

Foreword

The Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) is the only Chartered body representing linguists both in the UK and around the world. Part of our commitment to the community is to produce research which allows both members and organisations within the industry we serve to understand the upcoming challenges we, as a profession, face.

This report, the second in a series of four, looks at how people enter the industry and become professional linguists and, just as importantly, captures the career aspirations of students currently studying languages.

We aim to use the findings of this report to work towards presenting the languages profession as a more attractive career option, to influence government policy so that more children have the opportunity to take up languages and choose a language-based role, and to support members by evolving their skills to meet changing future requirements.

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Introduction

CIOL is the only UK-based professional body for all language practitioners. Its members work as translators, interpreters, teachers, university lecturers and trainers, or use their foreign-language skills in sectors ranging from business and industry to government, health care, the justice system, police and the armed forces.

As a Chartered body, CIOL not only serves its own members but aims to be an authoritative and respected voice promoting the use of language skills and the status of language professionals, both in the UK and internationally. With over 7,000 members spanning all areas of language work and an extensive network of [Language Partners](#), it is uniquely well positioned to gather and disseminate reliable information about the sector.

This survey on language careers and qualifications is the latest in the CIOL Insights series, following on from the report on [The Languages Professions 2019-2020](#)¹, published in September 2019.

The purpose of the survey reported here was to examine entry routes into the language professions in order to:

- inform CIOL's position when representing and promoting the interests of linguists
- guide and support the next generation of linguists
- monitor changes in the career profiles of professional linguists over time.

Future surveys in the CIOL Insights series will look in more detail at topics such as the impact of technology on the languages professions, and developing and maintaining customer relationships. Together, they will form a body of knowledge on the experiences of language professionals and the changes taking place in the sector, and contribute to CIOL's strategic aim of representing linguists, raising their profile and increasing public recognition of the value of language skills.

¹Available at www.ciol.org.uk/ciol-insights-languages-professions

About the survey

Methodology

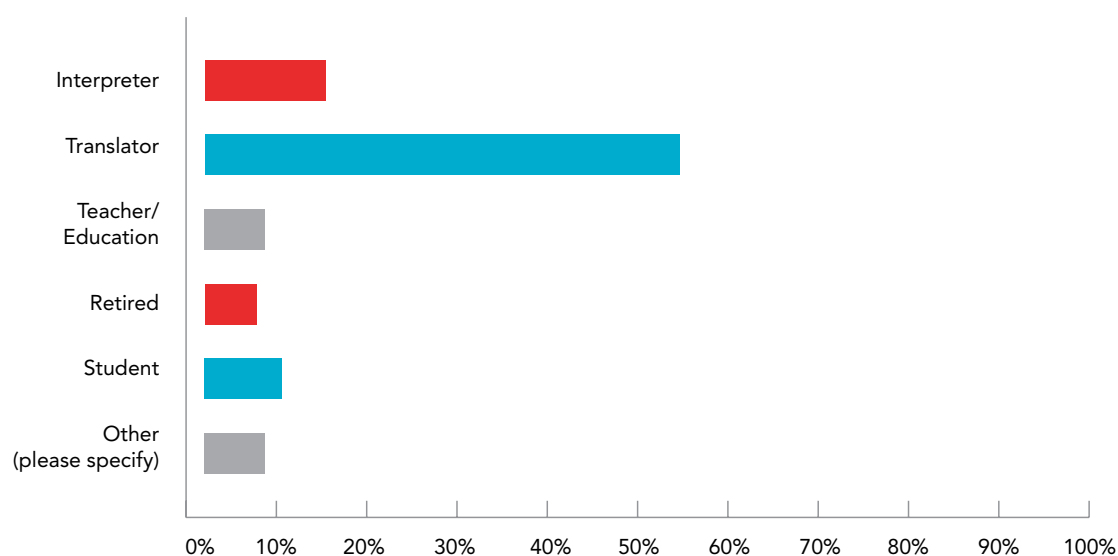
The CIOL Insights survey on careers and qualifications ran online for four weeks, from 7 October to 3 November 2019. It posed a series of open and closed questions² on language careers and qualifications, combining quantitative and open-ended responses.

The survey was promoted through CIOL’s website, social media channels and monthly members’ update. The total number of respondents was 320.

Profile of respondents

1. Area of work

Q1. What is your current primary role as a linguist?

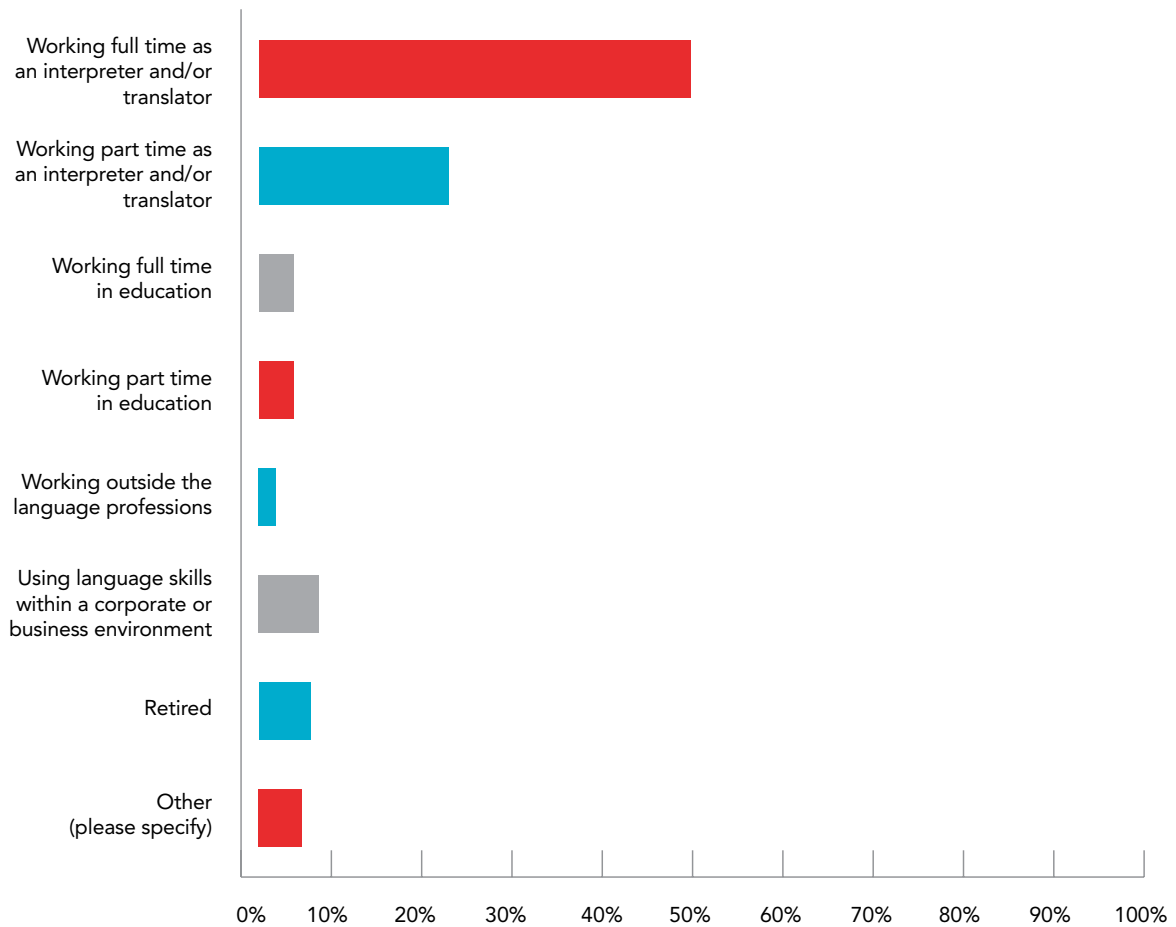


Almost 70% of respondents identified themselves as translators (55%) or interpreters (14%). A further 15% were split almost equally between education and other occupations (including project management, business development, sales and administrative roles). Students made up 9% of the sample, while just over 6% of respondents were retired.

²The full list of questions can be found in the appendix.

2. Employment status

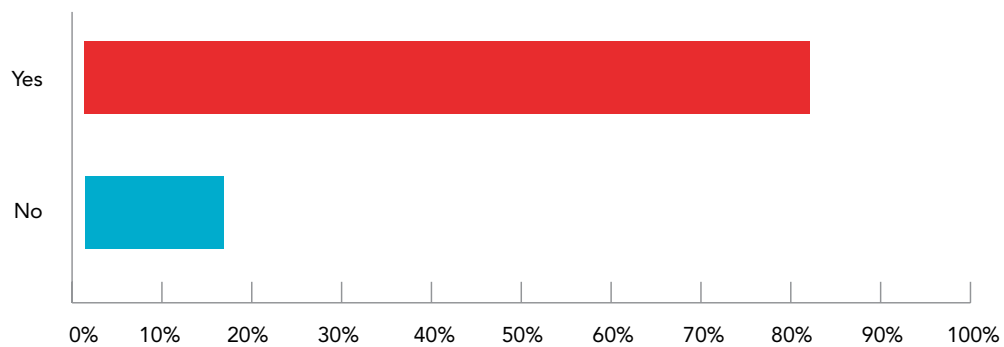
Q4. Are you currently:



Just under 50% of respondents reported working full time as a translator and/or interpreter, with a further 22% working part time. Linguists working in education were split almost equally between full-time and part-time work (at just under 4% each), with the remainder of respondents working in a business or corporate environment (7%) or in other fields (7%) both inside and outside the languages professions.

3. Membership of CIOL

Q2. Are you a member of CIOL?



Over 83% of respondents were CIOL members, while 16% of responses came from non-members.

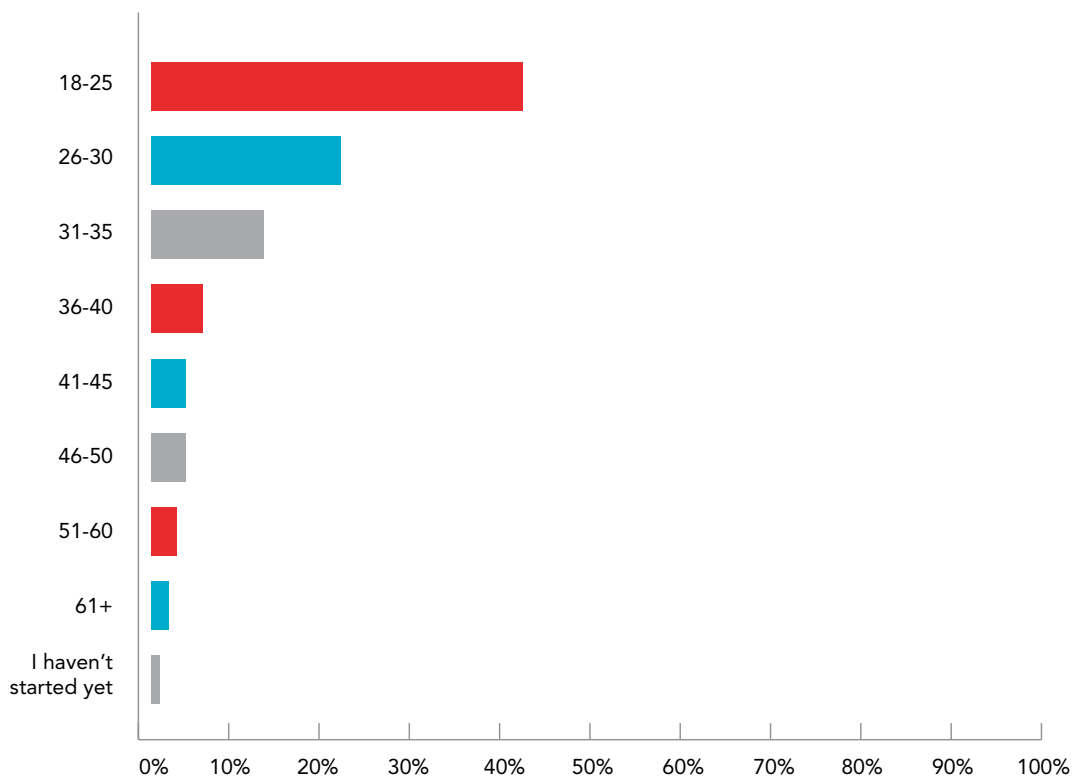
Structure

The following sections report on the survey's findings on:

- Career paths in the languages professions (questions 3, 5, 6, 7 and 17)
- Formal qualifications (questions 8-12)
- Professional challenges (question 13)
- Practitioners' perceptions of working as a linguist (questions 18 and 24)
- Interactions between language professionals (questions 19-20)
- Perceptions of linguists by people outside the sector (questions 14-16)
- Current students' career aspirations and expectations (questions 21-23).

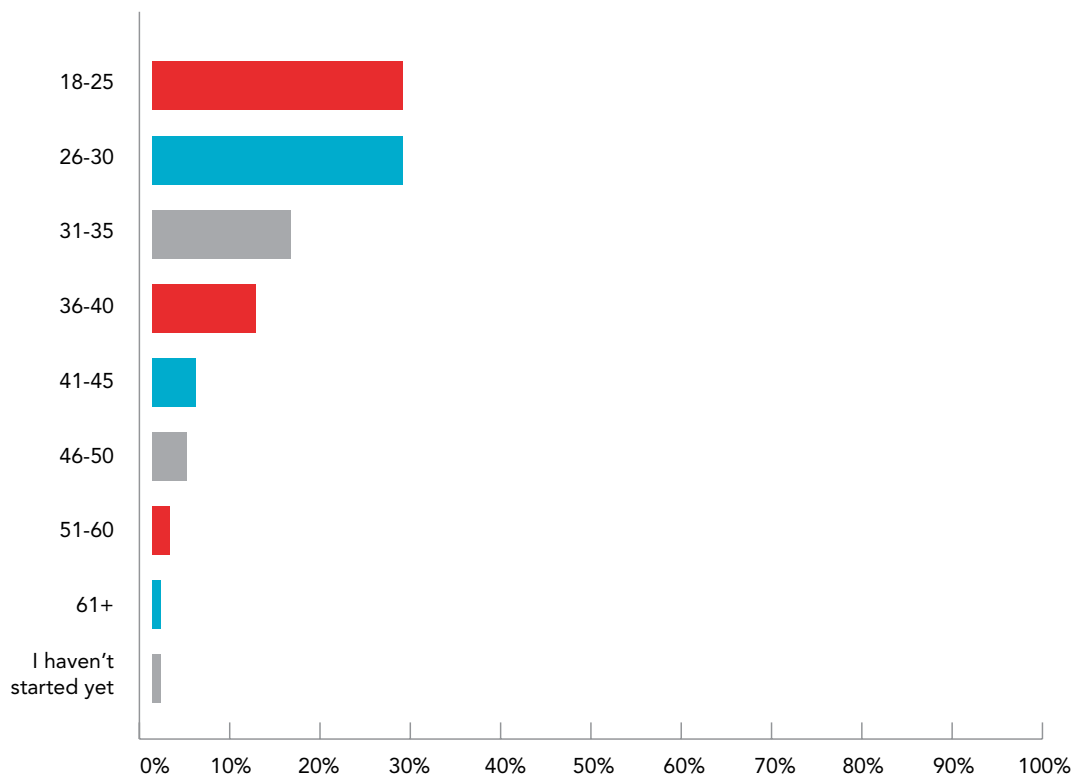
Career paths in the language professions

Q3. At what age did you start being paid to interpret, translate or teach languages?



At first glance, the responses to this question suggest a career profile that is heavily weighted towards younger practitioners. Over 43% of respondents reported that they started being paid to interpret, translate or teach languages by their mid-20s and a further 22% by the age of 30. Just under 20% began to earn in the languages professions in their 30s, with a further 14% starting after the age of 40. Responses to other questions in this section, however, point to a more nuanced picture, as outlined below.

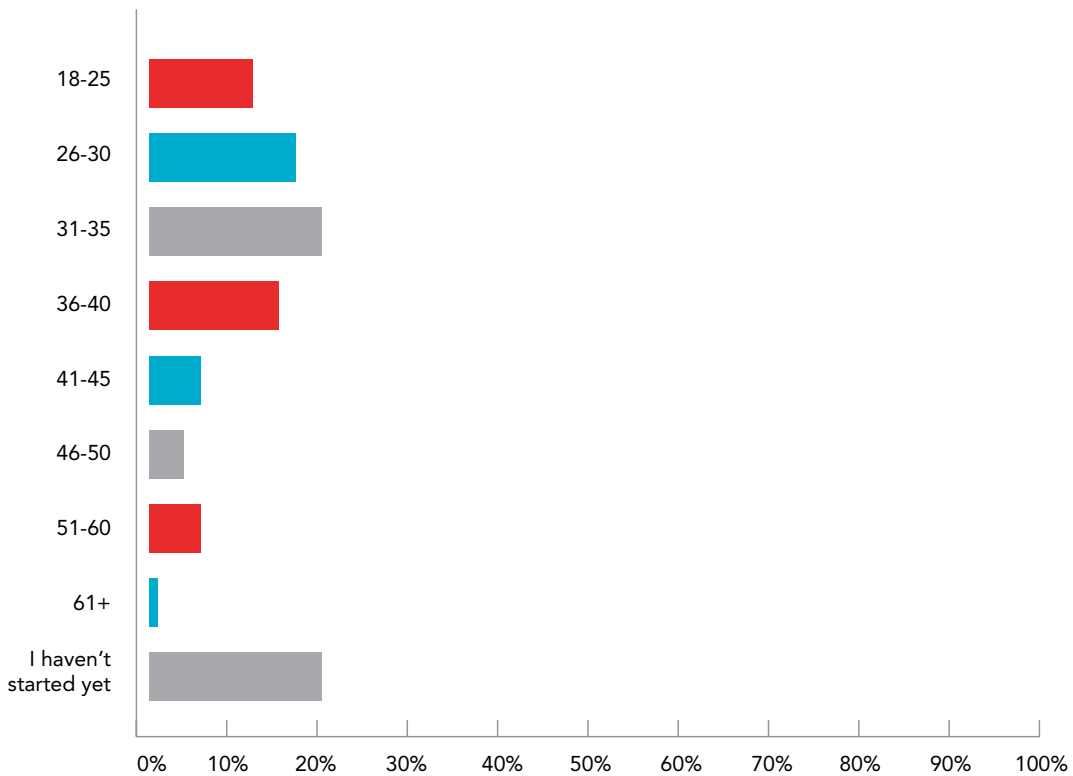
Q5. At what age did you first consider yourself to be a professional linguist?



First, there is a discrepancy between the age at which respondents start being paid to provide language-related services, and the age at which they view themselves as professional linguists. Just under 29% of respondents classed themselves as professionals by their mid-20s, compared with approximately 46% self-identifying as professionals between the ages of 26 and 35. Over 12% of respondents did not view themselves as professional linguists until after the age of 40, in some cases as a result of pursuing other careers before turning to the languages professions at a later stage.

Secondly, while a significant percentage of respondents reported starting to earn as a linguist by the age of 25, this dropped sharply when they were asked at what age they began to receive a (self-defined) acceptable level of income.

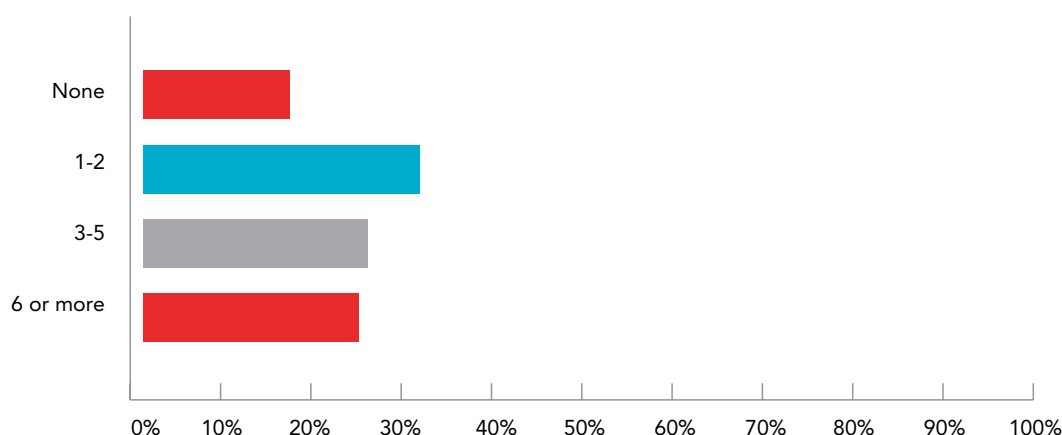
Q17. At what age would you say you started to receive what you class as an acceptable income as a linguist?



Just under 12% of respondents stated that they began to earn an acceptable income by their mid-20s. The largest percentage of respondents (just over 36%) reported starting to receive a reasonable income by the age of 35, with a slightly higher proportion in the 31-35 age group (just under 20%) than among those aged 26-30 (just under 17%). A notable 20% reported that they had not yet started receiving an acceptable level of income, compared with just 1% stating that they had not yet started to be paid to interpret, translate or teach languages. This suggests a significant degree of dissatisfaction with remuneration levels in the languages professions, as indicated in the CIOL Insights report on The Languages Professions 2019-2020 referred to above.

In terms of career paths, a relatively small percentage of linguists (17%) reported moving straight into the languages professions, as shown below.

Q6. How many jobs did you have before entering the language professions?



Almost a third of respondents held one or two jobs before embarking on a career in languages and over a quarter between three and five. A further 25% reported holding six or more jobs before entering the languages professions.

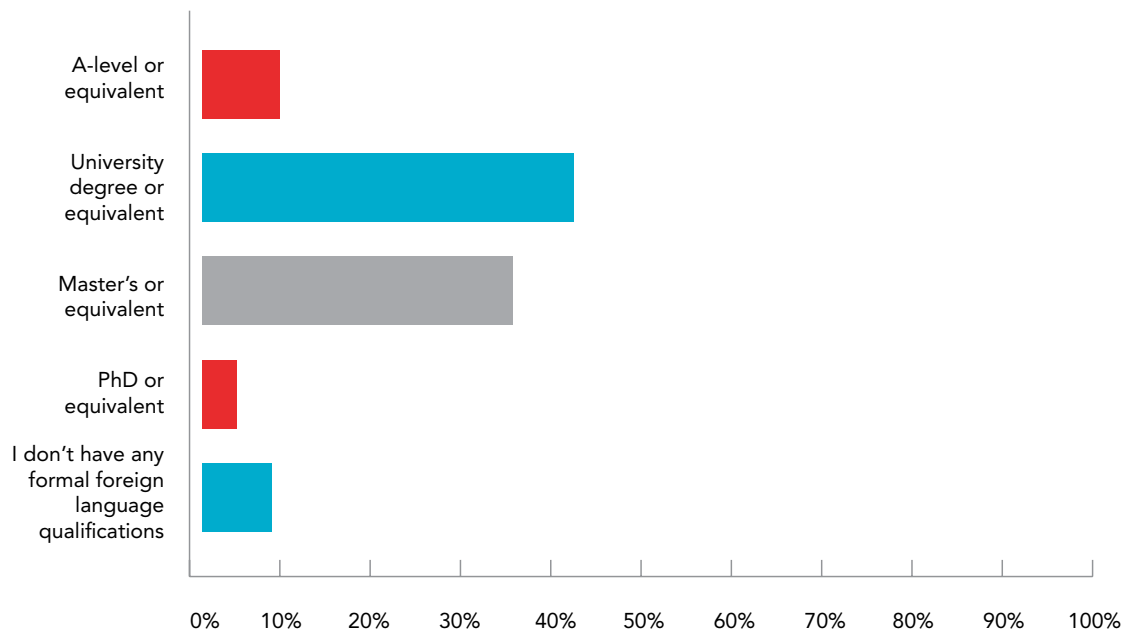
Around 100 respondents described, in their own words, why they were unable or chose not to enter the languages professions earlier on in their careers. Several respondents reported having enjoyed successful and fulfilling careers in other areas before turning to language work later on, in some cases to achieve a better work-life balance, with more flexible working hours, or to manage caring responsibilities. Many commented on a lack of formal language qualifications (or difficulties around recognition of foreign qualifications) as a barrier. Others had used their language skills in other sectors, but where languages were “less of a focus”, or as one respondent put it, “not enough to be considered a ‘language professional’ at that stage”. A lack of awareness of the language professions also emerged, with respondents commenting: “It never occurred to me”, “I wasn’t aware of the existence of the translation industry” or that they had moved into language work only after moving to a different country, not having thought about it previously. In a similar vein, a number of respondents commented on discouraging or inaccurate advice they had received. One respondent reported not having been “attracted to any of the language professions as they were presented by my university careers service”, while another remarked that “My French teacher said you had to be bilingual to work as a translator”. A number of respondents had been mature students and therefore come to the sector later in life. Others had been deterred by poor pay in the sector or a lack of affordable courses to gain formal qualifications, or were not confident that the language professions “would provide enough job and financial security”. One respondent commented that they had consciously deferred working for themselves, since they needed “all-round business acumen and experience to launch [their] freelance translation business – and a strong network” and had therefore worked in-house first, in order to learn “how to navigate the business world”.

Formal qualifications

Survey respondents were asked to state their highest level of:

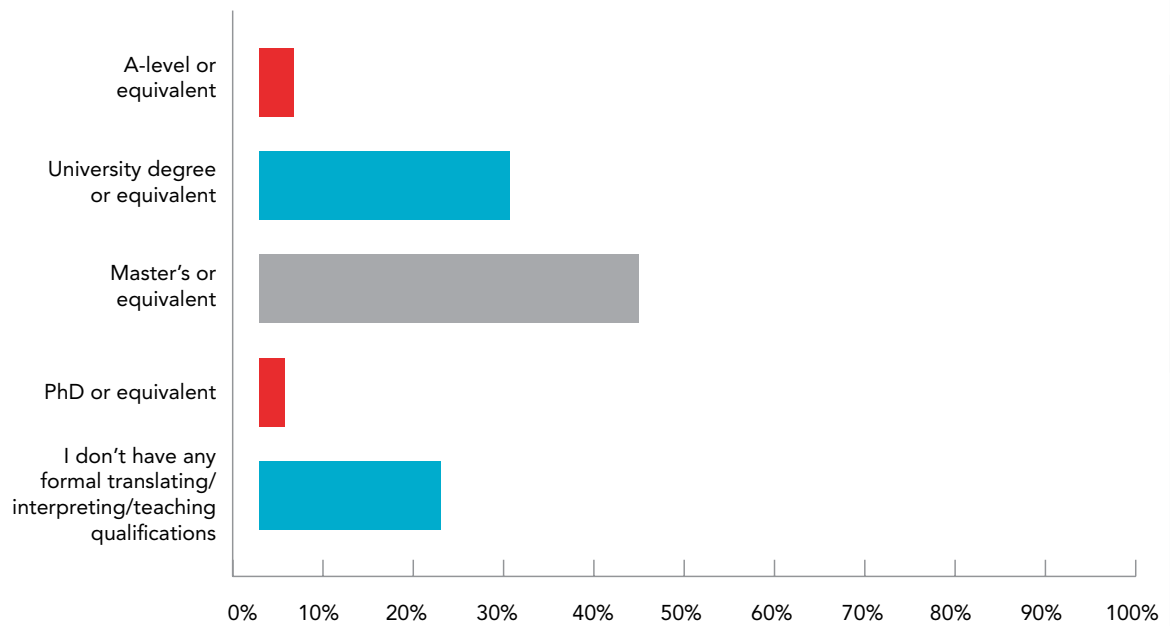
- foreign-language qualifications
- translating, interpreting and/or teaching qualifications
- formal qualifications in another specialist field, such as law, medicine or engineering.

Q8. If you have any formal foreign language qualifications, what is your highest level of qualification?



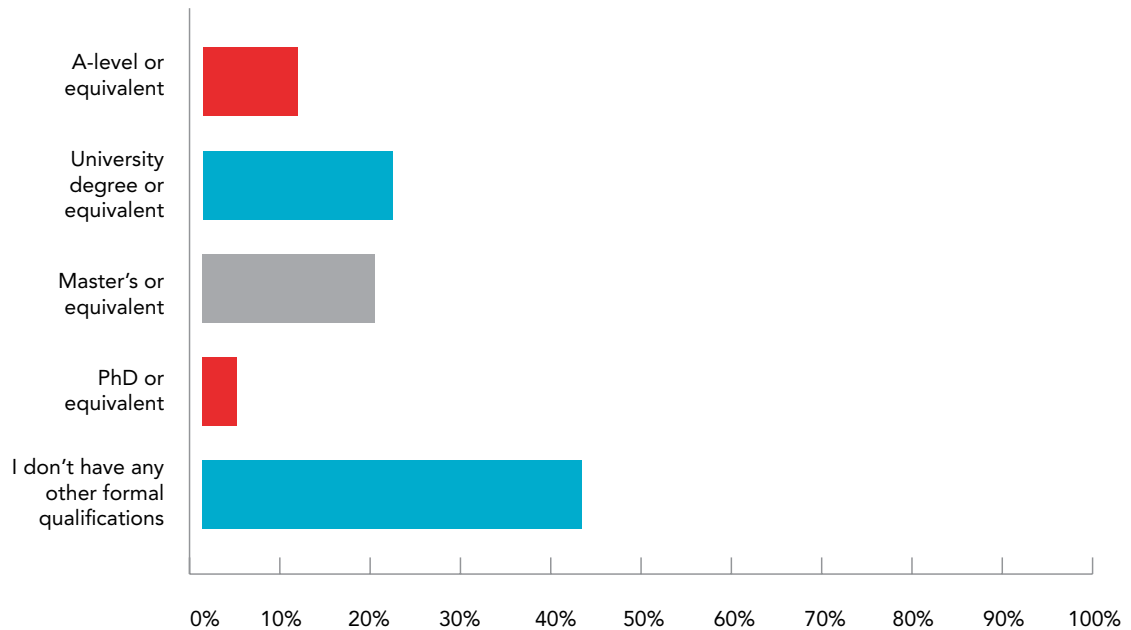
Over 43% of respondents reported that their highest level of foreign-language qualification was a university degree or equivalent. A further 36% held a Master's degree or equivalent, while just over 3% had been awarded a PhD or equivalent. Approximately 9% of respondents reported that their highest level of qualification was an A-level or equivalent, approximately in line with the percentage of student respondents. Twenty-two respondents (8%) had no formal language qualifications.

Q9. If you have any formal translating / interpreting / teaching qualifications, what is your highest level of qualification?



Almost 44% of respondents reported holding a discipline-specific qualification (in translation, interpreting or teaching) at Master's level. Just over 29% held a degree-level qualification, while 2% held a PhD or equivalent. Fifty-five respondents (just under 21%) held no discipline-specific qualifications.

Q10. If you have any formal qualifications (for example, in a specialist field such as law, medicine or engineering), what is your highest level of qualification?



Roughly similar percentages of respondents held a degree or Master's (22% and 20% respectively) in a non-linguistic field. Just over 3% held a PhD, while 43% held no other formal qualifications.

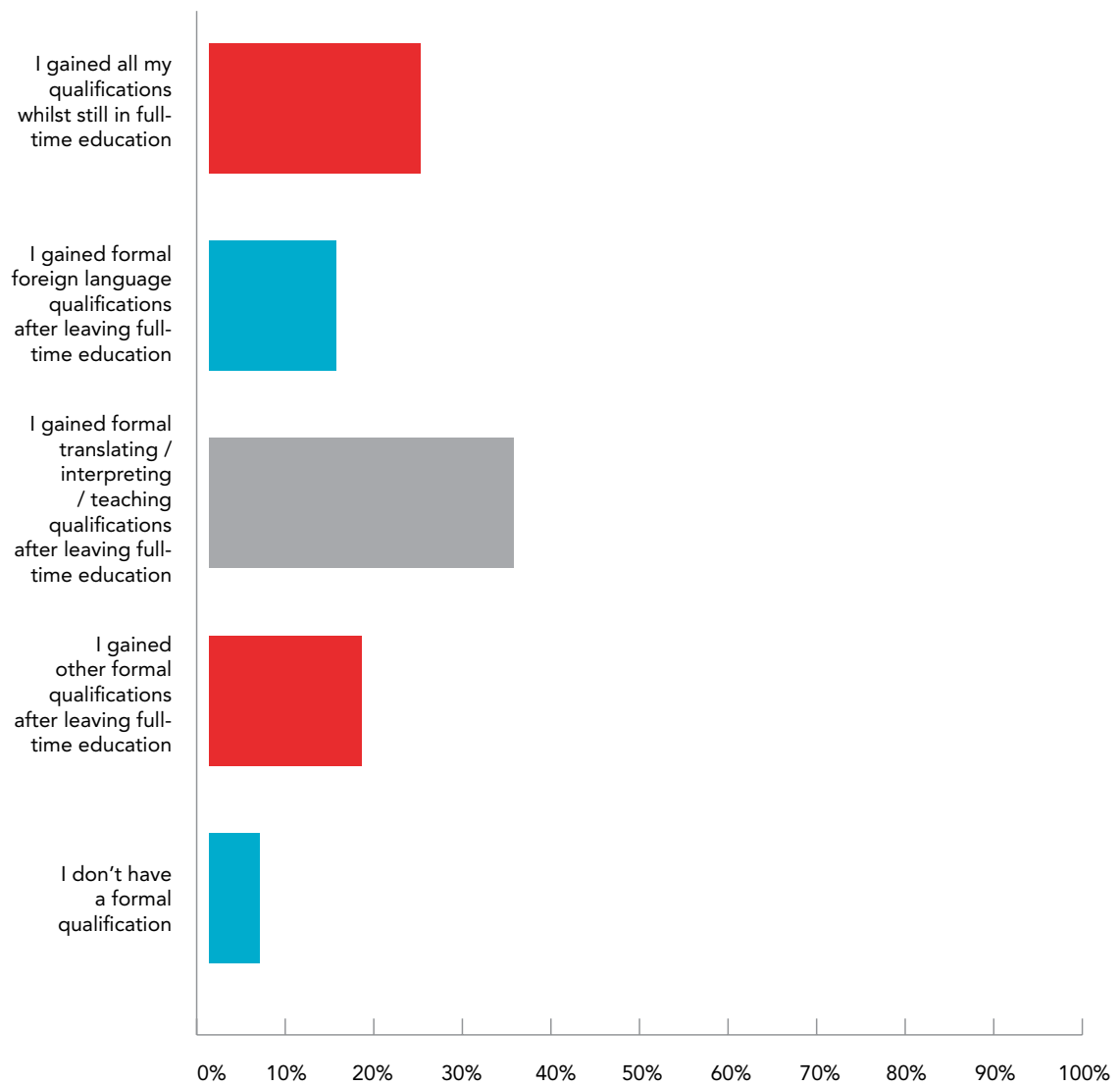
The figures reported here point to a highly skilled workforce, with over 82% of respondents holding foreign-language qualifications and 75% holding a qualification in their chosen discipline at degree level or above. Since the sample was weighted towards CIOL members, the number of respondents holding degree-level qualifications is unsurprising: all three of CIOL's professional grades normally require a qualification in the non-native language at this level³. The level of Master's qualifications reported here, however, exceeds the requirements for membership and is more likely to reflect the demand for higher-level and discipline-specific (translating, interpreting or teaching) qualifications across the language professions.

Respondents were also asked to comment on:

- Whether they had gained formal qualifications after leaving full-time education
- Whether they planned to complete any formal qualifications over the next three years

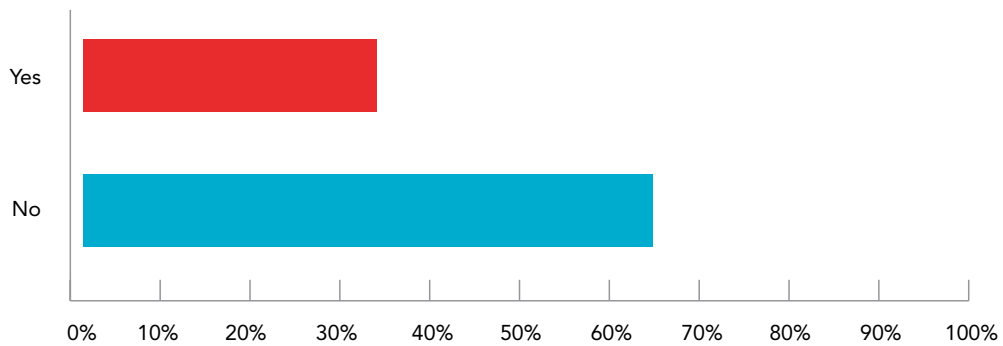
³See www.ciol.org.uk/grades for the admissions criteria for each grade of CIOL membership.

Q11. Did you gain any of your formal qualifications after leaving full-time education?



Almost 52% of respondents reported gaining new qualifications after leaving full-time education: just over 15% had gained formal qualifications in their foreign language(s) and over 36% in translating, interpreting or teaching. A further 18% had gained formal qualifications in other fields after leaving full-time education.

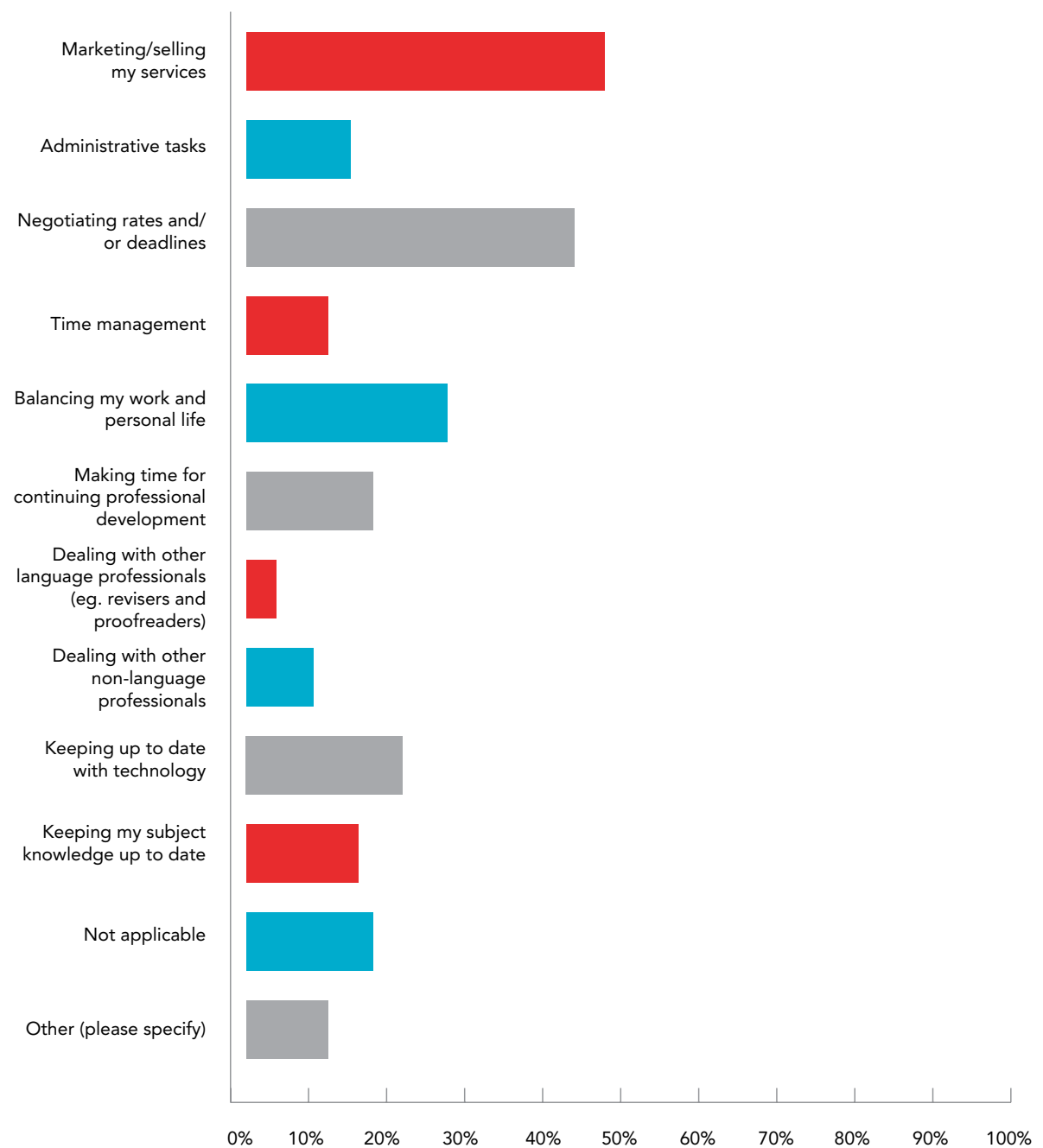
Q12. Do you plan to complete any formal qualifications in the next three years?



A commitment to skills development and/or retraining also emerged from the percentage of respondents planning to complete a formal qualification in the near future, with the 90 respondents (34%) far outstripping the number of full-time students responding to the survey.

Professional challenges

Q13. If you work as a freelance translator or interpreter, what are the main challenges you have faced to date? Select up to three options.



Freelance translators and interpreters were asked to select the three main professional challenges they had faced from the following list:

- Marketing/selling my services
- Administrative tasks
- Negotiating rates and/or deadlines
- Time management
- Balancing their work and personal life
- Making time for continuing professional development
- Dealing with other language professionals, such as revisers and proofreaders
- Dealing with other (non-language) professionals
- Keeping up to date with technology
- Keeping their subject knowledge up to date
- Other challenges

The responses reflected those given by linguists across the board in the CIOL Insights survey on The Languages Professions 2019-2020, referred to earlier in this report. Business issues topped the list of challenges, with over 48% of respondents citing “Marketing/selling my services” as a concern. This was closely followed by “Negotiating rates and/or deadlines” (43%), reflecting the fact that many translators and interpreters feel ill-equipped in this area.

Other significant challenges for freelance translators and interpreters were balancing their personal and professional lives (27%), keeping up to date with technology (21%) and making time for continuing professional development (17%).

Verbatim responses to this question were particularly revealing about external perceptions of translation and interpreting work, with comments such as:

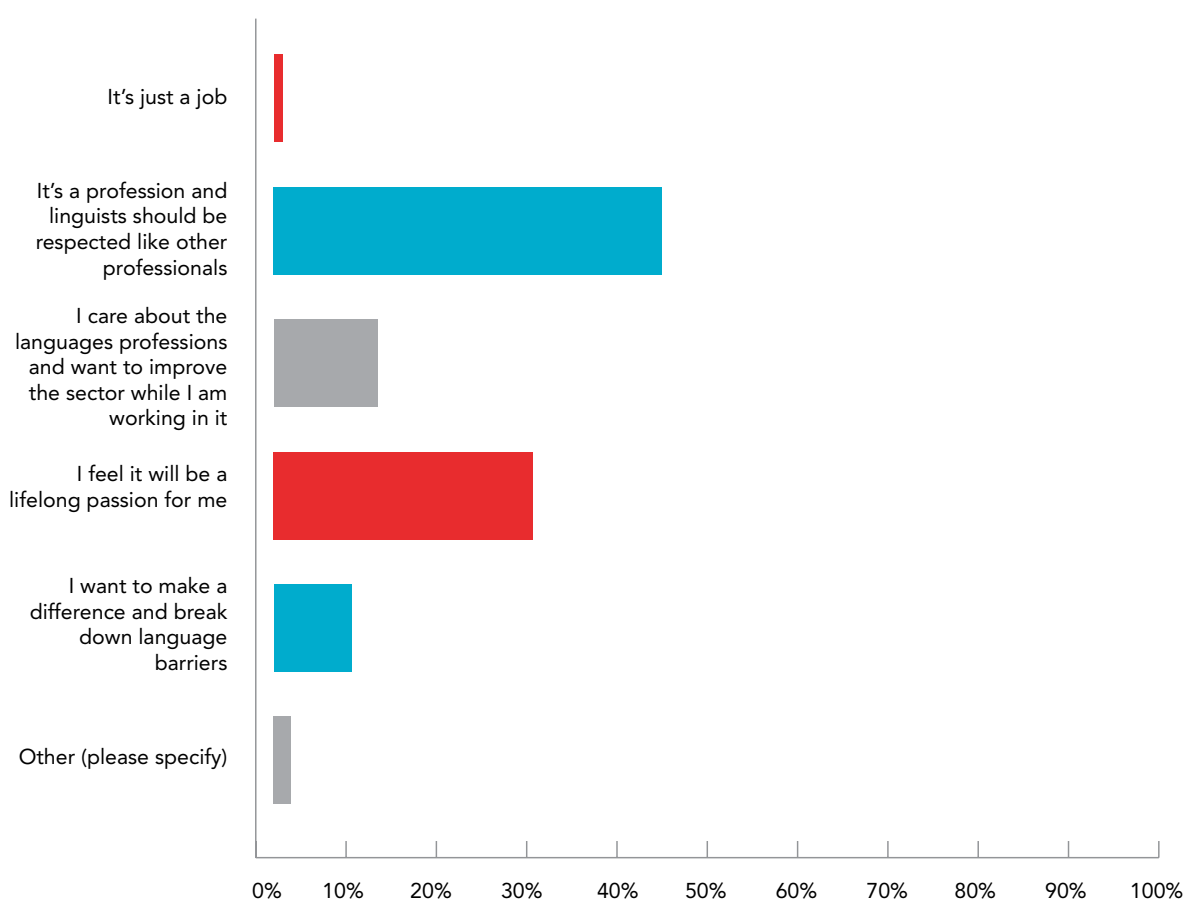
- “Managing client expectations to treat me as a professional, not “just a translator” and concomitant “sticker shock” at the rates I charge – and as a result getting work at a sustainable rate in my locale”
- “Living in a country where translation is “something everyone can do”...”
- “Agreeing reasonable terms of business with some (an increasing number [of]) agencies”.

Others cited difficulties with maintaining a consistent supply of work and the challenges of developing and maintaining specific technical skills (for example, using particular software or offering desktop publishing skills) that were unrelated to their core translation expertise.

Practitioners’ perceptions of working as a linguist

Respondents were asked first, to comment on their personal perception of being a linguist (Q18) and secondly, to describe in their own words, the main characteristics of a professional linguist.

Q18. Which of the following statements best reflects your feelings about being a linguist?



The list of statements was as follows:

- It's just a job
- It's a profession and linguists should be respected like other professionals
- I care about the language professions and want to improve the sector while I am working in it
- I feel it will be a lifelong passion for me
- I want to make a difference and break down language barriers
- Other

Over 45% of respondents selected “It’s a profession and linguists should be respected like other professionals”, followed by “I feel it will be a lifelong passion for me” (30%). A tiny minority (0.75%) of practitioners viewed their work as “just a job”, while 12% were committed to improving the sector and over 9% wanted to “make a difference and break down language barriers”.

A small number of respondents in the ‘other’ category expressed a sense of disappointment with trends in the sector, mainly around rates of pay and the impact of technology. Others expressed a commitment to improving the language professions or saw the potential to “combat ignorance and xenophobia” among people who had had less exposure to other languages and cultures.

In the second question in this section, respondents were asked “What do you believe is the main thing that makes someone a professional linguist?”

Unsurprisingly, linguistic ability featured heavily in the responses, often in conjunction with formal qualifications. Experience, domain knowledge and a wide general knowledge were mentioned frequently. Numerous respondents referred to a “passion for languages”, alongside cultural knowledge. A strong commitment to quality and professional standards emerged, backed by continuing professional development. Several respondents commented on consistent practice, charging professional rates and not working “on the side, as a hobby”. Integrity, ethical practices and adherence to a code of conduct featured in many responses.

A small sample of verbatim responses follows:

“Excellent language skills leading to recognised qualifications, followed by experience, CPD and membership of a professional body, [...] as well as specialist knowledge, soft skills and cultural competence.”

“Use of language to obtain payment, with an appropriate level of competence and adherence to an ethical code.”

“Being as serious about the services you provide as you would expect any other professional (e.g. doctor, lawyer) to be about the services they provide to you.”

“Performing the services s/he offers to standards defined by recognised professional bodies in the field of languages. Although formal qualifications and training are not required by law or regulation in order to work in the language professions, anyone whose quality standards, ethical approach and CPD efforts do not match those of a fully qualified, trained linguist is not a true professional.”

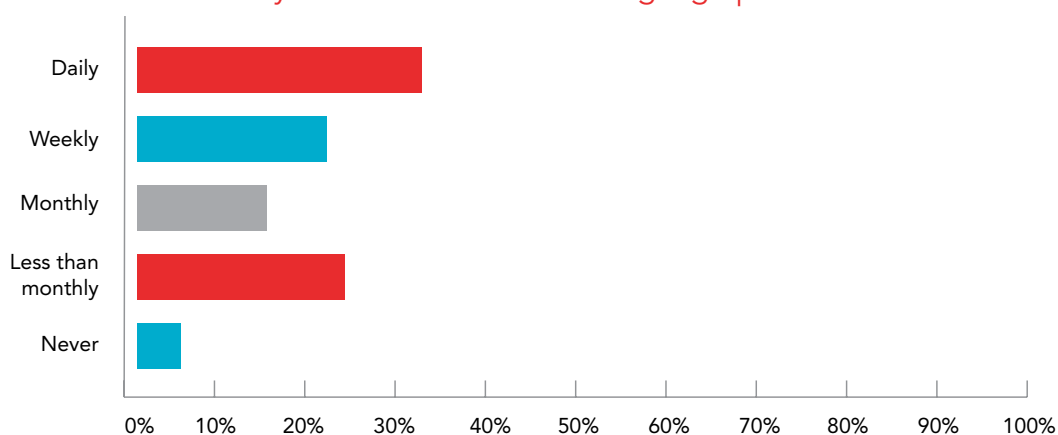
“Use of language within a professional environment to simplify and enhance communication.”

“Language skills and subject knowledge are clearly a prerequisite. However, professionalism in any discipline also extends to how we conduct our business relationships, and how we conduct ourselves.”

Interactions between language professionals

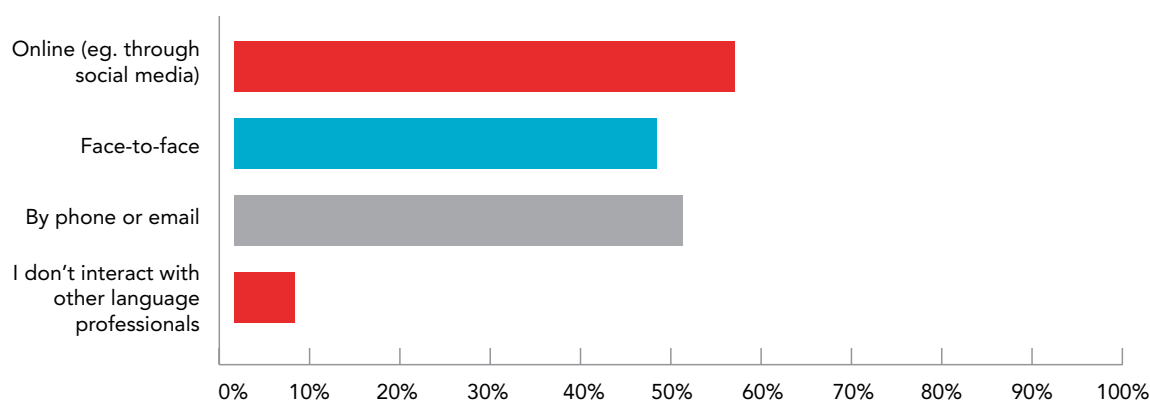
Professional isolation resulting from the often solitary nature of their working lives has frequently been raised as a concern by translators, in particular. The responses to the question “How often do you interact with other language professionals?”, however, suggest a more nuanced picture.

Q19. How often do you interact with other language professionals?



Over a third of respondents reported that they were in daily contact with other language professionals, and a further 22% on a weekly basis. Nonetheless, around a quarter interacted less than monthly with other linguists, and almost 5% never interacted at all.

Q20. How do you interact with other language professionals?



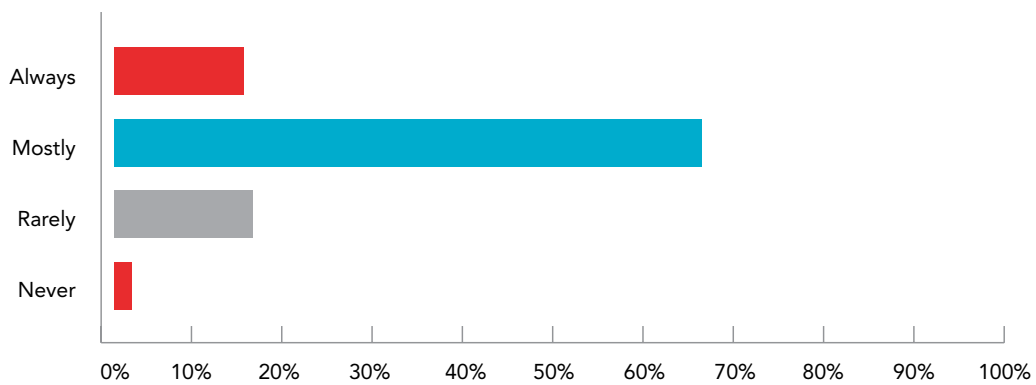
Almost 58% of respondents reported that they interacted with other language professionals online, for example, through social media. Face-to-face interactions were reported by slightly fewer than half of respondents (49%) while 52% mentioned contact by phone or email. A small proportion (7%) of respondents stated that they did not interact with other language professionals, suggesting a lower level of isolation than previously assumed.

External perceptions of linguists

Respondents were asked three questions about perceptions of linguists from those outside the sector:

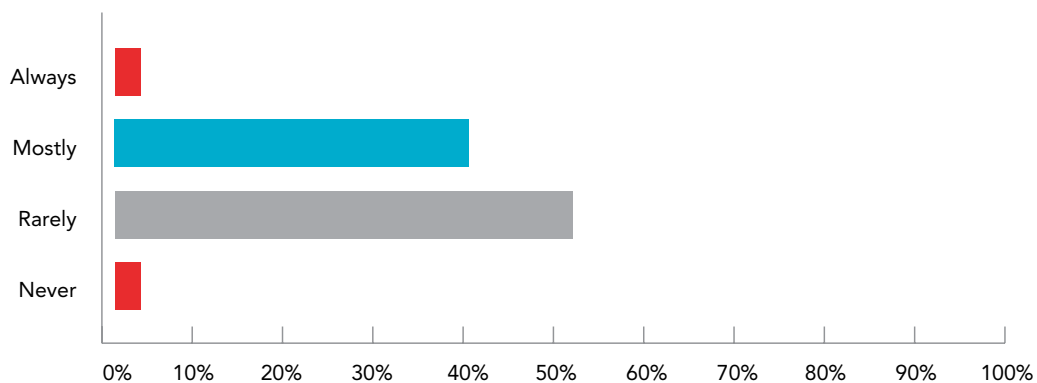
- Do you feel respected by professionals outside the languages sector with whom you come into contact?
- Do you feel professionals outside the languages sector understand what you do?
- Do you feel your friends and family understand what you do?

Q14. Do you feel respected by professionals outside the languages sector with whom you come into contact?



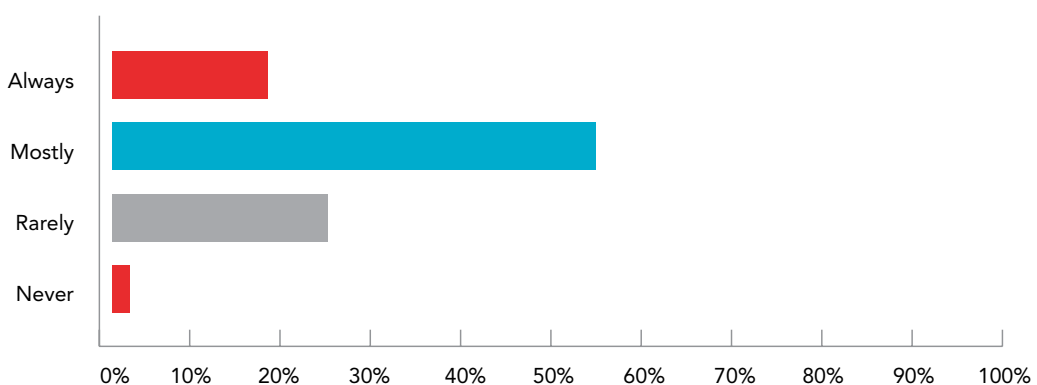
A large majority (83%) of respondents reported that they felt respected by other professionals, either “always” (15%) or “mostly” (68%). Nonetheless, 17% of respondents reported that they “rarely” (16%) or “never” (1.5%) felt respected, suggesting the need for continued efforts to raise the profile and status of language professionals.

Q15. Do you feel professionals outside the languages sector understand what you do?



While most respondents felt respected by professionals outside the sector, they did not feel that their work was understood to a similar extent. As shown above, over half (56%) of respondents felt that other professionals “rarely” (53%) or “never” (3%) understood what linguists do, while just 2% felt that they “always” did.

Q16. Do you feel your friends and family understand what you do?



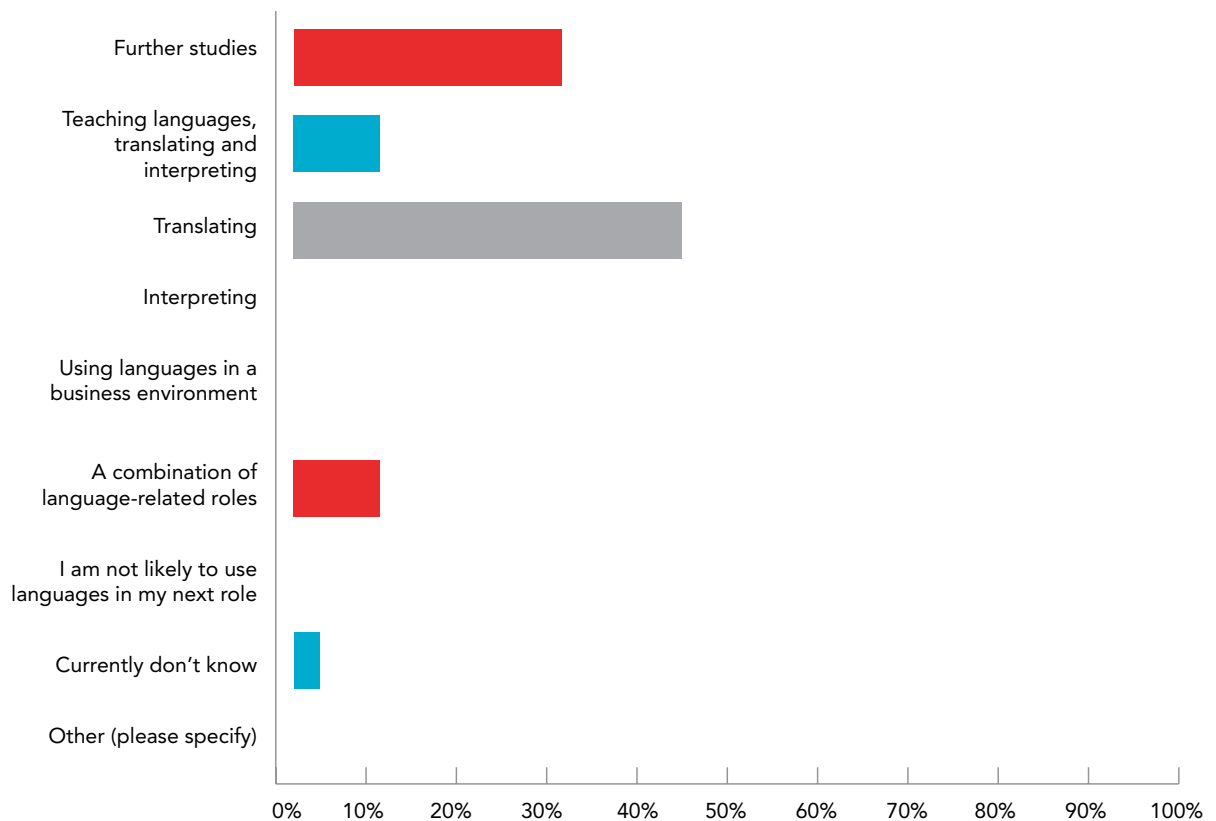
Among family and friends, the results were more positive, with almost three quarters of respondents reporting that those close to them “always” (18%) or “mostly” (56%) understood what they did. Nonetheless, a significant minority stated that their friends and family “rarely” (25%) or “never” (1.5%) understood their work.

Current students' career aspirations and expectations

Current students were asked to answer three additional questions⁴:

- Which career path are you likely to follow once you have finished your current course?
- Do you think you will move into a linguistic role straight after leaving higher education?
- What would be your main motivation for moving into a career in the languages professions?

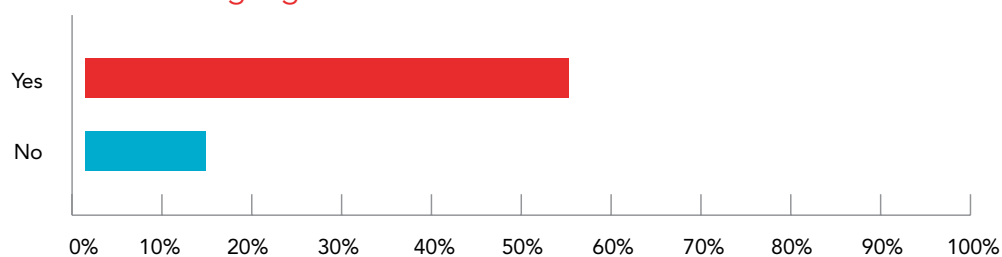
Q21. Which career path are you likely to follow once you have finished your current course?



Translating was the most popular career path for current students (13 respondents), followed by further studies (nine respondents) and an equal number of respondents (three) opting for “Teaching languages, translating or interpreting” and “A combination of language-related roles”. None of the respondents chose interpreting on its own as a career option.

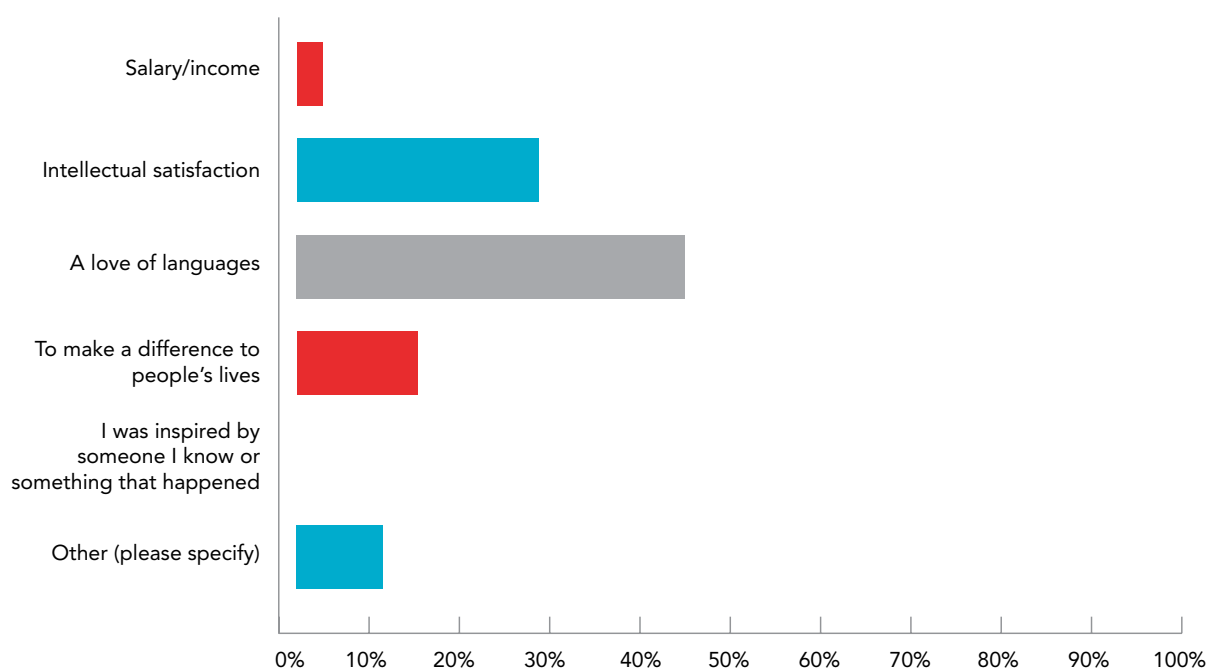
⁴Twenty-nine current students answered these questions; the results are reported here as a reference for future research but should not be treated as conclusive in light of the small sample size.

Q22. Do you think you will move into a linguistic role straight after leaving higher education?



Students responding to the survey appeared positive about using their language skills in their future career, with 25 out of 29 respondents stating that they intended to move into a linguistic role straight after leaving higher education.

Q23. What would be your main motivation for moving into a career in the language professions?



Finally, current students were asked to comment on their main motivation for pursuing a career in the languages professions. Enthusiasm for using their language skills appeared to be an important motivating factor, with 13 of the 29 respondents choosing "A love of languages" and eight "Intellectual satisfaction". Four students chose "To make a difference to people's lives", while just one was motivated by salary/income.

Conclusion

Based on the survey results presented in this report, professional linguists can be characterised as:

- highly qualified, not only in their foreign language(s) but also in their particular discipline and in some cases, other fields
- committed to continuing professional development, often through gaining formal qualifications after leaving full-time education
- experienced in fields outside the languages professions
- respected by professionals outside the languages professions
- fully aware of their ethical responsibilities as language professionals
- committed to serving their clients' interests and the wider profession
- in many cases, passionate about the work they do
- well connected with other linguists.

At the same time, many feel that the work they do is poorly understood by professionals in other sectors and a significant minority report that they do not yet consider themselves to be making an acceptable income as a linguist. The professional challenges they face centre around the business aspects of their work (marketing/selling services and negotiating rates/deadlines) as well as maintaining a positive work-life balance, and keeping up to date with new technologies and new developments in their areas of expertise.

Despite the challenges, the students who responded to the survey appeared to be committed to working in the languages professions, particularly in translation. While the responses from a small sample should be treated with caution, the apparent lack of any interest in a career solely in interpreting is a concern and merits further investigation.

The survey findings imply that further efforts are needed in two main areas:

- ensuring that linguists – particularly freelance professionals – feel properly equipped to manage the business aspects of their work and keep up to date with new technologies and domain-specific knowledge
- promoting the value of the services provided by professional linguists and improving understanding of the work they do.

On the first point, the efforts made by many university departments over recent years to equip their translation and interpreting students for the world of work should be welcomed and encouraged. Professional associations and training providers also have a role to play here, while schemes such as CIOL's [Mentoring Platform](#) provide valuable opportunities for one-to-one support from established practitioners.

On the second, all stakeholders in the languages professions – from professional associations to universities, language services providers, end users and individual linguists – must work together to assert the value of professional language services and improve understanding of the work done by linguists, particularly in light of the current speed of technological development in the sector.

Appendix

CIOL Careers and Qualifications Insight Survey – list of questions

1. What is your current primary role as a linguist?
2. Are you a member of CIOL?
3. At what age did you start being paid to interpret, translate or teach languages?
4. Are you currently:
 - Working full time as an interpreter and/or translator
 - Working part time as an interpreter and/or translator
 - Working full time in education
 - Working part time in education
 - Working outside the language professions
 - Using language skills within a corporate or business environment
 - Retired
 - Other (please specify)
5. At what age did you first consider yourself to be a professional linguist?
6. How many jobs did you have before entering the language professions?
7. Please describe briefly why you were unable or chose not to enter the language professions earlier on.
8. If you have any formal foreign-language qualifications, what is your highest level of qualification?
9. If you have any formal translating / interpreting / teaching qualifications, what is your highest level of qualification?
10. If you have any other formal qualifications (for example, in a field such as law, medicine or engineering), what is your highest level of qualification?
11. Did you gain any of your formal qualifications after leaving full-time education?
12. Do you plan to complete any formal qualifications in the next three years?
13. If you work as a freelance translator or interpreter, what are the main challenges you have faced to date?
 - Marketing/selling my services
 - Administrative tasks
 - Negotiating rates and/or deadlines
 - Time management
 - Balancing my work and personal life
- Making time for continuing professional development
- Dealing with other language professionals (e.g. revisers and proofreaders)
- Dealing with other non-language professionals
- Keeping up to date with technology
- Keeping my subject knowledge up to date
- Not applicable
- Other (please specify)
14. Do you feel respected by professionals outside the languages sector with whom you come into contact?
15. Do you feel professionals outside the languages sector understand what you do?
16. Do you feel your friends and family understand what you do?
17. At what age would you say you started to receive what you class as an acceptable income as a linguist?
18. Which of the following statements best reflects your feelings about being a linguist?
 - It's just a job
 - It's a profession and linguists should be respected like other professionals
 - I care about the languages professions and want to improve the sector while I am working in it
 - I feel it will be a lifelong passion for me
 - I want to make a difference and break down language barriers
 - Other (please specify)
19. How often do you interact with other language professionals?
20. How do you interact with other language professionals?
21. *(Students only)* Which career path are you likely to follow once you have finished your current course?
22. *(Students only)* Do you think you will move into a linguistic role straight after leaving higher education?
23. *(Students only)* What would be your main motivation for moving into a career in the language professions?
24. What do you believe is the main thing that makes someone a professional linguist?

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language professionals
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