a specific programme. The number and proportion of stand-alone courses compared to degree programmes is particularly important in the Humanities and Arts (Börjesson et al., 2019). The stand-alone courses carry a varying number of ECTS credits and can be combined into a general qualification (Degree of Bachelor or Degree of Master) if certain requirements are fulfilled. Table 1 below lists first- and second-cycle general qualifications.

Table 1 General qualifications in Higher Education

Cycle	Qualification	Required ECTS
First cycle	Higher Education Diploma	120
	Degree of Bachelor	180
Second cycle	Degree of Master 1-year	60
	Degree of Master 2-years	120

Students can rather freely choose how to combine different stand-alone courses. HEIs offer student counselling, and some combinations (labelled study pathways) are well established even though there seems to be little knowledge on how students combine their stand-alone courses. However, only a small minority of students studying stand-alone courses eventually take an exam. (UKÄ, 2020) found in a register study of students beginning to study stand-alone courses in HE that only 27% completed a degree and only 16% completed a general qualification. This can be compared to students who began a degree programme where 65% completed their degrees (UKÄ, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that the students' main purpose of studying stand-alone courses is not to study to complete a qualification. Instead, stand-alone courses function as introductions to HE and as complementary studies to other studies, often within degree programmes (UKÄ, 2020) or as part of life-long learning (Amnéus & Fredman, 2024). Stand-alone courses might be particularly important as an entrance to HE for non-traditional students that are the first in their family to enter HE in Sweden (Thunborg et al., 2013).

2.1 Trends in the educational offer in Swedish Higher Education

Over the last 30 years the educational provision in Swedish Higher Education has shifted towards more degree programmes and fewer stand-alone courses, a process sometimes labelled “programmification” of HE (SOU, 2015:70). Amnéus and Fredman (2024) find that the performance-based indicators for funding lead universities to prioritise full-time degree programmes. Börjesson et al. (2019) identify several other factors that may explain this development. Government authorities have emphasized the importance of performance rates and overall programme students demonstrate higher performance levels (UKÄ, 2020). Students enrolled in degree programmes tend to finish their studies to a larger extent than students enrolled in stand-alone courses. Since 2001, student financial support regulations have become stricter, with support beyond 12 semesters rarely granted, leading to a decline in the number of students taking stand-alone courses. The implementation of the Bologna reform in 2007/2008 also contributed, both by

creating more general degree programmes and by extending the length of some existing programmes, thereby requiring additional semesters of financial support (cf. also SOU, 2015:70). Students also tend to value degree programmes more highly than stand-alone courses not least for study-related social reasons (Lidegran et al., 2019). From an administrative perspective, degree programmes have been highlighted as easier to administer, though concerns have also been raised that programmification may come at the expense of liberal education, academic freedom, and the possibility of creating an individualised qualification (Börjesson et al., 2019). Finally, the quality and necessity of stand-alone courses have been questioned by the former Minister of Education arguing that resources should instead be allocated to programmes in engineering (Persson, 2024).

2.2 The educational offer of foreign languages in Swedish Higher Education

There is no official information as to how many different languages that are offered in Swedish Higher Education (HE). The exact number will depend on how foreign languages are defined. About ten years ago, Melander (2016) reported 60 different languages, a number which is also quoted in Alberius et al. (2017). Apart from some major languages, an individual foreign language is often offered at few or even a single Higher Education Institution (HEI). Melander (2016) found that 40 languages (out of 60) were offered at a single HEI and the majority of these are provided by Uppsala University.

Sweden has nearly 50 HEIs. In the academic year of 2024/25, about half of these reported having students in English or other foreign languages. As shown in Table 2, the number of HEIs reporting students in foreign languages have decreased during the period considered here (2007/08 – 2024/25). This is especially the case in other foreign languages than English.

Table 2 Number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) recording students in foreign languages at 1st and 2nd cycles

Foreign language	2007/08		2024/25	
	1 st cycle	2 nd cycle	1 st cycle	2 nd cycle
English	29	19	25	19
French	17	8	11	8
German	18	8	10	7
Spanish	18	9	12	9
Other LOTEs	16	6	11	6

In Swedish HE, foreign languages are mainly offered as stand-alone courses although degree programmes with foreign languages also exist. Consequently, the large majority of students of foreign languages are enrolled in stand-alone courses. About ten years ago, Alberius et al. (2017) estimated that 95% of all language students were enrolled in stand-alone courses while the average across HE was less than 30% of all students in 2013 (SOU 2015:70, p. 117). So far, the offer of foreign language first-cycle education has not been affected by programmification to any large extent. However, in the wake of the Bologna reform, a number of programmes with foreign languages were created at the second cycle (Master's programmes) (Börjesson et al., 2019, p. 27).

In addition to stand-alone course, foreign languages are included in different degree programmes. Two broad types of degree programmes can be identified, each with some subtypes:

1. Programmes leading to a general qualification (Bachelor or Masters)

The programmes included in this category can have a focus on a) specific languages (e.g. Bachelor programme in Japanese, Lund University or in Arabic, Stockholm University), b)

more broadly on linguistics (e.g. Bachelor's Programme in Languages at Uppsala University), c) more broadly on literature (e.g. Master's programme on Literature-Culture-Media at Lund University) or d) combining foreign languages with subject areas from e.g. social sciences or Humanities (e.g. Bachelor programme Language and politics at Linneaus University or, Bachelor's and Master's programme in European Studies Lund University)

Each subtype has a varying degree of focus on foreign languages. Both first-cycle and second-cycle programmes exist.

2. Programmes leading to a professional qualification (e.g. Degree of Bachelor/Master of Science in Engineering, Degree of Master of Science in Business and Economics)

The programmes leading to a professional qualification typically include foreign languages when the programme is offered with an international specialisation (e.g. International Business and Economics Programme, Linköping University). Both first cycle and second cycle programmes exist.

2.3 Measures in Higher Education during the pandemic

Soon after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government took initiatives to expand HE by increasing funding allocations (Government bill, 2019/20:99). The aim of these measures was to meet an expected rising demand for education during the pandemic, against the backdrop of deteriorating labour market conditions. Several temporary and permanent increases in funding for 1st and 2nd cycle education were implemented, with a particular focus on the period 2020–2022. Measures were introduced early in the pandemic; in April 2020, the government proposed additional special funding for universities and colleges in the spring supplementary budget (Government bill, 2019/20:99). Further expansions were introduced in the summer and in the 2021 budget.

Table 3 Full-time equivalents and study forms across HE before and during the pandemic (UKÄ, 2020, p. 26)²

Study forms	2019	2020	2021	Change 2019-2021	Percent
Stand-alone courses	69,690	77,740	77,920	8,230	12 %
General qualifications programme	91,030	96,670	100,960	9,930	11 %
Professional qualifications programmes	139,720	144,010	147,290	7,570	5 %

The National Higher Education Authority followed up on the Government's measures in a report from 2022 (UKÄ, 2022). As can be seen in Table 3, the result of these measures was that student numbers grew across all study forms between 2019 and 2021, with the largest increases in stand-alone courses and in general qualifications programmes. Professional qualifications programmes also expanded, though to a lesser extent. Women accounted for the majority of this growth: 71 percent of the 25,900 additional full-time equivalent students were women, leading to a rise in the overall proportion of women in HE to 61 percent (UKÄ, 2022). The difference in gender was consistent across all study forms.

2.4 Rationale and research questions

Swedish Higher Education (HE) has gone through major changes over the last decades. The last 30 years has seen an increased focus on marketisation, internationalisation and employability. Moreover, we have recently lived through a global pandemic with far reaching consequences for

HE. Against this backdrop, we are interested in understanding how foreign languages have fared in HE since the introduction of the Bologna reform in 2007/2008. Two main research questions guided the present study:

1. How have the Full-time equivalents (FTEs) and Annual performance equivalents (APEs) developed for English, French, German and Spanish and other LOTEs since 2007/2008?
 - a. Are there differences with respect to study forms (e.g. stand-alone courses and qualifications programmes)?
 - b. Are there differences with respect to educational level (1st and 2nd cycle)?
 - c. Are there differences with respect to gender and/or age groups?
2. How were the Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) and the Annual Performance Equivalents (APEs) affected by the Covid-19 pandemic?

3. Method and data

The data for the present study come from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) but is collected by Statistics Sweden on a yearly basis. The database *Högskolan i siffror* (Higher Education in numbers) has been used to extract data on Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) and Annual Performance Equivalents (APEs) (see below for definitions).³

The analyses have included data from 39 subjects in the database (cf. Appendix Table 1). 34 of these subjects correspond to individual foreign languages. The remaining five subjects in the database combine two or more languages (i.e. *Aramaic/Syriac*, *Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian*) or subjects where languages are part of the studies (i.e. *Indology and Sanskrit*, *Multilingual-oriented subjects*). Finally, the database contains the subject *Other languages* which includes an unknown number of different languages. The subjects *Swedish*, *Swedish as a second language* and *General linguistics* have been excluded from the analyses.

For the purpose of this study, the 39 foreign language subjects have been grouped into three language groups (number of subjects in the database in parenthesis):

- English (1)
- French, German & Spanish (3)
- All other LOTEs (35)

There are several reasons for this grouping. First, English has as a foreign language a special status in the Swedish educational system and in Swedish society (Mežek, 2024). English is obligatory from school year 3 at the latest. English is also by far the most studied foreign language in HE and included in more degree programmes than any other foreign language. During the period considered here, English alone represents between 37–42% of the total number of FTEs and between 42–45% of the APEs. Second, French, German & Spanish are the main second foreign languages in lower- and upper-secondary school. Compulsory schools are required to offer at least two out the three languages (Swedish School Ordinance, 2011). Together, the three languages represent between 24–28% of the total number of FTEs and 22–28% of the APEs. The remaining group of languages labelled Other LOTEs include languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Italian but also minority languages such as Sami and Finnish. This group of languages represent 30–39% of the total number of FTEs and between 27–35% of the APEs.

At the level of individual subjects (e.g. languages), the database allows for the following search variables:

Indicators

- Full-Time Equivalents (FTE)
 - 1 FTE corresponds to a full-time student's annual enrolment, defined as 60 higher education credits (ECTS) per academic year.
- Annual Performance Equivalents (APE)
 - 1 APE corresponds to 60 successfully completed ECTS during one academic year.

Based on the two indicators above a performance rate for a given academic year can be calculated by dividing the total number of APEs with the total number of FTEs.

Education level

- 1st cycle
- 2nd cycle

Study forms

- Stand-alone courses
- General qualifications programmes
- Professional qualifications programmes

Students

- Gender
- Age groups
 - Below 24 years
 - Between 25-34 years
 - Above 35 years

Data are included for each academic year from 2007/08 until 2024/25.⁴

4. Findings

In this section we will report the findings beginning with the Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) and then with the Annual Performance Equivalents (APE).

The total number of FTEs in Swedish HE has increased over the period considered here (cf. Figure 1 below). In 2007/08, the total number of FTEs in Swedish HE was 275,616 and 329,370 in 2023/24, an increase of 16%. There are two notable periods of increase: one in 2009/10 following the economic crisis and one in 2020/21 following the outburst of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the same period, the total number of FTEs in foreign languages (39 subjects) increased from 11,190 in 2007/08 to 11,477 in 2023/24, an increase of about 2%. This means that the proportion of foreign language FTEs has decreased from about 4% of the total number of FTEs in 2007/08 to about 3,5% in 2023/24.

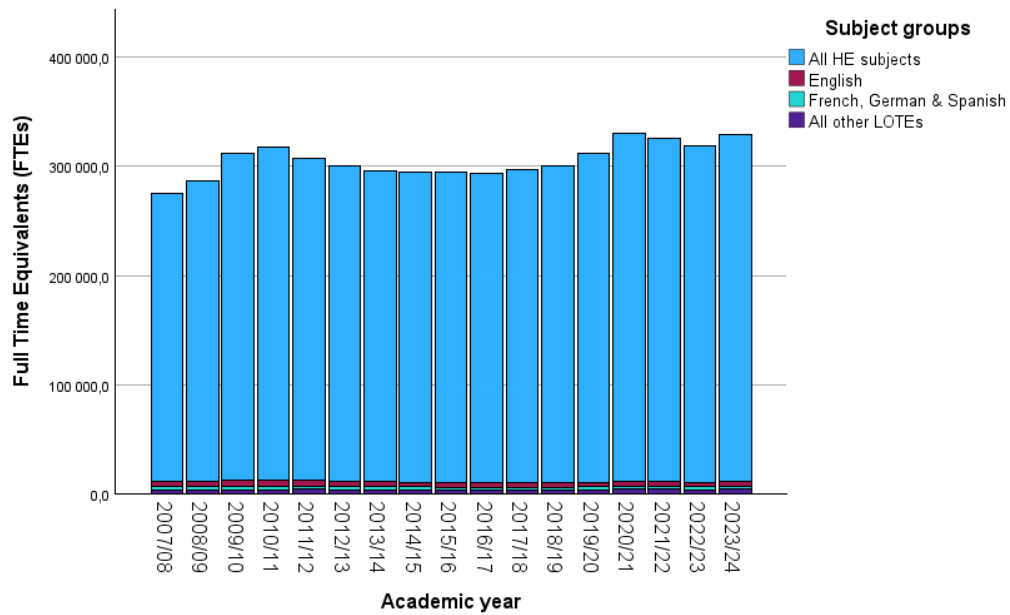


Figure 1 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) in Swedish Higher Education per academic year

Figure 2 below shows the development of FTEs for the three respective foreign language groups. Data from both 1st and 2nd cycle are included in the figure. The number of FTEs has dropped with about 12% in English when the beginning (2007/08) and the end (2024/25) are compared and with 22% from the peak in 2009/10. For French, German and Spanish, the decline is 9% since 2007/08 and 16% from the peak in 2011/12. The group of Other LOTEs, comprising 35 different subjects, has seen the reversed trend with an increase of 21% in FTEs when the endpoints of the series are compared. It is also interesting to note that the peak for this group of languages occurred in 2024/25 with 4,596 FTEs. Approximately half of the total number of FTEs in this group stem from five foreign languages: Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Russian and Arabic which in 2024/25 each had a nearly equal number of FTEs (approximately 470–480 FTEs). The trend is that Arabic has grown whereas both Japanese and Chinese saw peaks in the beginning of the 2010s followed by declines.

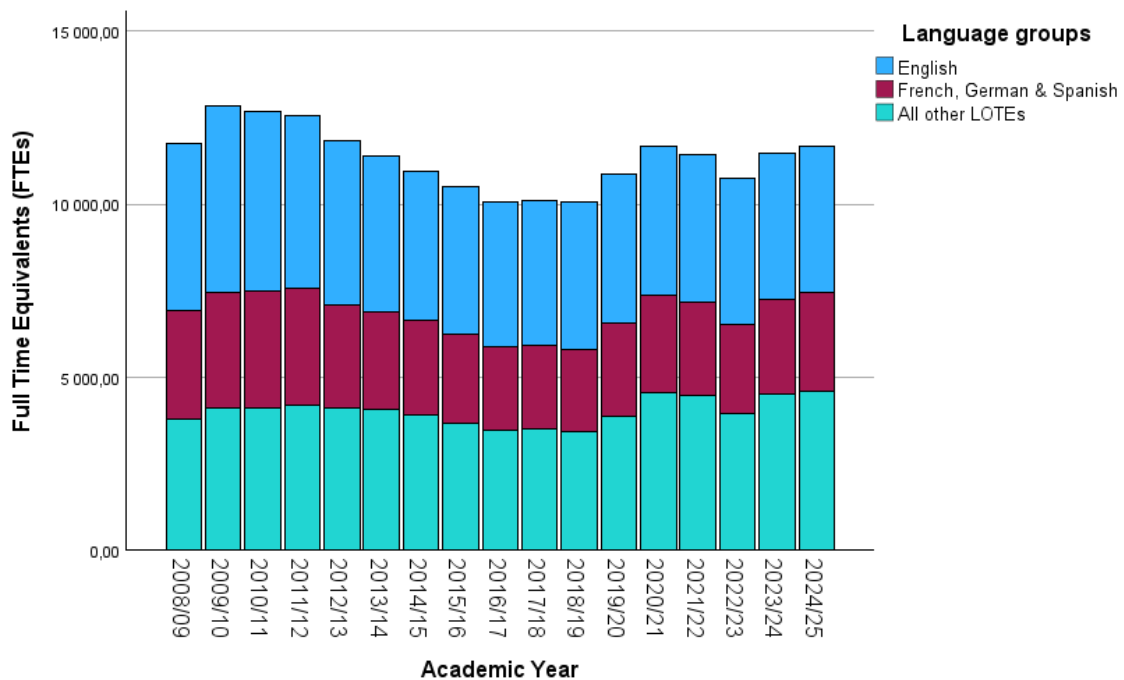


Figure 2 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) for foreign languages in Swedish Higher Education per academic year

Next, we look at FTEs in relation to study forms, i.e. stand-alone courses and qualifications programmes. Figure 3 below shows that there are differences among the three language groups. In English there has been an important decrease in FTEs in stand-alone courses from 3,742 FTEs at the peak in 2009/10 to 2,278 in 2024/25 (i.e. 39% decrease). This accounts for the overall decrease in FTEs that was observed above (cf. Figure 2). At the same time there has been an increase in English FTEs registered within professional qualifications programmes (40%). A little more than a third of all FTEs in English are currently registered with these types of programmes (stand-alone courses account for 54% and general qualifications programmes for 11%).

The group of languages French, German and Spanish has seen the reversed development. FTEs registered within professional qualifications programmes have decreased with 62% and accounts in 2024/25 for less than 6% of the total number of FTEs in these languages. The decrease in general qualifications programmes is 55% and totals less than 90 FTEs in 2024/25. Instead, the FTEs in stand-alone courses are approximately the same when the endpoints of the series are compared. In the group of other LOTEs, more than 90% of the FTEs come from stand-alone courses across the period. The FTEs in stand-alone courses have increased with nearly 25% since 2007/08.

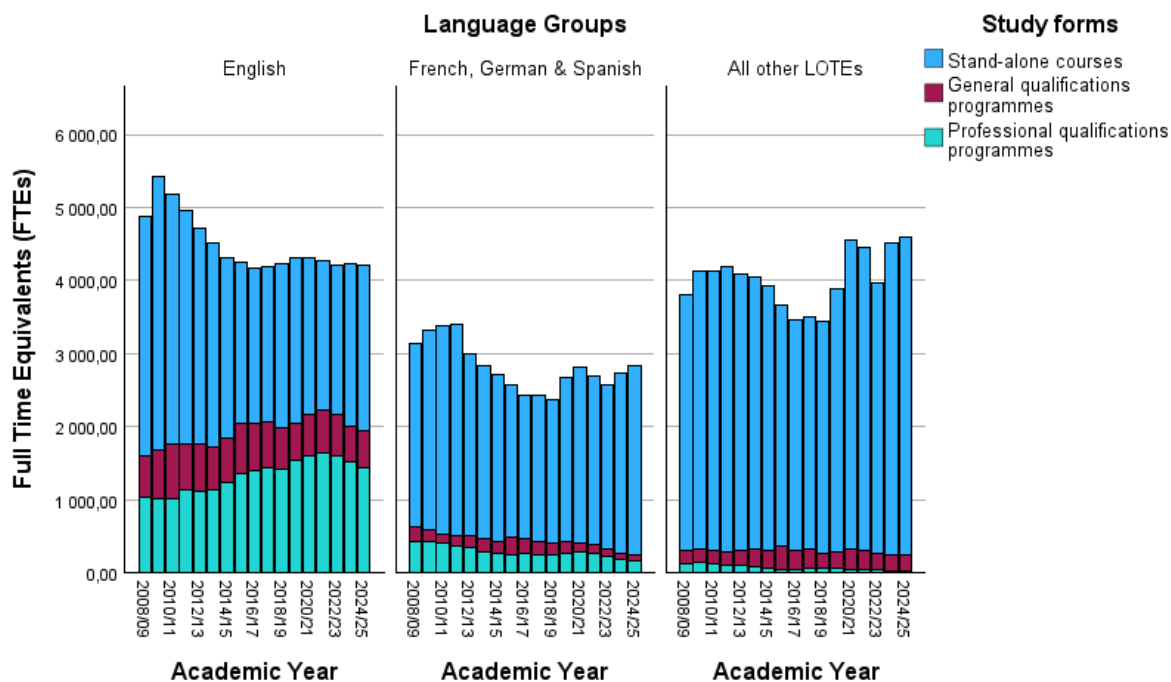


Figure 3 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) in foreign languages in relation to study forms

Looking more closely at the academic years before and during the pandemic, a couple of interesting observations can be made (cf. Table 4).

Table 4 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) and study forms in foreign languages before and during the pandemic

	Study forms	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Change 2018/19 – 2020/21	Percent
English	Stand-alone courses	2,240	2,278	2134	-106	-5
	General QP	568	508	583	15	3
	Professional QP	1,420	1,534	1,593	173	12
French, German & Spanish	Stand-alone courses	1,976	2,245	2,411	435	22
	General QP	161	160	129	-32	-20
	Professional QP	239	271	284	45	19
All Other LOTEs	Stand-alone courses	3,175	3,585	4,232	1057	33
	General QP	211	237	270	59	28
	Professional QP	56	56	47	-9	-16

Legend: QP = qualifications programme

In French, German and Spanish and in the group Other LOTEs, the effect of the pandemic is visible in the stand-alone FTEs. The 2020/21 figures showed an increase of nearly 22 and 33% respectively compared to prior to the pandemic. In English, the pandemic affected the professional qualifications programmes with an increase of 12%. The stand-alone courses decreased slightly during the same period.

Looking next at the language groups and FTEs in relation to study level (1st and 2nd cycle), Figure 4 shows that both the total number and the proportion of FTEs in English and the group French, German and Spanish at the 1st cycle have dropped. In English, the 2nd cycle FTEs have increased from 5,7% in 2008/09 (277 FTEs) of the total number of FTEs in English to 8,8% in 2024/25 (370 FTEs), but the proportional increase is mostly due to the decrease of FTEs at the 1st cycle during the same period.

In French, German and Spanish, the number and proportion of FTEs at the 2nd cycle peaked in 2012/13 with 135 FTEs (4,5% of the total number of FTEs) and has since then steadily decreased. Finally, the group of all other foreign languages labelled Other LOTEs (35 subjects) has seen an increase in FTEs at both 1st and 2nd cycle. However, compared to HE in general, the proportions of FTEs at the 2nd cycle in foreign languages, including English, are small. In Swedish HE, there has been an increase from 17% (2007/08) to 22% (2023/24) 2nd cycle FTEs of the total number of FTEs during the period.

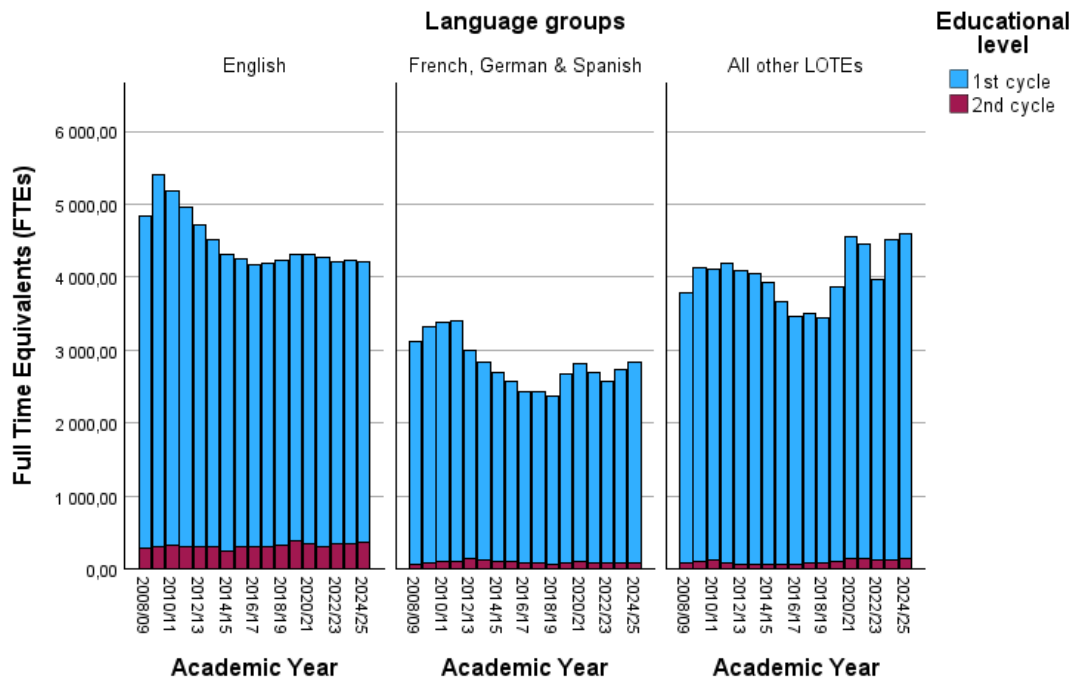


Figure 4 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) for foreign languages in relation to educational level

Next, we look at the age and gender variables in relation to FTEs in the three language groups. Figure 5 shows that in all three language groups there has been a decline in students in the youngest age group, below 25 years. The decrease is the highest in French, German and Spanish with 41% (from 1,736 FTEs in 2007/08 to 1,030 FTEs in 2024/25) followed by English with a 28% decrease. The age group with the largest increase is the group above 34 years. In the group of Other LOTEs the increase is 66% (from 847 FTEs to 1,403 FTEs). In French, Spanish and German the increase is 59% from 2007/08 to 2024/25 and in English 36%. In the groups Other LOTEs and in French, Spanish and German the total number of FTEs were approximately evenly distributed between the three age groups in the academic year of 2024/25.

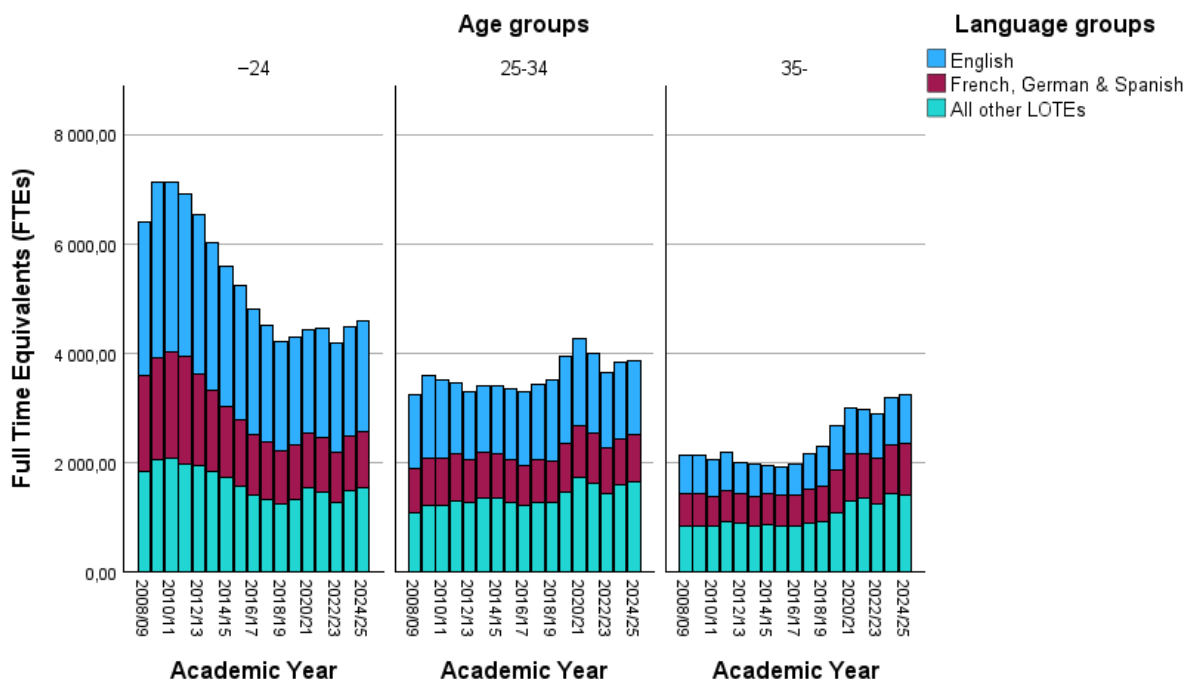


Figure 5 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) for foreign languages in relation to age groups

With respect to gender there have been little change over the period considered here. About two thirds of the students in English and in French, German and Spanish are women whereas in the other LOTEs women represent about 60% of the students.

When turning finally to APEs, results are by and large the same as for FTEs with two peaks in the academic years of 2009/10 and 2020/21. However, the decline after the second peak seems to be sharper than for FTEs. We will return to this observation in the discussion.

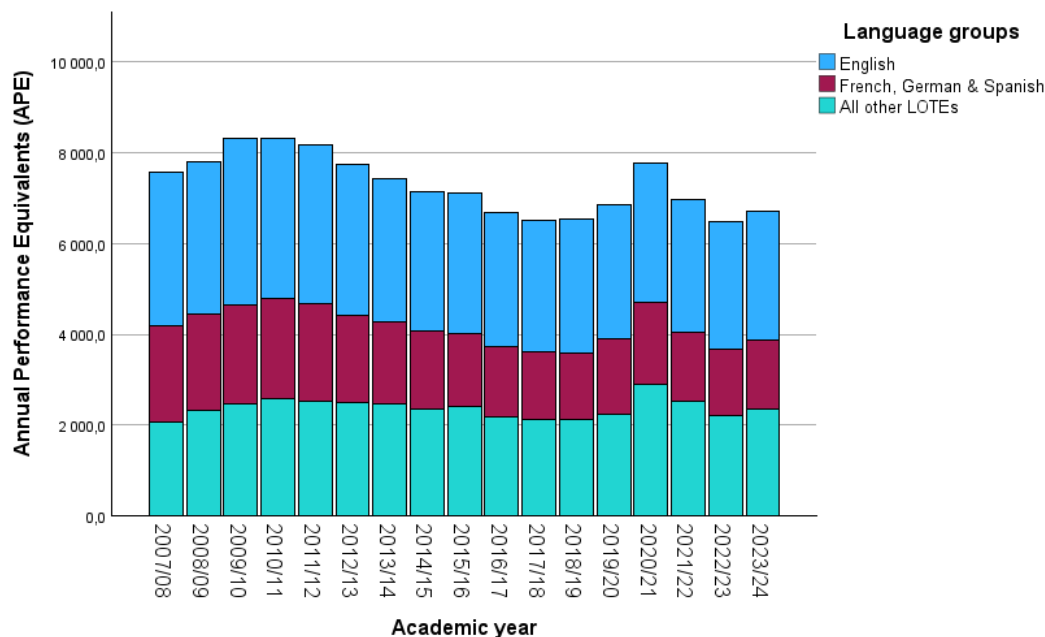


Figure 6 Annual Performance Equivalents (APE) for foreign languages per academic year

By dividing the total number of APEs with the total number of FTEs a performance rate can be computed for a given academic year. Figure 7 below shows the performance rate for the three language groups.

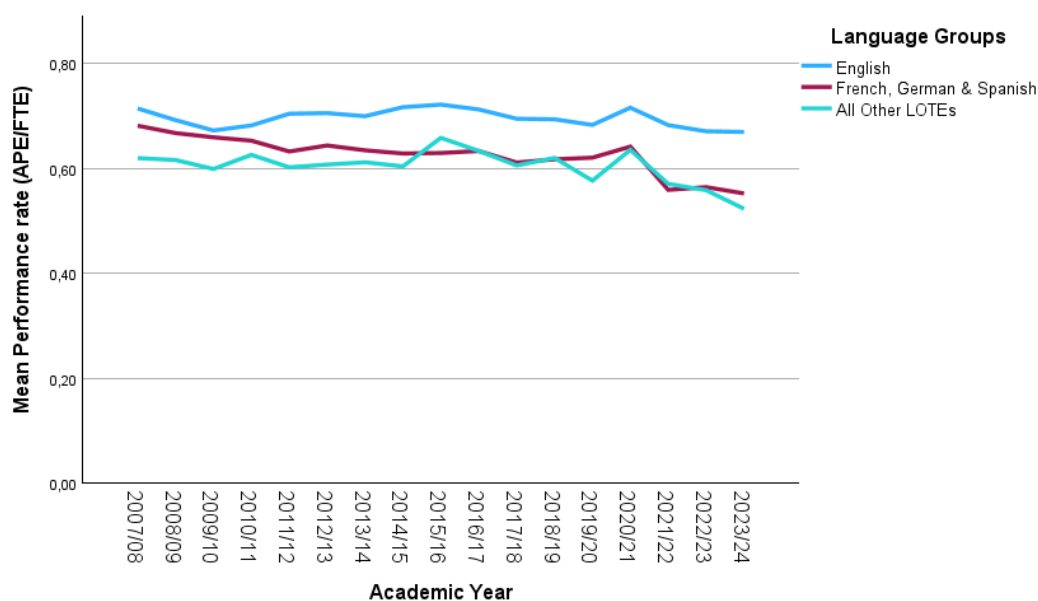


Figure 7 Mean performance rate for foreign languages per academic year

The students in English have the highest performance rate. This rate is rather stable at around 70% over the period. In French, German and Spanish the rate was stable around 63–65% up until 2019/20 when there was a sharp decline to around 55% in 2020/21. A similar trend can be seen in the group of other LOTEs. Looking into more detail, performance rates are generally higher at the 2nd cycle compared to 1st cycle (means for English 76% vs 68%; French, German & Spanish, 70% vs 61%; Other LOTEs 73% vs 59%). With respect to age groups, the rates differ between language groups. In English, the highest rates are clearly found among the youngest students (mean across the period 74% for below 25 years; 66% for 25–34; 60% for 35 years and above) whereas the differences are smaller in the two other language groups. Interestingly, the decrease in performance rates in the academic year 2020/21 is the highest in the age group 25–34 in both French, German and Spanish and in the Other LOTEs group. We return to this observation in the discussion.

5. Discussion

The Swedish higher education (HE) system has undergone transformations since the implementation of the Bologna reform nearly two decades ago. This study has examined how student volumes and performance outcomes in foreign language subjects have developed during this period (Research Question 1), with particular attention to changes during the Covid-19 pandemic (Research Question 2).

Regarding the first research question, our findings show that although the overall volume of Swedish HE has continued to expand, enrolments in most foreign language studies have declined. With the exception of certain languages—most notably Arabic—the number and proportion of full-time equivalents (FTEs) are generally lower today than at the time of the Bologna reform in 2007/2008. French, German, and Spanish—the major modern foreign languages in the Swedish school system—together with English have experienced declines of roughly 10–12% and 15–20% respectively compared to their peak levels during the period considered here.

A comparison across language groups reveals that these declines have not followed the same pattern. In English, the decrease is concentrated in first-cycle stand-alone courses, particularly among younger students under the age of 24. At the same time, English has expanded within professional qualifications programmes. The opposite pattern appears for French, German, and Spanish: the decline is primarily attributable to reduced enrolments in professional qualifications programmes, while enrolments have increased in stand-alone courses, especially among students aged 34 and older.

In relation to French, German, and Spanish, it is sometimes suggested that the decline in Higher Education (HE) is due to a corresponding decline in interest and uptake at the secondary school level with respect to these subjects. However, as our previous research has shown (Granfeldt et al., 2021), this is not the case. Instead, data on uptake in modern languages (i.e. mainly French, German, and Spanish) in lower secondary school show a steady and significant increase since the introduction of grade point average enhancement credits (Sw. *meritpoäng*). It is highly probable that more students than ever before study a LOTE in secondary school (cf. also National Agency for Education, 2018). It is clear from the present study, however, that this increase in uptake at the secondary level has not resulted in a corresponding increase in enrolment in LOTEs in HE.

These findings from the present study align with earlier observations regarding the “programmification” of Swedish HE (SOU 2015:70). They indicate that whereas programmes including English have grown, programmes including other foreign languages have become fewer and/or less popular. The results are also consistent with broader trends in Swedish HE showing that younger students tend to prefer degree programmes, whereas much of the increase in French,

German, Spanish, and Other LOTEs comes from older students, possibly studying these languages as part of lifelong learning.

The data also show that the volume of second-cycle education in foreign languages remains very small compared to Swedish HE overall. For French, German, and Spanish, there was a modest increase in second-cycle FTEs in the early 2010s, followed by a decline to very low levels. In practice, this means that only a small number of students pursue these languages beyond three semesters. When the three-cycle degree structure was introduced through the Bologna reform, many HEIs established cross-disciplinary master's programmes combining shared courses (typically taught in English) with subject-specific specialisation courses. The present findings suggest that these programmes have not succeeded in attracting students to LOTEs.

Turning to the second research question, the government responded to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019/20 by increasing HE funding. This contributed to a general rise in student volumes in the subsequent years, particularly in stand-alone courses and general qualifications programmes. For foreign languages, however, the patterns is different in English compared to other languages. In English, the number of FTEs in stand-alone courses decreased slightly, whereas substantial increases (20–30%) were observed in French, German, and Spanish, and especially in the group of other LOTEs. In both of these groups, the pandemic marked the end of a long period of decline in FTEs (at both first- and second-cycle), a decline that had begun in the early 2010s. Interestingly, these higher levels of enrolment have remained, and in some cases further increased, since the end of the pandemic.

Although FTEs increased in French, German, Spanish, and other LOTEs during the pandemic, performance rates declined sharply, from around 63–65% to approximately 55%. No comparable decline occurred in English. This result is consistent with the well-established pattern of lower performance rates in stand-alone courses. Since the increase in FTEs in the two language groups occurred mainly within stand-alone courses, the drop in performance rates is expected. The largest decrease occurred among students aged 25–34, a group that may include individuals who took up language studies temporarily when the labour market contracted.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to examine how foreign language education in Swedish higher education has developed since the implementation of the Bologna reform in 2007/2008, with particular attention to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reveal a long-term decline in the volume of foreign language studies, despite an overall growth in Swedish higher education during the same period. Except for a few subjects such as Arabic, most foreign languages—especially French, German, Spanish, and even English—now register fewer full-time equivalents than in 2008. However, the decline has affected language groups differently. English has contracted primarily in first-cycle stand-alone courses while expanding within professional qualifications programmes, whereas French, German and Spanish have declined most sharply in such programmes but have grown modestly in stand-alone courses, particularly among the oldest students.

The analysis also shows that second-cycle study volumes in foreign languages have remained very small across languages. Cross-disciplinary master's programmes introduced after the Bologna reform have not succeeded in attracting students to foreign languages, especially in other languages than English, resulting in very few students studying foreign languages at advanced levels.

The pandemic period resulted in further shifts. While the government investments in higher education led to increased enrolments overall, the effects for foreign languages differed between language groups. English saw only minor changes, but other languages experienced substantial growth in full-time equivalents, especially in stand-alone courses. Remarkably, this increase has persisted beyond the pandemic. At the same time, performance rates fell in French, German, Spanish, and in the group of other LOTEs.

Overall, the results highlight the vulnerability of foreign language subjects in a higher education system increasingly oriented toward employability and qualifications programmes. They also point to a growing divide between English and other foreign languages, both in programme structures and student pathways. As academic subjects, foreign languages are under pressure. Future policy development will need to address how the Swedish higher education system can sustain a diverse linguistic offering, support progression beyond the first cycle, and ensure that smaller language subjects can survive in an increasingly marketised higher education landscape.

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Appendice

Foreign language subjects (39) included in the analyses

Swedish name	English translation
Arabiska	Arabic
Arameiska/syriska	Aramaic/Syriac
Bosniska/kroatiska/serbiska	Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian
Bulgariska	Bulgarian
Danska	Danish
Engelska	English
Estniska	Estonian
Finska	Finnish
Flerspråkigt inriktade ämnen	Multilingual-oriented subjects
Franska	French
Grekiska	Greek
Hebreiska	Hebrew
Hindi	Hindi
Indologi och sanskrit	Indology and Sanskrit
Indonesiska	Indonesian
Italienska	Italian
Japanska	Japanese
Kinesiska	Chinese
Koreanska	Korean
Kurdiska	Kurdish
Latin	Latin
Lettiska	Latvian
Litauiska	Lithuanian
Nederländska	Dutch
Nygrekiska	Modern Greek

Persiska	Persian
Polska	Polish
Portugisiska	Portuguese
Rumänska	Romanian
Ryska	Russian
Samiska	Sámi
Spanska	Spanish
Swahili	Swahili
Teckenspråk	Sign Language
Tibetanska	Tibetan
Tjeckiska	Czech
Tyska	German
Ungerska	Hungarian
Övriga språk	Other languages

Endnotes

¹ University of Leicester: <https://www.change.org/p/save-modern-languages-courses-at-the-university-of-leicester>; University of Nottingham: <https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-removal-of-modern-languages-courses-at-the-university-of-nottingham>

² The fourth type of study form, Programmes in the fine, performing and visual arts, is not included since they rarely include foreign languages.

³ <https://www.uka.se/vara-resultat/statistik/hogskolan-i-siffror>. Data was extracted at different timepoints during November 2025.

⁴ When the data were retrieved from the database in November 2025, FTE figures were available for 2024/25, whereas APE data were only available up to 2023/24.