Introduction

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1. Background

The title of this book, Languages at work, competent multilinguals and the pedagogical challenges of COVID-19, explores two issues that have become increasingly prominent in 2020. The first one reflects on the language skills which are in demand in the UK, where much-needed multilinguals are sought after in the job market. It challenges the link between employability and the global graduate concept, highlighting the need for language students to be able to sell their skills. The second issue, which resulted in the delayed publication of our book, focuses on COVID-19 and illustrates the challenge to which the education establishment stood up. It reports on practical examples of how educators and digital technologists reframed the whole teaching and learning context without compromising staff and students’ experience.

The volume has, therefore, been deliberately conceived as two separate, yet interlinked, parts, showing explicitly how the editors felt the need, half-way through the process, to revisit their initial idea in the light of the unprecedented scenario which unfolded globally during the Spring of 2020.

The theme for the first part of the book draws inspiration from the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Modern Languages’ Manifesto, published in 2014 to tackle the “need for a national recovery programme”³ and improve the

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nation’s linguistic skills base. Subsequently, in March 2019 a further call for action from APPG was released stating that ‘the UK is in a language crisis’. Whilst employers are increasingly seeking multilinguals whose language skills are valued as an asset within the job market, UK educational settings are witnessing a consistent decline of language learners across sectors, creating a deficiency in the workforce and a shift towards monolingualism.

The current political and economic uncertainty is also contributing to widening the gap between offer and demand of multilinguals, with European schemes to support student mobility being under threat. It is within the context outlined above that the articles in this first part of the book explore and support the concept of the global language graduate. In particular, the focus is placed on the need for students to learn how to understand and articulate what makes them stand out from the crowd, as well as the need to be able to showcase the valuable, transferable skills that can be gained through studying languages.

2. Part 1

The book opens with a reference to the timely Policy Briefing on Languages, Business, Trade and Innovation published in June 2020, by Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Janice Carruther, which “focuses on the importance of languages for business, trade, and innovation” (p. 3). The briefing reports on the scale of how language skills deficit is currently affecting UK business and trade as well as “leading to an overdependence on anglophone export markets” (Ayres-Bennett & Carruthers, 2020, p. 3). It represents yet another strong call for the need of more language skills and cultural fluency which can only be achieved by a coherent and consistent language policy across the UK education sector. A competence in languages also brings a whole range of soft skills which are highly sought after by employers highlighting the fact that language graduates should not simply be seen as ‘linguists’. This point is strongly supported in the article by Jocelyn Wyburd, ‘Linguist’ or ‘Global Graduate’? A matter of identity for the global graduate with language skills. Here, the author discusses the importance for graduate students to be able to articulate the whole
A range of transferable competencies that they develop during their degree in a cogent manner. The author makes a lucidly convincing argument about the importance of language and intercultural skills for employability, touching also on English *lingua franca* and Brexit. She discusses and challenges the issue of language graduates who identify themselves simply as ‘linguists’ and provides a framework for students – supported by educators – which can be used to translate graduates’ skillset and experiences into the language used by employers.

In the next contribution, a team of researchers and practitioners from the Open University, Hélène Pulker, Ursula Stickler, and Elodie Vialleton, continues to highlight the link between language skills and employability by reporting on a radically redesigned modern languages curriculum in The School of Languages and Applied Linguistics; which eventually led to the development of a new Employability Framework. The article focuses on redefining modern languages as a holistic cluster of knowledge, skills, and attributes where it is important to develop a pedagogic approach which encourages self-reflection and explicit training in articulating one’s skills as a ‘well-rounded, global graduate’.

The first part of the book comprises fewer articles than originally planned; several authors who had agreed to write on the theme of language graduates and employability were sadly affected, one way or another, by the first wave of the pandemic. With COVID-19 taking hold of, and bringing, 2020 to a standstill, as editors of this publication we felt the need to expand our original call for papers to include a snapshot of how the spread of the virus started to impact the educational sector. In particular, our focus was readjusted to include the way in which the pandemic started to redefine teaching and learning and, more loosely, the development of the skills of language graduates.

### 3. Part 2

Following the rapid spread of the virus, schools, colleges, and universities in the UK and across the world had to switch from face-to-face to online teaching
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almost overnight. It was evident from the start that the whole teaching community across the sector was reacting to the challenges brought into education by the pandemic both with concerns and renewed energy. To provide a flavour of this exceptionally fast-paced pedagogical shift, we asked selected colleagues covering various roles within the higher education sector to write a reflective piece on their experience of researching, teaching, designing, and training staff during the first wave of the pandemic for the benefit of the entire language community. The second part of our publication offers readers the opportunity to consider, and reflect on, the changes affecting their individual practices with a wider focus on language learning and language graduates’ attributes.

Articles from this second call are featured in the second part of this publication. They are of a more personal and reflective nature, providing an overview of how the pandemic has accelerated the transition into a new modality which had already been predicted, but whose practical realisation was pushed forward at speed.

This section opens with Paul Feldman, Jisc CEO, reflecting on how the effort to make the most of an unforeseen and challenging situation like COVID-19 brought the future of learning forward. He suggests the adoption by the whole sector of an innovative approach that firmly integrates face-to-face with virtual interaction. He sees the forced acceleration in online teaching and assessment practices as a sustainable model for the post-COVID world of education.

The theme is then taken forward by three articles looking at how Digital Learning colleagues in Higher Education (HE) institutions worked on the ‘transposing’ of face-to-face teaching to online. Difficulties posed by the online modality for teaching and assessment are also discussed, with some suggestions for the future. In reporting on the initial steps taken in her own institution to respond to the COVID-19 emergency measures, Cecilia Goria explores the myth of academics not favouring digital pedagogies. She reflects on the process of moving forward from the state of emergency to a more thought-through digital pedagogical approach where academics embrace digital pedagogies as a meaningful part of their practice.
A personal perspective is offered by Gloria Visintini, who describes the practice of her institution during the pandemic. She reflects, in her role as Director of Digital Learning in the School of Modern Languages at Bristol University, on how the digital education agenda was brought forward by COVID-19 and how having a background in language teaching helped, and informed, some of her conversations with teaching staff. She describes the educational guidelines that were put in place and implemented by colleagues in Modern Languages and discusses the new digital teaching and assessment practices, the challenges in delivering teaching, and the opportunities the new online landscape created for staff and students.

Dale Munday’s article offers a report on how his institution supported its staff in the rapid shift to online teaching and learning, with an approach centred around the upskilling of staff. The future of curriculum design and the associated requirements at an institutional- and sector-wide level is also addressed in relation to the opportunities and challenges faced.

Linked to the topic of staff upskilling in a wider context, Fernando Rosell-Aguilar’s article looks at his own experience as a Twitter user and online pedagogy expert to reflect on how the use of Twitter during the pandemic reinforced the sharing of good practice among education professionals by providing a source of advice, ideas, and resources in a collegial way.

Kate Borthwick offers an overview of the practicalities of moving the Pre-sessional programme at the University of Southampton, a study skills and English language programme designed to prepare international students for academic success in UK Higher Education, to online delivery. She discusses how this was achieved using Blackboard, MS Teams, and Padlet, and how a personalised, small-group teaching experience was re-created.

The way the Modern Languages team at the University of Oxford saw the switch of their language courses to a remote mode as an opportunity to develop new ways of designing and delivering language courses is explored by Marion Sadoux. Her article also discusses a flexible and hybrid future of language teaching.
The book then moves on to explore another important asset in terms of the employability skills of graduate language courses: the year abroad. This compulsory practice of graduates spending the third year of their degree abroad was enormously affected by the sudden closure of many countries’ borders and ban to travel during the first wave of the pandemic as institutions had to respond with fast and practical solutions, which would not compromise degree outcomes for language graduates.

**Sonia Cunico** looks at the impact that the pandemic had on the year abroad. In her creative contribution based on the metaphor of journey, she describes how Exeter University students were offered alternative online language provision to support their learning once their year abroad was cut short due to COVID-19.

**Sascha Stollhans** is also reflecting on how unprecedented circumstances affected the year abroad as well as exploring the delivery of teaching and learning activities in higher education, including assessment. He offers a positive view for the future of the sector and recognises the spirit of collegiality developed during the pandemic across different HE institutions and national organisations.

The book closes with the contribution of **Stephan Caspar**, a UK practitioner currently teaching in the USA. In his piece, he reflects on essential skills that language graduates develop with language learning and multicultural studies. It is a very personal account on how, during the pandemic, he managed to help students find their voice and become active agents of change through storytelling. He highlights the potential of this methodology to help communities draw parallels with, and face, wider issues concerning minorities within a challenged society. American education has been profoundly shaken both by COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement; both reiterated the importance of language learning, cultural understanding, and identity as useful employability skills for the new global graduates to support, rebuild, and unite communities, especially in challenging times.

We hope that this volume will inspire practitioners to find ways to help raise language graduates’ awareness about the real value of their degree and the
range of skills that come with it. Most importantly, we hope that the volume will reinforce the concept of the global graduate as one that cannot be separated from language learning, cultural awareness, and multiculturalism. Throughout the book, the pursuit of a common objective should emerge: the language sector can bring a solid contribution to the tackling of contemporary crises – both at a national and local level.

By adding the second part devoted to personal reflections on education in a worldwide pandemic, we hope to leave a tangible sign of how educators rose to the challenge and found the strength to overcome the emergency and accelerate innovative approaches which had already emerged in the education scenario but have otherwise taken a longer time.

Reference
