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# Closing doors: Universities restructuring their language training programs

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HELSINKIN YLIOPISTO  
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI



# Itä-Suomen yliopisto lopettaa saksan pääaineopetuksen

Karsintaa perustellaan hakijoiden vähentymisellä ja työnjoella.



## Uni wird sprachlos

Akademischer Senat schließt Sprach-Studiengänge und will Entgelt für die Nutzung des Fremdsprachenzentrums

19.2.2004 0:00 Uhr

University to suspend music and language courses

3 days ago

Liam Barnes  
East Midlands



33 CAMPUS • UNIVERSITÉS

## Facs d'allemand cherchent étudiants désespérément

En trois ans, cinq universités ont fermé leur département d'allemand. Le nombre d'étudiants de civilisation germaniques a chuté de 25 %.  
Par Soazig Le Nevé (envoyée spéciale à Rennes et à Strasbourg)  
Publié le 10 novembre 2019 à 05h00, modifié le 12 novembre 2019 à 13h53 - 0 Lecture 4 min.

TYY: Venäjän kielestä luopuminen heikentää monialaisuutta – yhteistyön sijaan yliopistot kannustettiin oppaineekauppoihin  
of the University of Turku, 9.6.2010

teilen  
Comments Forum Recensies Radio & TV

Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam schrapt opleiding Nederlands  
Inzicht in onze cultuur en geschiedenis verdwijnt  
Wout Patyn - 30/3/2019 - Leestijd 5 minuten

Vaasan yliopisto aikoo luopua tutkintoon tähtäävästä kielipinnoista ja siirtää ne Jyväskylään

Yliopistot aikovat esittää opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriölle, että Vaasan yliopiston tutkintoon johtava kielten opetus siirrettäisiin Jyväskylän yliopistoon ensi vuoden elokuussa.



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# Structure of the presentation

- Project presentation (Leena)
- Data & methods (Leena)
- Preliminary quantitative results (Philipp)
- Preliminary qualitative results (Ulrike)
- Summary: Universities as language makers (Ulrike)

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## Ongoing project (2024-) [doors.ugent.be](http://doors.ugent.be)

**Closing and opening doors: Universities restructuring their language training programs**

- Language education (and science) policy within higher education in Europe
  - **Closures** of university language training programs / severe downsizing of their resources
  - **Openings: start of new** language training programs / allocation of major new resources for language training
- Online questionnaire
- Team:
  - Prof. **Leena Kolehmainen** (University of Helsinki), Prof. **Philipp Krämer** (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Prof. **Ulrike Vogl** (Ghent University)
  - Research assistants: **Alicja Kiełpińska** (University of Helsinki) and **Zeki Bostan** (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

# Why this matters

- Language making:
  - Universities as language makers
  - ~ as agents contributing to the creation, reconfirmation or redrawing of linguistic units, their borders and value

INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
THE SOCIOLOGY  
OF LANGUAGE

Volume 2022, Special Issue 274:  
***Language Making.*** Issue editors:  
Philipp Krämer, Ulrike Vogl and  
Leena Kolehmainen

## Higher education in languages ➔

- language experts
  - teachers, translators, interpreters, researchers, language technology, language and translation policy, linguistic accessibility in the society
- a deep understanding of languages, people and cultures
- understanding of worldviews: how people perceive and structure the world
- cultural exchange
- international collaboration
- language expertise for specialised work in other fields
- economic sustainability (e.g. international trade)
- health security
- national and international security, peace work, and diplomacy

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# Data collection

Where?  
Which languages?  
Why?  
How?  
Consequences?

## The online survey

- Published in December 2024, still open
- Closed and open questions
  - closures of university language training programs and major reductions in programs
  - new openings of university language training
- From 2000 onwards (including planned changes in the future)
- European universities
- Distributed via *Linguist List*, social media (*Facebook*, *LinkedIn*, *Bluesky*), SLE newsletter, email lists, personal contacts
- So far 107 answers for universities in 14 European countries



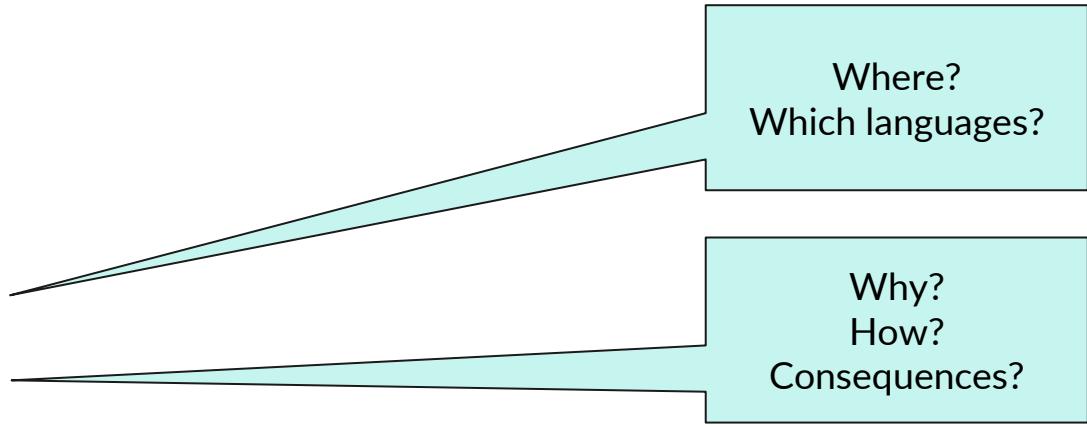
<https://elomake.helsinki.fi/lomakkeet/132773/lomake.html>

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# Methodology

Quantitative analysis

Qualitative analysis



- (critical) discourse analysis
- metadiscourses: “echoing”, reporting on and recycling previous discourses

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# Results

# Quantitative results

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Languages mentioned for reductions or discontinuations of teaching offers on all levels:

39 individual languages or language clusters

Arabic	English	Japanese	Romanian
Armenian	Estonian	Korean	Russian
Azeri	Finnish	Kurdish	Sanskrit
Bosnian	French	Latin	Slavistics
Celtic	Frisian	Latvian	Slovak
Chinese	Georgian	Lithuanian	Slovenian
Classical languages	German	Macedonian	Sorbian
Croatian and Serbian	Greek	Norwegian	South Slavic
Czech	Hebrew	Picard	Spanish
Danish	Hindi	Polish	Swedish
Dutch	Italian	Portuguese	Urdu

# Quantitative results

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Languages most frequently mentioned for reductions or discontinuations of teaching offers on all levels:

number of cases reported

Language	Count
German	19
Italian	18
French	15
Spanish	11
Russian	9
Chinese	7
Dutch	7
English	6
Latin	6
Greek	6
Arabic	6
Portuguese	5

# Quantitative results

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Reductions or discontinuations of language-related programmes  
number of cases reported

Type	Reductions	Discontinuations
Bachelor	13	47
Bachelor (minor)	7	26
Master	11	33
Master (minor)	4	13
Language Course or other	11	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>135</b>

# Quantitative results

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Discontinuations of language-related academic staff positions  
number of cases reported

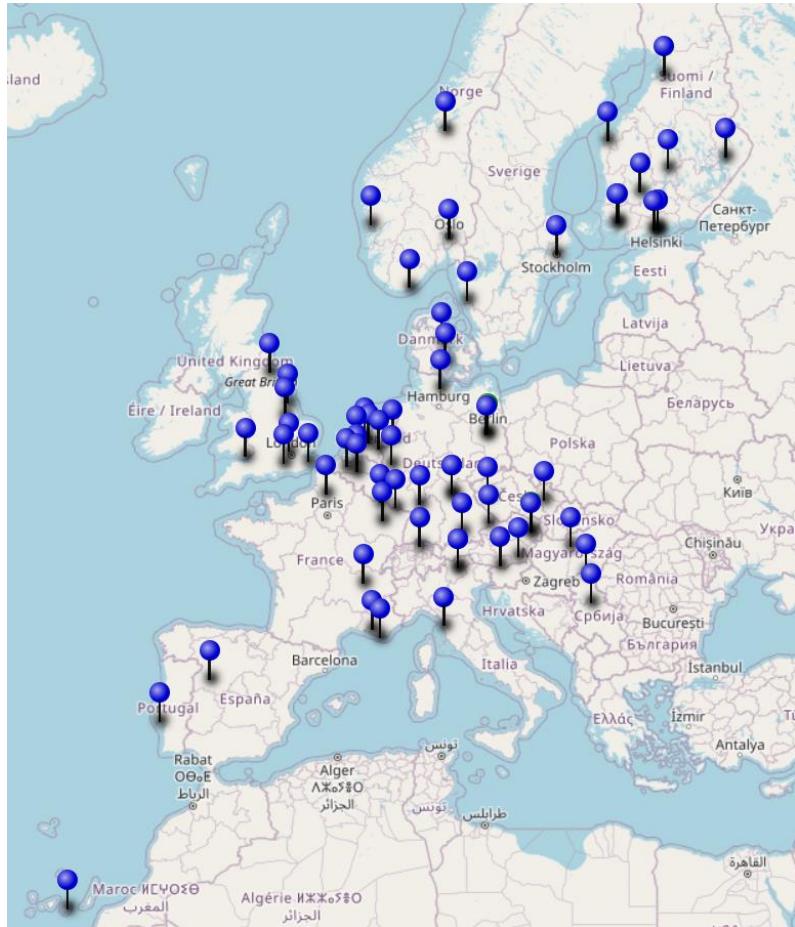
<i>Type of Position</i>	<i>Count</i>
Lecturer position (language instruction and/or academic work)	31
Professor position	16
Postdoctoral position	5
Postgraduate / PhD position	5
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>

# Quantitative results

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Geographic spread of programme and/or staff reductions and discontinuations

1 pin = 1 university

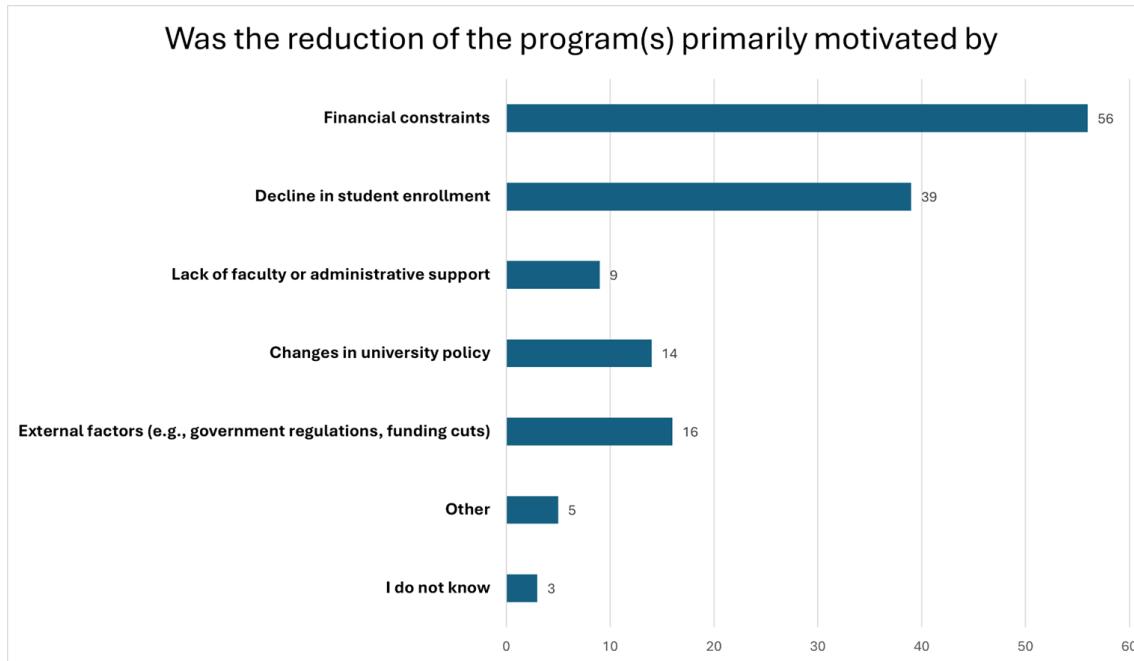


# Quantitative results

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Quantitative: reasons for reductions and discontinuations

Number of cases that match given categories



# Opening doors

Albanian	Luxembourghish
Arabic	Portuguese
Chinese	Romanian
Dutch	Russian
English	Spanish
Estonian	Ukrainian

Languages mentioned for new teaching offers on all levels:  
12 individual languages

New creations of language-related offers in universities  
number of cases reported

Type	Openings
Bachelor	6
Bachelor (minor)	5
Master	10
Master (minor)	3
Language course	4
Other	4

New creations of positions  
number of cases reported

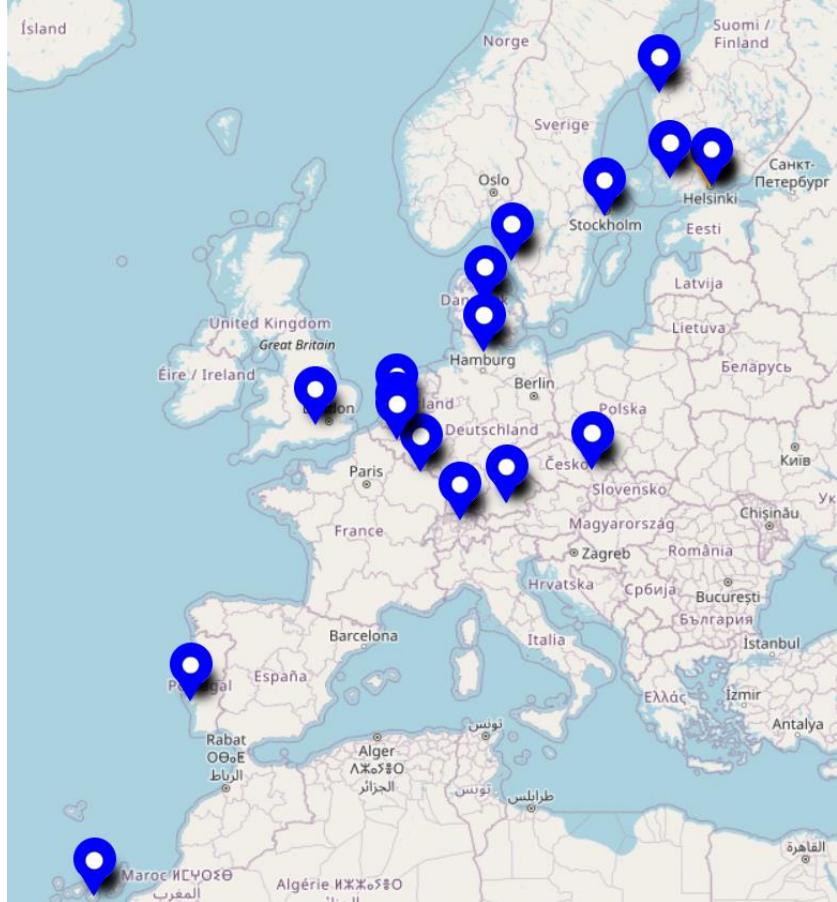
Type of Position	Count
Professor	4
Postdoctoral	1
Postgraduate/PhD	2
Lecturer	5
Other	3

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# Opening doors

Geographic spread of newly created teaching offers or positions

1 pin = 1 university



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# Qualitative results: How are languages & language programs represented?

# Languages as something small

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## Small in speaker numbers

The smallness of the language itself is emphasized, e.g., languages spoken by few people or seen as regionally limited. The focus is on perceived demographic insignificance of the language.

*No more 'small' languages, some don't exist anymore on university level (BE-XX)*

*Applicant and student numbers in all 'small' languages are low, and in practice, more cuts are possible also in the future. (FIN-XX)*

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## Small in student numbers

low student enrolment or recruitment is emphasized

*No more enrollment by students, only 2 or 3 students per year (BE-XX)*

*Der Landesrechnungshof in Baden-Württemberg hatte die Schließung mehrerer Standorte im Bundesland gefordert, da vor allem die Absolventenzahlen zu niedrig waren (in XX nur ca. 13 Studierende pro Jahr), und damit die Kosten pro Studienplatz zu hoch. (DE-XX)*

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## Lack of suitable staff

respondents mention the absence, retirement, or scarcity of qualified teachers or researchers

*Discontinuation was possible due to the retirement of the majority of the staff involved. (BE-XX)*

*South-Eastern European Studies have not been opened for several years already, allegedly, due to a lack of "habilitated" staff (with the docent or professor titles) who is supposed to guarantee programmes' accreditation (we have an accreditation system for study programmes in Czechia). (CZ-XX)*

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## Analysis

- Recontextualization: the sociolinguistic term “small languages” moves into a new domain (university management)
- Reframing: “small language” is being redefined by shifting the underlying evaluation criteria
  - Originally: small = few speakers.
  - Now: small = few students or small = few staff.

→ reframing justifies institutional decisions

# Replaceability of languages

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## Mergeable or substitutable languages

when respondents suggest that languages can easily be grouped under broader categories (e.g., “Asian languages,” “Romance languages”), implying interchangeability and redundancy.

*The section Italian language and culture will stop in 2026-2027 when the new merged program (with French and Dutch) will start. (NL-XX)*

*All language-based degrees to be relaunched and replaced by a streamlined BA and MA offering - unclear what language offer will be a part of this new relaunch. (DK-XX)*

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## Diversity as fragmentation

when the diversity of language programs is framed negatively: as inefficient, fragmented, or an obstacle to streamlining and consolidation.

*At the same time, the rectorate (managed in two subsequent terms by people from medicine and natural sciences) seems to be irritated by a high number of small programmes (they call it pejoratively "fragmentation", although one can call the same thing "enriching diversity") and pushes for merger, which is very difficult when language teaching is involved (there are not "general language skills" for South Slavic, for example, that could be taught at the bachelor level with specializations as late as the master level - individual languages must be taught from the beginning of studies and in precisely small, not large, groups of students). (CZ-XX)*

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## Loss of independence through mergers

where a specific language program loses visibility or autonomy because it is merged into a larger disciplinary structure (e.g., Dutch folded into Germanic or European Studies), leading to a perceived loss of identity within integration.

*The status of the study Dutch Language and Literature is not independent anymore, therefore it is less visible. (HU-XX)*

*From 2025-26 entry, all individual course titles "with language" will be amalgamated into "with Modern Languages". Applicants search by keyword for French, Japanese etc will therefore not necessarily find the options so easily. (UK-XX)*

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## Analysis: Languages as bounded entities vs. mergeable units

Opponents of mergers perceive the merging of language programmes as the “erasure” of:

- linguistic identity (languages as historically grown, bounded entities)
- research traditions
- intellectual autonomy

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## Analysis: Languages as bounded entities vs. mergeable units

Merging several language programs into one administrative unit as a process of *erasure* (Irvine & Gal 2000):

→ distinctions collapse, institutional lines disappear, complexity is flattened

This institutional flattening mirrors a discursive flattening: the university constructs a category (“Germanic,” “Asian”) that overwrites historically-made distinctions.

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## Analysis: Languages as bounded entities vs. mergeable units

- *Iconization* (Irvine & Gal 2000): small programs become icons of disorder/inefficiency.
- *Fractal recursivity* (Irvine & Gal 2000): internal diversity of programmes (many languages) is interpreted as the same “problem structure” as fragmentation in the larger university organization (“complexity is always bad, order is good”)

# Languages as misfits

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## Languages as not timely (ideologically)

when respondents describe languages as outdated, unnecessary, or irrelevant in the current era

*“the ignorance of the meaning of language- and culture-based scholarship on the European countries other than the large ones (Britain, France, Germany,...) or those that are a scene of serious conflict (Ukraine) on the part of the management”*

*“And then there's Brexit...if we don't have free movement and we don't want foreigners in the UK, why would we need languages?”*



## Languages as not timely (economically)

when language programs are portrayed as financially unviable or not aligned with economic priorities. Mentions of costs, deficits, or arguments that funding should go to more “productive” or “profitable” areas

*However, the university has been cutting free Italian, French, and Spanish language courses for beginners (A1-A2 level) already in the winter term 2021-2022 due to financial constraints (AT-XX)*

*Students bring money and if there are too few students, it's not worth it for the university. (NO-XX)*

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## Languages as irretrievably lost

when a respondent frames the closure as a complete disappearance: no more teaching, no future students, the end of a language's academic presence. Often expressed with a tone of finality or lament ("no one can study X anymore").

*There will be no more Czech, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian in Norway (NO-XX)*

*If thus development continues, German as a subject might be lost completely in Norway - maybe with Oslo as an exception. (NO-XX)*

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## Analyse

- “Misfit” discourse: constructs languages as out of alignment with dominant political and economic regimes
- allows marginalization of language programs to feel common-sense
- dissenting voices counter this by invoking metaphors of loss, waste, and even death, thereby re-embedding languages in a humanistic value regime

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# Discussion

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# Universities as language makers: then & now

- 19th century: building languages as national subjects
  - Universities institutionalised national philologies: language + literature + culture
  - Languages became studyable packages aligned with emerging nation-states
  - Academic infrastructures built over centuries
- 21st century: Remaking languages through scarcity
  - Language programs reclassified as “small”, “non-strategic”, or “luxury” offerings
  - Small numbers become an icon: used to rationalise downsizing or closure of long-standing programs
  - Administrative logics (orderliness, efficiency, clusters) are mapped onto language offerings
- Tensions inside the institutions
  - Multiple internal actors voice resistance

- Counteracting the “small = luxury we can’t afford” discourse
  - How to reframe “smallness” as intellectual value, cultural infrastructure, and societal relevance rather than cost?
- Counteracting the “fragmentation → orderliness” discourse
  - How to resist managerial clustering narratives that flatten linguistic diversity into administrative tidiness?
- Counteracting the “misfit in times of crisis” discourse
  - How to challenge the idea that languages no longer matter in a world of crises, when in fact crises increase the need for multilingual, intercultural expertise?

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## Questions and input

- New closings or openings?
- How biased are our data, what is missing? How to complete the picture? Input needed!
- Are other disciplines concerned by closures to the same extent? Only in humanities and social sciences or also in STEM?
- How to avoid that universities use these tendencies as an argument for further cuts, pointing at a “general trend” they are following?

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