

Student Feedback - 2016 Yearlong Languages Courses

Executive Summary March 2017

"Learning a new language at any stage in one's life can be a challenge! As a language learner you have to be prepared to have-a-go and take risks....and for this you need to be in a learning environment which will support and encourage you, an environment where you feel safe. I have met some wonderful people through my classes- we support and encourage each other, and more importantly, we reflect on how far we have come on our Spanish learning journey. The combination of our tutor and the class members creates a motivating and inspiring teaching and learning environment"

Introduction

During 2016 written feedback was reintroduced for yearlong courses, of which the Language courses accounted for 46% of the yearlong program. Students in 31 Foreign Language courses (French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish) were electronically surveyed in November, with 283 members providing feedback, representing 74% of all enrolled students. As in the earlier 2010 survey, student feedback was extremely positive about the tutors/leaders professionalism in running the course, their enjoyment and many benefits derived.

"I have been a teacher myself, watched university seminars presented by trained and untrained teachers, and attended other language courses at CAE and U3A, and this course with its tutor, its involved class members and its venue and equipment runs rings around the lot"

Findings

Student Expectations and Outcomes from attending the course

Multiple factors prompted students to enrol in their particular language course. Respondents indicated that they enrolled predominantly because they wanted to deepen their skills and knowledge of the particular language and culture (77%), had a general interest in the area (48%) or the course was relevant to a personal goal or plan, such as travel or better communication with family and friends (40%). In this respect, language students appeared more focused in their enrolment purposes than the Humanities students surveyed in July 2016.

"I wanted to improve my knowledge about French history and learn more about the culture and politics. And to improve my language skills for a month's holiday in France"

"My goal is to revisit Italy at regular intervals so as to maintain contact with relatives, hence the need for language practice"

Importantly, with few exceptions the course very well met or exceeded their expectations (88%). Students reported significant intellectual and social benefits from their participation in the course.

The vast majority (96%) nominated the knowledge gained in the language and culture as an important outcome, with 68% also specifying the skills acquired and confidence gained in using these (45%).

"I think I have learned more this year about the living language and how it is used 'en France' than i did in all my years at secondary school where the teaching was geared to exams"

"The grammar has been so well explained that I understand it and feel motivated to use German in all kinds of situations, and feel confident that I can do so (at my level). I have also learnt a lot of useful vocabulary and facts about Germany"

Half (50%) reported being motivated and inspired by the tutor/other students and significantly over a half (55%) identified the companionship derived from course participation as a specific benefit be it within the class or friendships beyond.

Course Delivery

These core benefits to students clearly stemmed from the quality of the program delivered by individual tutors and group leaders. In particular students most valued the tutors dedication, extensive knowledge, skills and flexibility in running the course; plus the supportive class atmosphere and camaraderie developed throughout the year that created a safe enjoyable learning environment. Within this environment, students valued the varied activities/resources included and the shifting focus on different language aspects each session which enhanced their engagement and learning.

"The tutor is clearly highly professional in his knowledge of the subject but is willing to take into account information or advice from class members. He presents aspects of the subject in varied and interesting ways that increases knowledge of the culture as well as the language and keeps us all motivated and involved in the learning"

"I love the relaxed, friendly and comfortable environment of the class. All the students are there to learn and we have similar interests in the language and travelling"

In rating specific aspects of course delivery, students strongly endorsed the tutor/leader's knowledge and enthusiasm (95%), their providing a supportive and friendly atmosphere for learning (93%), and encouraging student participation (88%). Respondents strongly agreed that sessions were well-organised (82%), with relevant course content (84%), were presented in a clear and interesting way (81%) and included useful learning activities, texts and resources (81%). In this regard Language students gave higher ratings overall than the Humanities students, and especially in those aspects most related to the organisation, presentation and activities/resources used in the course.

Where students suggested changes to the course, these were largely related to increasing the diversity and currency of resources and activities included in sessions, and a greater emphasis on conversation and interactive exercises.

"Possibly more emphasis on conversation where students talk about their experiences and life in general"

"More regular revision of topics and increased verbal practice. Include vocab games in class time eg patience or Snap with German/English word pairs"

Various suggestions were also made about new and additional Language courses, as well as new course topics in other categories (eg lifestyle, history, arts), thereby providing guidance to tutors and the Course Coordination Team in further development of the program.

Indeed, students voiced their appreciation of the diversity and excellence of the course program and overall U3A Melbourne activities which achieved both the educational and social goals of the organisation. Many acknowledged the commitment and professionalism of tutors, leaders and behind-the-scenes volunteers who created and supported these opportunities.

"U3A is a brilliant idea and an enormously valuable educational and social resource for the whole of metro Melbourne, professionally delivered at almost no cost to the City. As metro Melbourne has grown into a world city, and with a growing population of alert, intelligent elders, the importance of U3A Melbourne City could hardly be exaggerated"

Conclusions

On this basis, it is evident that the 2016 yearlong Foreign Languages program was well run along lines that support learning for mature age students and enabled many students to achieve their study goals.

It would appear that the 2012 Foreign Languages Policy introduced in 2013 has gone a considerable way in growing the Foreign languages program, thereby enabling members greater access to language courses and progression in their language studies. However the great popularity of language courses and growth in membership continues to challenge these goals. Adjustments to enrolment procedures for 2017 aim to address these issues.

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